Does Philosophy Make Students Better Thinkers?

Abstract
Does studying philosophy help students to become better thinkers? The proposed project will use data collected by the Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) to investigate this question, examining traits like reflectiveness, open-mindedness, and critical thinking. HERI has a database with records from thousands of students at schools across the United States. These include records from the start of students’ first years in college and at the end of their graduating years. Using these data, we will compare philosophy majors with non-philosophy majors, examining changes in intellectual traits over the course of the college years. Hence, this project will provide solid and relevant evidence for assessing a common claim about the value of our discipline. Such evidence would be invaluable for those seeking to advocate for philosophy in higher education and beyond.

Basic Information
Project Coordinator(s)
Michael Vazquez

Steering Committee
- Michael Prinzing, Baylor University (Postdoctoral Research Associate in Psychology and Neuroscience; Consulting Research Scientist at the Parr Center for Ethics)
- Thomas Metcalf, Spring Hill College (Associate Professor of Philosophy, Faculty Director of Assessment, and Director of Philosophy, Politics, and Economics Program)
- Geoff Sayre-McCord, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (Morehead-Cain Alumni Distinguished Professor of Philosophy and Director of Philosophy, Politics, and Economics Program)
- Luc Bovens, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (Professor of Philosophy and Core Faculty, Philosophy, Politics and Economics Program)

Funding Amount Requested
$2,725.00

Expected Project Completion Date
August 2024

Project Description
Philosophers often claim that doing philosophy helps people to become better thinkers. It encourages people to question things that others take for granted, to reflect more deeply, and to reason more carefully. It helps people to recognize the limits of their own understanding and awaken them from “dogmatic slumbers.” In other words, in addition to whatever intrinsic value philosophy may have, many think that the discipline is also instrumentally valuable insofar as it is distinctively well-suited to cultivating intellectual virtue. If this claim were supported by compelling, non-anecdotal evidence, this would be
incredibly helpful for advocating for the discipline. The biggest barrier to drawing valid inferences about philosophy's impact is the problem of selection effect. To date, none of the existing accounts of philosophy's positive impact (that draw, for example, on standardized test scores and intellectual trait measures) have overcome this barrier. Although a randomized, controlled trial would be ideal, this is probably not feasible. Hence, in this project we will employ what is sometimes called a “quasi-experimental” approach. Although this does not overcome all forms of selection effects, it does overcome one of the most persistent and confounding selection effects.

We plan to request data from the Freshman Survey and Senior Survey, which are uniform surveys administered at a wide range of colleges and universities across the country. Both the Freshman Survey and Senior Survey include questions that can serve as indicators of intellectual virtues like intellectual humility, reflectiveness, open-mindedness, and curiosity. The text of these questions are below. Some survey items may not be relevant (e.g., self-ratings of physical health). Others may be so strongly correlated that we could average them together as indicators of a single outcome. We will make such determinations after we have seen the data.

Survey Questions:

How often in the past year did you: [Response options: Frequently, Occasionally, Not at All]
- Support your opinions with a logical argument
- Seek solutions to problems and explain them to others
- Look up scientific research articles and resources
- Explore topics on your own, even though it was not required for a class
- Accept mistakes as part of the learning process

How would you rate yourself in the following areas: [Response options: A Major Strength, Somewhat Strong, Average, Somewhat Weak, A Major Weakness]

- Ability to see the world from someone else's perspective
- Tolerance of others with different beliefs
- Openness to having my own views challenged
- Ability to discuss and negotiate controversial issues
- Ability to work cooperatively with diverse people
- Ability to manage my time effectively

Rate yourself on each of the following traits as compared with the average person your age. We want the most accurate estimate of how you see yourself. [Response options: Highest 10%, Above Average, Average, Below Average, Lowest 10%]
Academic ability
Artistic ability
Compassion
Creativity
Drive to achieve
Emotional health
Flexibility during uncertain times
Leadership ability
Mathematical ability
Physical health
Public speaking ability
Risk-taking
Self-confidence (intellectual)
Self-confidence (social)
Spirituality
Understanding of others
Writing ability

In addition to the above, we will request the following information about participants who completed these surveys:

Socio-demographics: age, race, gender, rural/urban hometown, political orientation

When did you decide to pursue your current academic major?

Overall and primary major GPAs

[Senior Survey only] Highest degree that they plan to obtain, major (includes primary, secondary, and intended graduate major, if relevant)

Project Impact
In recent years, university departments across the humanities have faced heightened pressure to demonstrate the relevance and impact of their curricular offerings. The case for philosophy’s place in the core curriculum could be substantially strengthened by finding ways to articulate its value in terms of quantifiable and communicable outcomes. To that end, we propose to analyze data about philosophy’s
impact that are unprecedented in their size and scope, and to communicate the results of that analysis in professional and public fora. The data are likely to be highly informative in the immediate term. Even if the results of our analysis are mixed or negative, understanding these data is a necessary part of the long-term project of disciplinary advocacy. It is important for us to understand how philosophy coursework fares on these metrics. Perhaps just as importantly, though, the proposed analysis will lay the foundation for future empirical work on philosophy’s impact and advocacy for philosophy at all levels of education. For example, the results can indicate which outcomes are more or less promising and worthy of continued investigation. In addition, philosophy departments across the country might seek to replicate our findings (using the same methods as the HERI researchers) or to build on our findings by collecting other data about the impact of philosophy coursework on their students.

