Learning Assistants for Philosophy: A Sustainable Model for Career-Oriented Colleges and Universities

Abstract
Although many departments across the country have found ways to increase students’ engagement with philosophy, philosophers have yet to discover a sustainable, reproducible means for increasing engagement with philosophy at small, career-oriented colleges and universities. In order to bridge this gap, this project plans to expand the Learning Assistant program for philosophy at the University of Mary, a program that trains upper-level undergraduate majors to lead weekly dialogues for introductory philosophy courses. Building on our experience with Learning Assistant programs at the University of Mary, this project will increase the number of Learning Assistants in philosophy, enrich their training through a tailored course, provide them with opportunities to lead philosophy disputations at a local high school, and publish organizational and pedagogical documents that can be used by other career-oriented institutions to start similar programs on a minimal budget.

Basic Information
Project Coordinator(s)
Donald Joseph Bungum

Steering Committee
- Dr. Daniel Barr, Associate Professor of Chemistry, Learning Assistant Coordinator, University of Mary, Bismarck, ND
- Anne Hook Seidler, Academic Advisor, Tutor Coordinator, University of Mary, Bismarck, ND
- Dr. David Fleischacker, Principal, St. Joseph Montessori School, Mandan, ND

Funding Amount Requested
$5,000

Expected Project Completion Date
June 2024

Project Description
Recently, philosophy departments have faced intense pressure to increase engagement in their programs, as economic, demographic, and environmental forces have reduced the number of students attending college and turned their attention towards career-oriented majors. Despite these factors, some departments have been very successful in increasing engagement. For example, in 2016, the University of Notre introduced its God and the Good Life course, and by 2020 it had
experienced a 60% increase in philosophy majors. Connecticut College has maintained solid engagement through attractive courses such as "The Philosophy of Dinosaurs." Wooster College sustains a disproportionately large number of philosophy majors through intense mentoring by faculty and careful, extended coaching of students' capstone papers.

However, despite the excellent work that some departments have done to increase engagement with philosophy, none of this work addresses how to increase engagement at rural, career-focused colleges and universities: departments at such colleges and universities do not have Notre Dame’s money, Connecticut’s whimsy, or Wooster’s availability. As a result, philosophy departments at rural colleges and universities are facing pressure to trim their courses, merge with other departments, or close altogether. This represents a tragedy for philosophy. There are hundreds of rural colleges and universities in the United States. They are filled with students who farm, hunt, fish, and serve, and many of these students are deeply reflective and have already made difficult choices about meaning just to attend college. My project, "Learning Assistants for Philosophy: A Sustainable Model for Career-Oriented Colleges and Universities," remedies this gap by providing a way for career-focused institutions to support sizable, intense engagement with fundamental philosophy within existing frameworks for work-study and student tutoring. I am applying to the APA Small Grant in order to expand the Learning Assistant program at the University of Mary in Bismarck, North Dakota. I will train a core of six philosophy upperclassmen who will lead dialogues in introductory courses, host philosophy disputations at neighboring high schools, and manifest the impact of philosophy on everyday life.

There are six people most important for this project. I will be leading it. I have been teaching at the University of Mary for six years, and I serve as department chair. I will receive guidance from Dr. Daniel Barr, Associate Professor of Chemistry and director of the Learning Assistant program in the sciences. Daniel established the Learning Assistant paradigm at the University of Mary three years ago. He maintains a team of six chemistry upperclassmen who assist with his introductory chemistry courses. I will also receive assistance from Anne Hook Seidler, academic advisor and coordinator of the tutoring program at the University of Mary. Anne is skilled at handling HR requirements for students, and she recently co-authored a paper with Daniel describing the practical and intellectual impact that Learning Assistants have had on students in our chemistry courses. In addition to faculty help, I have already trained two student Learning Assistants, thanks to a grant from the Council of Independent Colleges and Universities. Last spring, we planned the new version of our introductory philosophy course, and we will be offering it as a team during the 2022-2023 school year. Finally, the project will receive assistance from Dr. David Fleischacker, former Dean of Arts and Sciences at the University of Mary and now Principal of St. Joseph’s Montessori School in Mandan, North Dakota. David is a theologian, and he is looking for ways to increase philosophy’s presence in his high school.

