

# On the Road: Pre-College Philosophy Through Writing

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## Abstract

This proposal seeks funding to support curriculum development and the implementation of workshops that engage K-12 students in philosophy through the medium of writing as opposed to the more common methodology for young students which emphasizes dialogue. This project builds from a partnership between Penn's Project for Philosophy for the Young at the University of Pennsylvania and Mighty Writers, a local, Philadelphia, non-profit organization that supports Philadelphia School District children with their writing. Philosophy through writing offers exciting and unique opportunities for reaching more K-12 students with philosophy, with the potential benefits of bringing more and diverse students into the field. This project will draw upon philosophy graduate and undergraduate student students to develop curricula and teach these workshops, thus improving their own teaching and community engagement skills.

## Basic Information

### Project Coordinator(s)

Dustin Webster, Karen Detlefsen

### Funding Amount Requested

\$4,895.00

### Expected Project Completion Date

December 2025

## Project Description

In an academic setting, "philosophy" may bring to mind densely-argued articles and books, and it might conjure up the image of the solitary academic, musing over abstract concepts. But beyond these images, thinking philosophically is central to the human experience. Far from being inaccessible, the everyday engagement in philosophical thinking is a mainstay of human life. Honing philosophical skills is of interest and value to adults and children alike. Indeed, young people are every day encountering new ideas, values, and dilemmas that require them to consider their own philosophical ideas. Equipped with philosophical methods of identifying and challenging assumptions, understanding and systematically analyzing arguments, making connections, and questioning intuitions, students are enabled to improve their critical thinking skills—skills of central importance in all school subjects—while developing intellectual tools and habits of mind which will serve them throughout their lives.

The vast majority of initiatives that engage K-12 students in philosophical thinking are heavily based in dialogue, with the typical format being a trained facilitator engaging students in discussion prompted by a 'stimulus'—a story, game, or other activity meant to generate philosophical

questions. This practice has a rich history and provides great value to students, but although this programming takes a variety of forms, in our experience it is relatively uncommon for writing to play a significant role in pre-college philosophy outside of the often comparatively privileged K-12 setting that are able to offer philosophy as official standing courses. This project will leverage writing as a way to expand the K-12 offerings of Penn's Project for Philosophy for the Young (P4Y) at the University of Pennsylvania. It will build on a partnership between Penn P4Y and Mighty Writers, a non-profit organization operating in and around Philadelphia committed to helping students – frequently underserved students – develop and strengthen their writing skills, by developing curricula and implementing workshops on philosophy through writing for Mighty Writers.

Penn P4Y and Mighty Writers have partnered together for about 5 years (described in more detail below in the 'Groundwork Laid' section), and this proposal outlines a new project requiring seed money in order to establish an ongoing partnership with Mighty Writers in this new area. Recently, Mighty Writers has reached out to Penn P4Y expressing interest in developing and implementing philosophy through writing workshops as part of their "On the Road" initiatives. Rather than taking place at one of Mighty Writer's own spaces, On the Road workshops bring programming directly to school and community partners, and are often integrated into the school day or run at a community center or other site as an added compliment to other after school providers' offerings. The workshops offered vary by theme and writing focus. They generally run for 1-2 hours for 8-10 sessions, typically one day/week but other formats are sometimes requested. Mighty Writers would help connect us to and organize logistics with the partner seeking an "On the Road" workshop. Our program and students would develop and implement the curriculum.

Engaging young students in philosophy through writing is a relatively unique form of this programming that offers several benefits and opportunities over the more common dialogue-based programming. For one, it expands the accessibility of philosophy to students who feel less comfortable sharing their views and engaging in dialogue, as well as for those who benefit from a slower pace and more time to form their thoughts. Depending on the age, level, and desires of the students, the content can be tailored from providing the opportunity to engage in philosophical thinking through writing activities (such as the writing of fiction, poetry, etc.) on one end of the spectrum, to introducing students to the mechanics and structures of crafting written philosophical arguments on the other end. This format also offers significant potential in partnering philosophical content with standard K-12 curricula as it develops not only critical thinking and other virtues associated with engaging in philosophy, but also students' writing skills. This expands the ways in which philosophy can be integrated into schools and potentially opens up new partnerships that allow more children who would not normally have the opportunity to be exposed to philosophy. For example, even when philosophy is brought into an English/Language Arts class in a K-12 school, the methodology of using dialogue and discussion tends to remain the same. The philosophy takes place in the discussion around the book or other piece of writing that is the content of the lesson. The value tends to be framed on how philosophy develops a student's critical thinking skills and other intellectual virtues. However, when the philosophical work takes place individually for students through the process of writing rather than in dialogue, in addition to the benefits mentioned above, it can help develop writing skills. This is good for students, and as noted, offers

