Dear Executive Director Ferrer,

My colleagues and I were delighted when, in April 2016, the APA Committee on Public Philosophy approved a $960 grant from the Berry Fund for Public Philosophy for some activities of Columbia University’s philosophy outreach program, Rethink. This grant was used to (1) expand Rethink to two new community partners and (2) foster the facilitation techniques of our volunteers. I will outline these efforts in more detail in turn.

In January 2016, the coordinators of Rethink identified two new community partners for which the outreach program would be suitable: the South Bronx Overall Economic Development Corporation (SoBro), and the Osborne Association (Osborne). Both organizations provide education and job resources for court-involved youth (i.e., 16 – 24 year olds on probation or parole), a marginalized group with which Rethink had facilitated philosophical discussions in the past. Both organizations were enthusiastic for having our volunteers (primarily graduate students of philosophy) co-facilitate regular philosophical discussions with their students. Teachers and social workers at SoBro and Osborne were confident that our program would enrich the established curriculum, provide students a safe, yet critical, space to communicate their ideas, and practice skills necessary for success on the High School Equivalency exam, a goal shared by many of the students.

We prepared and facilitated three concurrent series of discussions (two at SoBro, one at Osborne) from February through June for a total of thirty 1.5 hour sessions with ten to fifteen participants and two to three co-facilitators in each session. As we had done in the past, we held the final discussion of each series (the two groups of students from SoBro had a joint discussion) in the seminar room of the Philosophy Department at Columbia University, after a brief guided-tour with the students around campus, and followed by a pizza lunch. The APA grant was used, in part, to cover students’ travel expenses to Columbia’s campus, as well as the food and drinks for the two lunches.

The topics for both discussions were race and racism, with most attention given to a recent controversy: the decision of Yale’s president to retain the name of Calhoun College, a residence hall named after John C. Calhoun, a defender of slavery in the 1800s. The feedback given to us by the students, their teachers, and case managers was all-around positive. Staff from both organizations reported that the students continued the conversation after leaving Columbia’s campus. Moreover, two students from SoBro asked if they could become more involved in Rethink (we are hoping they can stay on board, but now as facilitators), and the teachers and staff at both organization requested that we continue collaborating together. We are pleased to say that we’ll be doing just that, again holding three concurrent series of discussions at SoBro and Osborne (in addition to our other community partners), this fall.
The amount of interest on the part of graduate students in volunteering with Rethink has been extraordinary (in 2015-2016, there were 30 volunteers, and even more who were interested but had schedule conflicts). Volunteers also come from different universities – Columbia (plus Teachers College), CUNY, Fordham University, The New School, and NYU were all represented. In order to, at once, strengthen the network of these young philosophers invested in engaging with the public, particularly marginalized groups, and foster greater facilitation techniques, we organized a workshop closed to Rethink volunteers. The topic of the workshop, which was held on Thursday, May 5 and led by Professor Michele Moody-Adams, was Miranda Fricker’s recent work on epistemic injustice, the idea that there are distinctive ways in which people can be wronged as knowers. This topic is often central to the framing of Rethink’s mission, as those with whom we work come from communities we take to be particularly vulnerable to epistemic injustices, and our discussions aim to rectify these injustice, albeit to a limited extent. The topic naturally prompted many volunteers to share their experiences and challenges in volunteering with Rethink. The APA’s grant was used to cover the expenses for drinks and sandwiches for workshop participants.

Feedback on the workshop was overwhelmingly positive. Several volunteers afterwards requested that there be more such workshops in the future, and the ideas from that discussion often come up again in conversation. Of no less importance, is the comradery enthused by the workshop, which was one of the rare occasions for so many of our volunteers to engage one another. Added to this was the travel compensation to the sites of our community partners around New York City for weekly discussions provided to volunteers through the funds of the APA’s grant. We look forward to continuing to collaborate with our current partners in the community, as well as strengthening the network of graduate students interested in public philosophy. Once again, we are grateful to the APA for its support of our efforts.

Sincerely,

Adam Blazej
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Rethink Co-ordinator