The project can be broken down into three components. The first is to hire and train six Learning Assistants in philosophy. This will involve securing the funding needed to offer these positions, publicizing the positions and why they are attractive, and training the new Learning Assistants to serve in the dialogue-based version of our introductory philosophy course. Within the course itself, the Learning Assistants’ main responsibility is to lead weekly dialogues with a group of 10-12
The Learning Assistants must be trained to build trust within their group, to establish and monitor group norms, to model open-ended and incisive questioning, and to bring out and explore differences among group members with an eye towards mutual understanding. The project will provide this training for new Learning Assistants through a spring seminar and a fall team retreat.

The second component of the project is to devise and offer a course tailored to the Learning Assistants themselves. I will write this course in the summer of 2023 and offer it during the 2023-2024 school year for the Learning Assistants and other interested students. The course will consider philosophy as a way of life. It will explore historical "schools" of philosophy, focusing on their conception of the good life and their concrete practices for attaining it. The goal of the course will be to deepen the Learning Assistants' appreciation for how philosophy emerges from and informs everyday life. The course is also meant to provide Learning Assistants with material to inject into their dialogue sessions, material that illustrates how philosophy has impacted human lives throughout history.

The third component of the project is to train the Learning Assistants to lead philosophy disputations at a local high school. I have led disputations at the University of Mary for the past six years, attracting 80-100 students on most Saturday afternoons throughout the semester. These disputations have become a "cultural export" for the University of Mary, with many graduates going on to host them in their post-college communities. The project will train Learning Assistants to host such disputations with high school students. Learning Assistants will learn the format of the disputations, principles for selecting effective questions, and guidelines for facilitating Q and A. Learning Assistants will also have the opportunity to put their dialogue skills to work with the high school students during the "after party" discussion that follows the disputation. By leading disputations with the high school students, Learning Assistants will gain concrete experience with transmitting the practice and value of philosophy to a lay audience. They will also be offered the opportunity to interact with high schoolers' untutored questions, questions that are frequently both penetrating and deeply rooted in everyday life.

In terms of timing, the project will take place during the 2023-2024 academic year, although there will be two important preparations in the prior year: the Learning Assistants will need to be selected and trained, and the upper-division course will need to be written. Learning Assistants will be hired to provide roughly five hours of service per week: three hours of class time, one hour of meetings, and an additional hour of outside work. This outside work will include meetings with undergraduates in the introductory class, preparing their dialogues, and leading disputations at the high school. I will also be working with the Learning Assistants for three hours per week during their upper-division course, which promises to provide ample opportunity to discuss their experiences in dialogues in light of historical philosophies of the good life.

Much groundwork has already been laid for the project. As I mentioned above, Daniel Barr and Anne Hook Seidler have pioneered the Learning Assistant paradigm at the University of Mary. The position fits neatly into our tutoring program as a work-study role, and a cohort of students is already familiar with the position from their experience with chemistry classes. Additionally, I have already written and delivered the relevant training to two Learning Assistants for our fall 2022
course. These Learning Assistants helped to revise the course vision, and they prepared lesson plans for their weekly dialogues that we refined through intense criticism. The project also draws from a strong history of philosophical disputations at the University of Mary. It seeks to place this tradition into the hands of students and to extend it to a wider lay audience.

I expect this project to establish a feasible, reproducible paradigm for increasing philosophical engagement at rural, career-focused colleges and universities. It establishes a core group of students who are specifically trained and committed to synthesizing the concerns of philosophy and everyday life. It will be of value to students who are interested to pursue academic philosophy professionally, since it will be a venue for them to practice facilitating fruitful philosophical dialogues. But it will also be of value to students who are interested in philosophy for its ability to enrich ordinary life, since it is intensely focused on peer relationships, rigorous and empathetic questioning, and concrete philosophical practices. The project dramatically increases opportunities for students and Learning Assistants to practice the philosophical skills that will have the greatest impact on their future lives. And the project promises Learning Assistants a curt rejoinder to employers and grandmothers who ask: "Philosophy? What can you do with that?" Answer: "I have built teams, changed minds, and helped my friends to see a life well lived."

**Project Impact**

This project aims to expand the Learning Assistant program to six philosophy students, provide a course tailored to their needs, and afford them the opportunity to host disputations with high school students. The project will be guided by mission and vision documents, templates for student-led dialogues, best practices for selecting dialogue questions, training seminars and retreats, an upper-division course syllabus, and guidelines for hosting disputations. The project will track undergraduates who participate in the dialogue-based introductory course to assess whether they major in philosophy and how the course affected their further studies. Following the project, these materials and data will be made available to the philosophy community at large, not only through our department website and social media but also through the Mellon Philosophy as a Way of Life Network, of which I am a member. These materials will be helpful for other philosophy departments at rural and career-focused institutions to enrich their philosophical engagement in an efficient manner.