potentially new ways to integrate philosophy into K-12 curricula while also aligning with required K-12 educational standards. In the effort to bring philosophy to Philadelphia public school students, every additional avenue that can be pursued is valuable, and we believe that philosophy for the young though writing is so far underutilized.

#### PREVIOUS GROUNDWORK LAID FOR THIS PROJECT

The partnership between Penn P4Y and Mighty Writers began in 2018 when a Penn philosophy graduate student, Stephanie Wesson, developed and ran the first philosophy-through-writing workshop at a Mighty Writers site in West Philadelphia as part of their after school programming. The onset of the Covid-19 pandemic disrupted the growth of the partnership between our programs, but Wesson was able to adjust. Over time, and supported by an internal course development grant from the Netter Center for Community Partnerships at Penn, Wesson developed and ran several different philosophy curricula for students from late middle school through high school, based on various genres of writing which were developed to be delivered remotely online. Since then Penn P4Y has partnered with Mighty Writers occasionally on an ad hoc basis. However, given the value we see in this format as outlined above, and the fact the Mighty Writers has reached out to us asking for more “On the Road” programming, we see this as an excellent opportunity to build on this partnership and develop programming that be used both in the near future and in an ongoing way.

Wesson has already developed three curricula for workshops—“Philosophy of the Future,” “Philosophy of Nature and Technology,” and “Political Philosophy”—that are structured for the online format. All of these curricula need to be converted for the in-person format. Many of the activities are currently set up to use tools like Google Forms and shared slides which were less than ideal for the lessons but which were a necessity for the online format. Part of these grant funds would be used to provide a stipend for a graduate student or students to convert these lessons to use tools such as worksheets which are better for the in person delivery of the program. The other part of the funds would be used to cover the costs of implementing these workshops. We see it as a matter of social justice to provide our programs free of charge to Philadelphia public school students. Outreach is always a challenging part of this work. In our partnership with Mighty Writers, they handle the logistics of finding and connecting us with partners, and because we cover all of the costs of the workshops that we run, they are also able to offer expanded programming without drawing on their own scarce resources.

#### **Project Impact**

K-12 students are not the only ones who stand to benefit from this work. The programming that we offer is typically implemented by Penn philosophy graduate and undergraduate students, who without exception report how valuable and enjoyable this work is for them. It is often noted that one of the best ways to learn is by teaching. It is also true that one of the best ways to learn is by doing. Penn students will solidify their knowledge of philosophy by teaching these ideas to K-12 students, they will improve their teaching and communication skills through practice, and they will cultivate skills in what we might call “translational philosophy”. By “translational philosophy”, we

mean the ability to take highly-specialized academic writing and translate it into a more accessible form while preserving the central philosophical insights of the original. For example, when asked if and how doing philosophy with K-12 students has changed their teaching of undergraduates, a Penn philosophy doctoral student reported, "Because K-12 students will need things spelled out for them a little more simply (at least at first), it has really pushed me to be able to break complex ideas down in a way that's easily digestible. This is obviously important for the purpose of introducing students to a specific topic in philosophy, but I also have found that it helps with introducing students to philosophy generally. [This work] has helped me appreciate how difficult philosophy can be, and to give the undergrads a little bit more grace." Thus, this programming benefits the field of philosophy by helping graduate students develop into better teachers and mentors.

Additionally, by introducing the economically and racially diverse set of students in the Philly School District to philosophy, this work holds the potential to draw students into the study of philosophy in college who may not have considered this as an option before. Over the years, Penn P4Y has seen a handful of high school students with whom we have worked (many of them from groups generally underrepresented in the field) express interest to major in philosophy or adjacent majors (such as Philosophy Politics, and Economics) in college, thus holding the potential to expand and diversify the field.