Finally, these data will provide valuable insights into the socio-demographic and educational backgrounds of philosophy majors across the country. Such information is useful in helping us to contextualize the results. It will also enable us to examine differences in the experiences of people across groups. For example, we can consider whether the findings look similar for men and women, or across racial groups, etc., thereby providing evidence about how social and cultural factors might influence students’ experiences with a philosophical education. Additionally, these data can help us to build a more inclusive and equitable profession by providing valuable information about diversity in undergraduate philosophy instruction along several dimensions.

**Project Goals**

- Yield clear, empirically-based, insights into the effects of philosophy education on students’ intellectual virtues.
- Progress toward goal up to this point:
- In a recent paper ([https://psyarxiv.com/jx7d8](https://psyarxiv.com/jx7d8)), we used publicly available data to begin investigating whether studying philosophy affects students’ intellectual traits. The paper begins by discussing (and dismissing) the oft-mentioned suggestion that standardized testing scores illustrate the desirable effects of studying philosophy. The paper then reviews research on Philosophy for Children (a philosophy education program, common in the United Kingdom, typically conducted with primary school children) and studies on critical thinking skills among college students. It also presents new empirical findings, suggesting that philosophers tend to score higher on measures of logical reasoning, reflectiveness, open-mindedness, and intellectual humility than non-philosophers. We found evidence that some of these differences are due primarily to selection effects (e.g., people who are more reflective are more likely to study philosophy). However, we also found some preliminary and suggestive evidence that some of these differences between philosophers and non-philosophers may not be due to selection effects.
- We have also started to contribute to this work by collecting baseline data on the impact of our undergraduate Philosophy courses and outreach programs at UNC-CH—most notably, by running a pilot study on the impact of the Parr Center’s National High School Ethics Bowl program ([https://parrcenter.unc.edu/eb-study/](https://parrcenter.unc.edu/eb-study/)). The primary takeaway from our paper and pilot studies, though, is that more data are needed. The Higher Education Research Institute data would provide invaluable insights into the ways in which valued intellectual traits change over the course of the college years. They would enable us to compare the changes in such traits that are experienced by philosophy majors with the changes experienced by non-philosophy majors. If philosophy majors show greater changes, then this could indicate the instrumental value of studying philosophy.
• Publish the findings in an academic paper and publicize them to general audiences through blog posts (e.g., DailyNous), a press release from the public relations team at University of North Carolina, and a popular audience article (e.g., New York Times “Gray Matter” column).
• Provide an informal report for the APA Executive Committee and for the APA Committee on the Status and Future of the Profession, since it is our view that the findings will be of relevance to their work.
• Use our findings as an opportunity to engage a broad audience of philosophers and philosophy students in a conversation about the outcomes that they associate with philosophy education.

Project Timeline
Should this application be successful, we plan to submit a proposal to HERI immediately. HERI’s review time for submitted proposals is approximately 3 months. We have budgeted 6 months for data analysis and write-up. Altogether, then, our timeline is 9 months from the date of award notification.

Project Outreach
We plan to publish the findings in an academic paper and publicize them to general audiences through blog posts (e.g., DailyNous), a press release from the public relations team at University of North Carolina, and a popular audience article (e.g., New York Times “Gray Matter” column). We will also provide an informal report for the APA Executive Committee and for the APA Committee on the Status and Future of the Profession, since it is our view that the findings will be of relevance to their work.

Accessibility Plan
The proposed project does not involve any public events. Nonetheless, we are committed to ensuring that there are no barriers to engagement with public-facing materials that are created on the basis of our analysis. At minimum, this means that we will ensure that the online venues we pursue for publication are accessible to people with disabilities as set out in the Americans with Disabilities Act (e.g., compatibility with screen readers, captioning, and voice commands).

Evaluation Plan
The project will be a success if it yields clear, empirically-based, insights into the effects of philosophy education on students’ intellectual virtues. We believe this work can lay the foundation for thinking about the impact not only of collegiate philosophy instruction, but of burgeoning pre-college philosophy programs and of public-facing philosophy programs in, for example, prisons and retirement communities.

Online Presence
The extent of our online presence is detailed under "Project Outreach."

Budget Narrative
The Higher Education Research Institute charges a $2,500 base access fee and $25 per additional cohort. We are requesting 9 cohorts, which brings the total access fee to $2725.