**Project Goals**

- Expand philosophy Learning Assistant program from 2 to 6 students. This will be accomplished by publicizing the positions and selecting and training the students.
- Gain 30% more philosophy majors from Learning Assistant sections of our introductory course than non-Learning Assistant sections. This will be accomplished by the Learning Assistants, through student-led dialogues, helping to manifest the way in which philosophy emerges from and impacts everyday life. It will also be accomplished by a persistent emphasis on the final and instrumental value of philosophy and dialogue exercises meant to elicit intellectual courage and intellectual humility.
- Train students to practice rigorous, empathetic dialogue governed by norms of evidence, mutual understanding, and intellectual courage and humility. This will be accomplished...
primarily by training the Learning Assistants to lead dialogues in which these excellences are present and jointly practiced.

- Teach Learning Assistants to be fluent ambassadors for the value of philosophy in everyday life. This will be accomplished through the dedicated upper-division course, which will provide the intellectual and historical context for philosophy’s value. It will also be accomplished through the high school disputations, which will provide the Learning Assistants opportunities to practice communicating the value of philosophy to a lay audience.

**Project Timeline**

Oct 2022 - Meeting with Sahlenia Braun in HR to establish new work-study positions in PHI

November 2022 - meet with current LAs regarding goals for new LAs and promising prospective students

December 2022 - publish request for applications for 2023-2024 LAs positions in PHI

Jan 2023 - select six LAs for 2023-2024 school year

Feb-Apr 2023 - new LAs attend weekly meetings and some dialogue days in class

Feb 2023 - Intensive training seminar on facilitating PHI dialogues for new LAs

March 2023 - new LAs complete lesson plans for 2023-2024 school year

Apr 2023 - new LAs host two practice dialogues

Jul 2023 - build 300-level "Philosophy as a Way of Life" class for LAs and other interested students centered on historical views and practices of Platonists, Aristotelians, Skeptics, Epicureans, Stoics, Confucians, Buddhists, Benedictines, and Carmelites.

August 2023 - Attend Notre Dame Philosophy as a Way of Life conference

August 2023 - Zoom pre-semester orientation meeting set goals and expectations for coming semester.

Sep 2023 - team-building retreat centered on philosophical dialogue, team trust/psychological safety, and strong questioning

Sep 2023 - final practice dialogue for new LAs.

Sep 2023 - LAs host disputation at St. Joseph’s High School

Sep 2023-April 2024 - 6 LAs active in PHI intro classes

Sep 2023-April 2024 - 6 LAs taking "Philosophy as a Way of Life" 300-level course

Oct 2023 - submit expanded PHI budget proposal to fund 6 PHI LAs and program long term
Oct 2023 - midterm course-correction meeting with LAs to review goals, assess progress, review class needs, identify improvements

Oct 2023 - midterm follow-up with spring 2023 intro students to survey how dialogue has impacted fall learning, goals, and relationships

Oct 2023 - LAs host disputation at St. Joseph's High School

Nov 2023 - meet with 6 LAs regarding goals for new LAs and prospective students

Nov 2023 - LAs host disputation at St. Joseph's High School

Dec 2023 - LAs host disputation at St. Joseph's High School

Dec 2023 - publish request for applications for 2024-2025 LAs positions in PHI

Dec 2023 - end of semester meeting with LAs to review class, identify strengths and weaknesses of program, and make adjustments for spring semester.

Jan 2024 - select six LAs for following school year

Jan 2024 - LAs host disputation at St. Joseph’s High School

Feb-Apr 2024- new LAs attend weekly meetings and some dialogue days in class

Feb 2024 - Intensive training seminar on facilitating PHI dialogues

Feb 2024 - LAs host disputation at St. Joseph’s High School

Feb 2024 - Submit presentation proposal to Notre Dame PWOL conference

March 2024 - midterm course-correction meeting with LAs to review goals, assess progress, review class needs, identify improvements

Mar 2024 - LAs host disputation at St. Joseph’s High School

Mar 2024 - midterm follow-up with fall 2023 students to survey how dialogue has impacted spring learning, goals, and relationships