### **Project Goals**

- Convert three existing curricula that are currently designed for online delivery to an in-person format. This will be accomplished through work done by philosophy graduate students who will be provided a stipend.
- Develop at least one new curriculum. Like Goal #1, this will be accomplished through work done by philosophy graduate students who will be provided a stipend.
- Implement 4-5 "On the Road" workshops over the course of spring, summer, and fall 2025. Mighty Writers will provide logistical support and match our program with schools or others looking for this program. We will provide a stipend to philosophy graduate and undergraduate students to deliver the content.
- Develop and solidify the partnership between Penn P4Y and Mighty Writers with to goal of providing regular programming and working together to seek additional funding for this initiative.

### **Project Timeline**

Spring 2025

- Convert one of the existing online curricula to the in-person format
- Offer one On the Road workshop

Summer 2025

- Convert remaining two online curricula to in-person format
- Develop one additional 10 session workshop curricula

- Run at least one workshop for an Mighty Writers Summer Camp

Fall 2025

- Run 2-3 On the Road Workshops using existing curricula

### **Project Outreach**

- In partnership with Mighty Writers, we will connect with their very broad network to attract a wide range of school district partners eager to engage with the On the Road philosophy project.

- We will include the curricula with supporting professional development materials on the “Materials” section of our website, which is publicly available for anyone who wishes to engage philosophically with the precollege population (currently under construction, currently in progress); for website, please see: <https://www.philosophy4young.org/>

- These website materials will be widely advertised through our existing partnerships in the Philadelphia School District through, for example, the Teacher’s Institute of Philadelphia, and the District’s newsletter

### **Accessibility Plan**

With all of the Penn P4Y programming we consider accessibility broadly to include not only how we ensure accommodations of individuals with disabilities, but also how accessible our programming is to students who are often a part of underserved communities. For example, we provide students with fares for public transportation to and from our programming. We provide meals for many of our programs which, among other benefits, helps our students who may be food insecure. We also try to integrate at least some programming into the school day to increase accessibility for students who have jobs, family caretaking, or other responsibilities outside of school hours.

In the case of this initiative, because the One the Road workshops take place within local schools or at the sites of other after school providers, many of the significant accessibility considerations have already been taken into account by those partners. However, where it is especially important for us to be considerate for these workshops is to students with various learning or physical disabilities that impact their ability to engage in writing. Within schools, supports for these students are often in place, and it's simply a matter of our workshop leaders being flexible to the various necessary accommodations. For example some students may require the use of technology to support their writing. Since many of the curricula which we will be using were originally developed for the online format, providing alternatives to paper and pencil for these students is simply a matter of drawing upon these original curricula. In other cases more adaptation may be necessary, and if required we will provide our leaders additional preparation time to make these modifications to the lessons. If the workshop takes place at an after school provider, community center, or similar setting, the needs of students who require accommodations or additional scaffolding of lessons may or may not be accounted for. In these cases, Dustin Webster who will serve as the point person on disability,

will communicate prior to beginning the workshop with the partners to ensure that appropriate accommodations can be provided. Dustin's background as a 5th grade special education teacher will be a valuable resource in this area. A benefit of working in partnership with Mighty Writers is that their wealth of experience in supporting student writing development provides another resource for ensuring that appropriate accommodations are met for students. Penn P4Y also is able to consult resources at Penn when necessary, including Regina Bynum, Director of Teaching and Learning for University-Assisted Community School Programs at the Netter Center for Community Partnership, with whom we have collaborated a great deal, as well as the Penn Disability Services Office at the Weingarten Center.

## Evaluation Plan

Markers of the project success by the end of Fall 2025 will be:

- Three current curricula revised into an in-person format
- One additional curriculum created
- At least 2 Mighty Writers "On the Road" workshops implemented: One in Spring 2026 and one Fall 2026.
- One summer 2026 workshop implemented within an Mighty Writers summer camp
- Newly revised and created curricula evaluated after implementation including using feedback from students and revised for improvement.