Other Funding Sources
We have not yet identified additional grant opportunities, but we are actively investigating the options.
## American Philosophical Association Small Grant Budget Template

**Project Title:** Does Philosophy Make Students Better Thinkers?

**Project Coordinator(s):** Michael Vazquez

**Total Funding Request:** $2,725.00

Proposals over $5,000 normally are not funded.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item (e.g., salaries, honoraria, supplies, travel)</th>
<th>Estimated Cost</th>
<th>Amount Requested from Other Sources</th>
<th>Amount Requested from APA</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Higher Education Research Institute Data Access</td>
<td>$2725 ($2,500 base access fee + $25 per additional cohort. We are requesting 9 cohorts.)</td>
<td>$</td>
<td>$2,725.00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Total** | $ | - | $ | $2,725.00 |

Cells in the total row automatically total the items in the column above them.

The total cell for the last column must match the total in the top section of the budget template. If the total here does not match the corresponding total above, the cell...
EMPLOYMENT

University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill
Teaching Assistant Professor, Department of Philosophy  July 2020 - Present
Director of Outreach, Parr Center for Ethics  July 2020 - Present

University of Pennsylvania, Graduate School of Education
Lecturer, Mid-Career Doctoral Program in Educational Leadership  July 2020-Present

EDUCATION

University of Pennsylvania  2015 - 2020
Ph.D., Philosophy

University of Pennsylvania  2014 - 2015
Post-Baccalaureate Program in Classical Studies

Villanova University  2010 - 2014
B.A. summa cum laude Philosophy, Humanities (Honors Program)

SELECTED WRITING

[5] The Future of Humanities is Public  (with Kari Lindquist, Delaney Thull, Aurora Yu)
Op-ed in EdNC (Mar. 2023)

forthcoming, Journal of Philosophy in Schools

[3] Looking for a better way to disagree this election season? Look no further than your local high school  (co-author with Alex Richardson)
Op-ed in EducationNC (Nov. 2022)

[2] Deliberating Across the Lifespan
Chapter in The Ethics Bowl Way: Answering Questions, Questioning Answers, and Creating Ethical Communities (Rowman and Littlefield 2022)

[1] Ethics Bowl and Democratic Deliberation
Blog post in APA Syllabus Showcase (Mar. 2022)

SELECTED PRESENTATIONS ON PEDAGOGY & PUBLIC PHILOSOPHY

[9] Moral Dilemmas in Educational Ethics
Philosophy Learning & Teaching Organization (Jan. 2023)

[8] Fostering Collaborative Ethics Discussions in the Secondary-Grades Classroom
2022 PLATO Conference: Ethics in Schools, Communities, and the Public Sphere (Jun. 2022)

Eastern Division Meeting of the American Philosophical Association (Jan. 2022)

[6] Deliberative Practice for the Public Sector
6th Public Philosophy Network Conference (Oct. 2021)
[5] Community-Engaged Pedagogy & Intergenerational Encounter
   Engagement Scholarship Consortium Annual Meeting (Sept. 2021)

   UNC Faculty Symposium on Deliberative Pedagogy (May 2021)

[3] Putting Ethics Bowl to Work: Dialogical Pedagogy for Professional Ethics Education
   30th Annual Association for Practical and Professional Ethics Conference (Feb. 2021)

[2] Ethics Bowl in the Classroom: Perspectives on Dialogical Pedagogy for Ethics and Civics Education
   2021 Eastern Division Meeting of the American Philosophical Association (Jan. 2021)

[1] Service-Learning, Moral Philosophy, and Civic Engagement
   Philosophy of Education Society Annual Meeting (Mar. 2020)

RECENT HONORS

Departmental Award for Excellence in Undergraduate Teaching by a Faculty Member 2023
Office of the Provost Engaged Scholarship Award 2023
RJ Reynolds Foundation Junior Faculty Development Award 2023
Provost’s Graduate Academic Engagement Fellowship at the Netter Center 2019 - 2021

RECENT GRANT PROJECTS

Educating for Intellectual Virtue 2023
   Institute for the Arts and Humanities Fixed-Term Faculty Support Fund
Political Neutrality in the Classroom: What is it and Should I Value it? 2022
   Humanities for the Public Good Critical Issues Project Award
Stoic Tragedy & the Sources of Human Ethics 2022
   Committee on Classics in the Community, Society for Classical Studies
NHSEBBridge: Promoting Student Access and Equity in the National High School Ethics Bowl 2022
   American Philosophical Association Diversity and Inclusiveness Award
Dialogue and Transformation: Bringing Philosophy to Juvenile Justice Educators 2022
   American Philosophical Association Grant

SELECTED PROFESSIONAL SERVICE

Research Committee Chair, Philosophy Learning and Teaching Organization (Fall 2022 - Present)
Academic Advisory Board, Philosophy Learning and Teaching Organization (Spring 2022 - Present)
Executive Committee, Middle School Ethics Bowl (Kent Place School) (Fall 2021 - Present)
Committee on Public Philosophy, American Philosophical Association (Jul. 2021 - Jun. 2024)
Advocacy Committee (lobbying state boards of education for philosophy in K-12 curricula), Philosophy Learning and Teaching Organization (Fall 2020 - Spring 2022)
Executive Committee, National High School Ethics Bowl (Jul. 2020 - Present)