Mar 2024 - new LAs complete lesson plans for 2024-2025 school year

Mar 2024 - Collect vision plan, lesson plan template for dialogues, sample dialogue lesson plans, training seminar itinerary, and other materials to post on PHI department website

Apr 2024 - LAs host disputation at St. Joseph's High School

Apr 2024 - new LAs host two practice dialogues

Apr 2024 - end of semester meeting with current and new LAs to review class, identify strengths and weaknesses of program, and make adjustments for fall semester.
May 2024 - construct and submit evaluation report

Jun 2024 - Publish project materials on PHI department website

Aug 2024 - Present results at Notre Dame PWOL conference

**Project Outreach**

1. Rural and career-focused colleges and universities. The projects guiding materials will be published on our department website. The results of the project will be presented at the annual Philosophy as a Way of Life conference. They will also be shared with the Philosophy as a Way of Life Instructor Community Facebook page, which has over 350 members. Since early stages of the project were inspired and funded by the Council of Independent Colleges, the project will also be sent to them as a potential item for their annual enrichment workshops.

2. Philosophers interested in pre-collegiate philosophy. Guiding materials for high school disputations will be published to our website and made available through conference presentations. Pending permissions, videos of high school disputations will be published to our department website and social media.

3. Other humanities departments seeking to increase the intensity of student engagement. The University of Mary is a member of the Association of Benedictine Colleges and Universities, which hosts an annual interdisciplinary conference on pedagogy. The project will be submitted for presentation at this conference.

**Accessibility Plan**

Potential accommodations relevant to this project are similar to those relevant to college courses. For example, the project will need to insure that classrooms satisfy ADA accommodations for wheelchair users; that course websites, presentations, and texts are visually accessible; and that dialogues are accessible through sign-language interpreters, if requested. The University of Mary provides such accommodations. $500 has also been designated for potential accommodations in the project budget. Dr. Lynn Dodge will serve as the point person on accessibility. She is the director of Student Accessibility Services at the University of Mary. We are close colleagues, since we recently worked together to help a student who is blind to complete my course in logic. The University of Mary includes the following paragraph in all course syllabi, including those for the courses in this project:

The University of Mary, in compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act and in the spirit of our mission, offers support for disabled students who provide required documentation. Students with disabilities who need accommodations should apply to the Office of Student Accessibility Services. For further information, contact Dr. Lynn Dodge, director of Student Accessibility Services, in the Student Success Center (lower level of Welder Library) at (701) 355-8264.

Two expert resources regarding accommodation include: (1) Dr. Lynn Dodge, Director of Student Accessibility Services, University of Mary, and (2) Robert McConnell, ADA Coordinator, Director of Human Resources, City of Bismarck
Evaluation Plan
This project will be assessed based on the four goals articulated above. Two of the goals are quantitative and can be assessed simply as complete or incomplete:

1. Expand philosophy Learning Assistant program from 2 to 6 students.

2. Gain 30% more philosophy majors from Learning Assistant sections of our introductory course than non-Learning Assistant sections.

The remaining two goals are qualitative. The third is:

3. Train students to practice rigorous, empathetic dialogue governed by norms of evidence, mutual understanding, and intellectual courage and humility.

This goal will be assessed in several ways. First, following each dialogue, students will be asked to complete the following self-assessment:

What was the topic of this week’s discussion? How could this topic impact your own life? (Describe in at least 3 sentences.)

What do you think was the most important takeaway from our discussion? (Describe in at least 3 sentences.)

What more do you want to learn about this topic?

What was your least favorite part of this week’s discussion? Why was this your least favorite? (Explain in at least 3 sentences.)

How and how well did you participate in this week’s discussion?

What do you think you (as a student) could do to help make discussion even better next week?

What do you think I (as an LA) could do to help make discussion even better next week? Identify one concrete step for yourself, and one for your LA.

Feel free to write additionally about this week’s topic or discussion here!

This self-assessment will give the team evidence of whether students in the course are engaging in the dialogue, gaining understanding through the dialogue, seeing the dialogue as relevant, and growing in their ability (actual and perceived) to sustain philosophical dialogue.

Second, at midterms and finals, students in the course will be asked to complete the following quantitative assessment:

Question #1)

On a scale of 1 to 6: How much have you enjoyed discussions?

(#1 = I have hated discussions. #6 = I have loved discussions!)
Please explain your rating in 3-5 sentences.