## Online Presence

The Primary online presence of this project will be the curricula with supporting professional development materials shared on the "Materials" section of our website, which is publicly available for anyone who wishes to engage philosophically with the precollege population (currently under construction, currently in progress).

<https://www.philosophy4young.org/>

## Budget Narrative

**Student Stipends:** We provide students with the standard university compensation rate of \$25/hour for graduate students and \$15/hour for undergraduate students. The number of hours required for curriculum development/re-development and the running of the workshops is estimated off of previous experiences engaging in similar types of projects.

Transportation costs are based on the standard rates on Philadelphia public transit.

Material cost estimates are based on experience running similar clubs and workshops. These typically amount to some small amount of basic office supplies that is a new purchase for Penn P4Y

or replenishing frequently used items. This cost also typically includes small snacks or prizes for students as part of the workshop activities.

### **Other Funding Sources**

Penn P4Y is determined not only to build on our partnership with Mighty Writers, but to make Philosophy for the Young through writing a more significant part of the programming that we offer. We have applied for an internal Penn course development grant to create and teach an Academically-Based Community Service course based on engaging K-12 students in philosophy through writing. This undergraduate course would be developed and taught by a graduate student in philosophy as well as a graduate student in the Penn Graduate School of Education with expertise in literacy and pedagogy. Students in the course would develop lessons which they would implement both as part of Mighty Writers after school programming as well as at other local P4Y partner K-12 schools.

This initiative is related, but separate from the project that this proposal describes. They would work hand in hand to make philosophy through writing a more significant part of Penn P4Y and cultivate a more robust relationship between our program and Mighty Writers, thus laying the groundwork for the potential to apply in partnership with Mighty Writers for future sources of funding for the On the Road initiative. Our budget (see APA Small Grant Budget) reflects funds requested from the APA for only this On the Road component of our larger commitments to (a) integrating writing within our pre-college philosophy programming, and (b) cultivating enriched partnerships with Mighty Writers. Nonetheless, we are seeking additional funding beyond the APA and described above for those elements of our larger commitments. These are not reflected in the budget.

## American Philosophical Association Small Grant Budget Template

Project Title:	On the Road: Pre-college Philosophy through Writing
Project Coordinator(s):	Dustin Webster and Karen Detlefsen
Total Funding Request: \$	4,895.00

*Proposals over \$5,000 normally are not funded.*

Item	Estimated Cost	Amount Requested	Amount Requested
Stipends for Students (Stipend)			
<b>Spring 2026</b>			
Stipend: Convert 1 curriculum to In-Person (15 hours @	\$375	\$ -	\$ 375.00
Stipend: Implement 1 workshop (2 students at University	\$600	\$ -	\$ 600.00
Public Transportation to and from Site (10 round trips per	\$80	\$ -	\$ 80.00
Materials for Workshop	\$100	\$ -	\$ 100.00
<b>Summer 2026</b>			
Stipend: Convert 2 curriculum to In-Person (30 hours @	\$750	\$ -	\$ 750.00
Stipend: Create 1 new curriculum (20 hours @ \$25/hour)	\$500	\$ -	\$ 500.00
Implement 1 MW Summer workshop (2 Graduate	\$750	\$ -	\$ 750.00
Public Transportation to and from Site (10 round trips per	\$80	\$ -	\$ 80.00
Materials For Workshop	\$ 100.00	\$ -	\$ 100.00
<b>Fall 2026</b>			
Stipend: Implement 1 workshop (2 students at University	\$600	\$ -	\$ 600.00
Stipend: Implement 1 workshop (2 students at University	\$ 600.00	\$ -	\$ 600.00
Materials for 2 workshops	\$200	\$ -	\$ 200.00
Public Transportation to and from Sites (10 round trips	\$160	\$ -	\$ 160.00
	<b>\$ 4,895.00</b>	<b>\$ -</b>	<b>\$ 4,895.00</b>
<b>Total</b>			

*The total cell for the last column must match the total in*

*Cells in the total row automatically total the items in the column*

# KAREN DETLEFSEN

June 2024

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## EDUCATION

University of Toronto	PhD, 2001
University of Western Ontario	MA, 1995
University of Calgary	BA in English and Philosophy, 1989