Question #2)

On a scale of 1 to 6: How much have discussions helped you to better understand the course material?

(#1 = The discussions have not helped me understand the material at all. #6 = The discussions have helped a lot.)

Please explain your rating in 3-5 sentences.

We expect the combination of a quantitative measure plus the opportunity to explain the rating will give us insights into how students are experiencing the course, how they are internalizing the approach to philosophical dialogue, and whether they are growing in their ability to pursue rigorous, empathetic dialogue with others across differences.

Third, during our weekly meetings, the Learning Assistants and I will be discussing the presence (or absence) of the following observables in dialogues:

1. Consistent sharing of relevant personal experiences
2. Consistent interpretation of personal experiences in light of philosophical course content
3. Consistent flow of questions from all participants in dialogue
4. Respectful and productive disagreements between students
5. Engaged, attentive listening
6. Changes in views, catalyzed by and expressed through interactions with others
7. Evident joy, marked by laughter, inside jokes, and lingering conversations

The fourth goal is as follows:

4. Teach Learning Assistants to be fluent ambassadors for the value of philosophy in everyday life.

This goal will be assessed in several ways. First, we will track students in the course to see whether they end up majoring in philosophy. This will be an indirect measure of the Learning Assistants’ ability to communicate the value of philosophy. Second, we will follow up with students in the course in the following semester to ask about how the course has impacted their further study. We will include questions about the impact of the Learning Assistants, which will also provide evidence concerning their fluency. Third, I will be evaluating the Learning Assistants in the upper-division course, where I will be able to see their ability to communicate the value of philosophy through their writing and conversation about historical philosophies of life. Fourth, I will have the opportunity to evaluate the Learning Assistants as they lead the high school disputations. There, I will be evaluating their ability to motivate philosophical questions, relate them to lived experience, provide relevant tools for thinking about them, and demonstrating the impact of different
approaches to those questions, all in the context of a lay audience. We will also provide the high school students with surveys about what they gained from the disputations, focusing on the nature of philosophical conversation, the value of philosophical conversation, and their plans for philosophical reflection in their future lives.

**Online Presence**
The project is primarily based on in-person interactions. However, the guiding materials and media from certain events will be posted at the University of Mary’s philosophy department website, given below. The University of Mary also maintains an active social media presence, and events from the project will be recorded and posted on these platforms. Finally, resources and results of the project will be shared with the Philosophy as a Way of Life Network, the Council of Independent Colleges, and the Association of Benedictine Colleges and Universities to be shared on their websites and social media.

https://www.umary.edu/academics/undergraduate-programs/philosophy

**Budget Narrative**
1. LA Stipends: $12,000. This cost covers $1000/semester for two semesters for six Learning Assistants. $1000 per semester is reasonable given roughly five hours of work per week for 15 weeks at about $13 per hour.

2. Training Seminar Printing: $50. The training packet will be between 50-100 pages, and printing is 10 cents per page.

3. Training Seminar Meal: $70. This covers $10 per person for our training seminar meal together.

4. High School Disputation Refreshments: $400. There are eight disputations planned. This allows for $50 for refreshments for each disputation, which will involve roughly 20 students and six Learning Assistants. We have found that scones or breads/spreads are excellent refreshments for disputations.

5. High School Disputation Travel: $350. This is based on the standard mileage rate for three cars for eight disputations throughout the year.

6. Fall Team Training Retreat: $500. This is based on the price for a local high-ROPES course, a meal, waters, and snacks for seven participants (including myself).

7. Disability Accommodations: $500. Disability accommodations are provided for students for classes at the University of Mary. This additional amount, however, could be used to support a special translator or technology, if required.

8. Notre Dame Conference Travel: $1020. This is based on the standard mileage rate between Bismarck and South Bend. Flights are similarly priced. I can stay with family in South Bend.

9. PHI Website Work Order: $50. This is an estimated cost for a tech work order at the University of Mary.
Other Funding Sources

1. University of Mary. I have already been approved for funding for stipends for two Learning Assistants for 2022-2023. This is a stable funding source into 2023-2024 and can be counted as $4000. In fall 2022, I plan to apply for $6000 additionally to help with stipends for additional Learning Assistants.

2. AAPT. I plan to apply for $1000 from the American Association of Philosophy Teachers in August of 2022.

3. Marc Sanders Foundation. I plan to apply for $6000 from the Marc Sanders Foundation in July of 2022.