## ACADEMIC POSITIONS

Vice Provost for Education, University of Pennsylvania	2021-2024
Professor of Philosophy and Education, University of Pennsylvania	2016-present
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• secondary appointment in the Graduate School of Education</li><li>• non-voting member of the graduate groups of the Department of Religion Studies and the Department of the History and Sociology of Science</li><li>• Affiliated Faculty, Alice Paul Center and Gender, Sexuality, and Women's Studies</li><li>• Founding Director of <a href="#">Penn's Project for Philosophy for the Young</a></li></ul>	
Associate Professor of Philosophy and Education, University of Pennsylvania	2008-2016
Assistant Professor of Philosophy and Education, University of Pennsylvania	2001-2008

## FELLOWSHIPS, GRANTS, AND AWARDS (SELECTED AND RELEVANT TO APA GRANT)

### SERVICE/RESEARCH

Philosophy Teaching and Learning Organization (PLATO) grant, US\$3000 (for developing a kindergarten philosophy curriculum); US\$5000 for developing a first grade philosophy curriculum)

Making a Difference in Diverse Communities Grant (with Graduate School of Education, Social Policy and Practice, and the Netter Center for Community Partnerships), September 2018-August 2021; US\$84,000

## AREAS OF RESEARCH

History of Modern Philosophy (including Early Modern Women Philosophers); History of Philosophy of Science (especially Philosophy of Biology); Philosophy of Education; Feminism

**PUBLICATIONS: ARTICLES** (\*=REFEREED; SELECTED AND RELEVANT TO APA GRANT)

\*"Philosophy—Academic and Public: Lessons from The Graduate Certificate in Public Philosophy at the University of Pennsylvania," Jacqueline Wallis and Karen Detlefsen, in *Precollege Philosophy and Public Practice* (2022).

\*"Bringing Philosophy into Philadelphia Classrooms," Dustin Webster, Stephen Esser, and Karen Detlefsen, in *Intentional Disruptions: New Directions in Pre-College Philosophy*, edited by Stephen Miller, Vernon Press, 2021.

**PRESENTATIONS** (SELECTED AND RELEVANT TO APA GRANT)

Penn's Project for Philosophy for the Young: state of the project, with Steven Esser and Dustin Webster

- American Philosophical Association Eastern Division Meeting Teaching Hub, Philadelphia (January 2020).

**SERVICE AND TEACHING** (SELECTED AND RELEVANT TO APA GRANT)

Created and Instituted the Graduate Certificate in Public Philosophy (2021)

Teachers Institute of Philadelphia, University Advisory Council (2018-present); Co-Chair of the University Advisory Council (2020-present)

Netter Center for Community Partnerships, Faculty Advisory Board (2015-present)

Netter Center for Community Partnerships *Ad Hoc* Committee on Elevating Academically-Based Community Service Work, to produce a report for Provost Pritchett (2020)

Founding Director, Penn's Project for Philosophy for the Young (2018-present)

Ad Hoc Committee to evaluate the Curriculum and Program, Teachers Institute of Philadelphia (2018)

Netter Center Mormon-Simon Working Group for Community Partnerships: Chair (2016-17)

Supervised Michael Vazquez, graduate student, philosophy: supervisor for his Provost's Graduate Academic Engagement Fellowship with the Netter Center award (2019-20)

Academically-Based Community Service Courses created and taught:

PHIL248: Ethics Bowl, ABCS (Fall 2019)

PHIL249: Philosophy of Education, intermediate undergraduate seminar, an ABCS course (Spring 2021; Spring 2015; Fall 2018)

PHIL295: Identity, intermediate undergraduate seminar, an ABCS course (Spring 2017)

Under development (with Herman Beavers, Professor of Africana Studies and English at the University of Pennsylvania: Public Humanities (a graduate-level ABCS course to be taught in academic year 2025-26)

# DUSTIN WEBSTER

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## EDUCATION

**PhD in Education** - University of Pennsylvania Graduate School of Education 2023  
**Master in Law** - University of Pennsylvania Carey Law School 2021  
**M.A. in Philosophy and Education** - Teachers College, Columbia University 2017  
**B.A. in Political Science** - University of San Diego 2012  
**Other Training** - Institute for the Advancement of Philosophy for Children, Montclair State University Summer Seminar 2016

## PROFESSIONAL POSITIONS

**Postdoctoral Fellow** 2023-present  
Co-Director, Penn's Project for Philosophy for the Young, University of Pennsylvania Philosophy

## SELECTED PUBLICATIONS

**"Beyond Academics: How Teachers Flourish Through Ethical Education"** (2021) *Educational Theory* 71(3), 409-429.

**"Bringing Philosophy into Philadelphia Classrooms"** with Stephen Esser and Karen Detlefsen in *Intentional Disruption: Expanding Access to Philosophy* (Ed. Stephen Kekoa Miller), Vernon Press, 2021.

Public Facing - **"Does Content Matter in Philosophy for Children?"** (2023) Blog post on Philosophy Learning and Teaching Organization (PLATO) blog, *Wondering Aloud: Philosophy with Young People*. Available at <https://www.plato-philosophy.org/does-content-matter-in-philosophy-for-children/>

## OTHER WRITING

**"National High School Ethics Bowl Coaching Manual and Guide for Teachers"** (2023)

**"Penn's Project for Philosophy for the Young Standard Curriculum: Kindergarten"** (2021) with Karen Detlefsen

## SELECTED GRANTS AND FELLOWSHIPS

**National High School Ethics Bowl Bridge Micro-Grant** 2023  
Awarded \$1,000 to support providing stipends to K-12 teachers for their work with Ethics Bowl..

**PLATO (Philosophy Learning and Teaching Organization) Philosophy Fund Grant** 2023  
"Widening the Circle Conference" Co-Applicant with Dr. Lee Franklin. Awarded \$2,500 to host a conference on engaging undergraduate students with K-12 students in philosophical topics and practices.

**PLATO (Philosophy Learning and Teaching Organization) Philosophy Fund Grant** 2020

“Philosophy in Kindergarten... and Beyond!” Co-Applicant with Dr. Karen Detlefsen. Awarded \$3,000 to develop a Kindergarten Philosophy Curriculum.

**University of Pennsylvania Netter Center Course Development Grant** 2019  
Awarded \$5,000 to develop an Academically Based Community Service Ethics Bowl Course with Dr. Karen Detlefsen to train undergraduate students as ethics bowl coaches for students from local schools.

### **SELECTED CONFERENCE PRESENTATIONS**

**Widening the Circle: Engaging Undergraduates with K-12 Students in Philosophical Practice** 2024  
Conference Organizer with Dr. Lee Franklin

**Philosophy in Middle School: New Directions and Initiatives** 2024  
American Philosophical Association Eastern Division Meeting Teaching Hub - Panel Organizer and Presenter - New York, NY

**Content vs. Practice in Public Philosophy** 2023  
Public Philosophy Network Conference - “Lightning Talk” - Santa Cruz, California

**Engaging in Pre-College Philosophy Through Writing** 2022  
American Philosophical Association Central Division Meeting Teaching Hub - Panel Organizer and Presenter - Chicago, Illinois

**Models of Philosophical Engagement with K-12 Students** 2020  
Philosophy of Education Society Annual Meeting - Panel Organizer/Member - Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania

**Penn’s Project for Philosophy for the Young** 2020  
American Philosophical Association Eastern Division Meeting Teaching Hub - Panel Member - Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

### **PRE-COLLEGE PHILOSOPHY**

**Penn’s Project for Philosophy for the Young** 2019-present  
Developed and implemented a variety of workshops and activities with K-12 students in local schools.

**Penn Provost’s Summer Mentorship Program, Penn Law** 2020, 2021  
Developed and conducted programming for high school students based on National High School Ethics Bowl

**‘Mighty Writers’ Philosophy of the Future** 2021  
Teacher- 6th grade Philosophy through Writing Workshop

### **National High School Ethics Bowl**

**Philadelphia Regional High School Ethics Bowl - Philadelphia, Pennsylvania** 2020-present  
Founder and Organizer

**National High School Ethics Bowl Spring Workshop - Philadelphia, Pennsylvania** 2019  
Organizer