Award Report: Berry Fund for Public Philosophy

Grant to the WMU Lyceum

Overview

In May 2019, the Philosophy Department at Western Michigan University was awarded a $1,000 grant from the APA’s Berry Fund for Public Philosophy. The grant’s purpose was to support the growth initiatives of the WMU Lyceum, a free, weeklong philosophy-themed summer camp for high school students in Kalamazoo, MI.

Not only did the APA funds help us secure our primary objective of growing and diversifying the Lyceum, but it also raised the public profile of the camp. This, in turn, brought further benefits to our outreach efforts and helped us contribute to the pre-college philosophy community more generally.

Background

The Lyceum was started three years ago by graduate students in the Western Michigan University Philosophy MA Program. The camp has two aims: (i) to improve students’ critical thinking and writing skills in a fun, engaging manner and (ii) to expose students to the study of philosophy in a college setting. To achieve these aims, the Lyceum uses a theme-based curriculum: daily class sessions combine critical thinking exercises and discussions that are focused on a specific topic within the camp’s larger theme (e.g., Philosophy and Technology, Philosophy and the Environment).

Last year the Lyceum leadership team—Adam Waggoner (graduate student, WMU Philosophy) and Charlie Kurth (Associate Professor, WMU Philosophy)—wanted to capitalize on the success the Lyceum had seen in its first two years (the summers of 2017, 2018). The result was a two-part growth initiative for the 2019 camp:

(1) Broaden and build. The first two sessions of the Lyceum drew a small number of students, most of whom came from affluent families. We want to significantly increase this number while also diversifying our student body. To do this, we have broadened our recruitment efforts to draw in significantly more students from socioeconomically disadvantaged schools in the Kalamazoo area.

(2) Measuring success. To gain a better understanding of how high school students become interested in both studying philosophy and going to college (big issues here at WMU), we developed a set of survey questions for students attending the camp (e.g., rate your interest in [studying philosophy/going to college]; did the Lyceum increase your confidence in defending your views in front of others?; what part of camp did you find most enjoyable?). By administering these questions at the beginning and end of the camp, we will not only gain insight on how to improve our
program, but will also be better able to demonstrate the effectiveness of the camp as we seek addition funding for the 4th Lyceum (summer 2020) and beyond.

The cost of the camp is approximately $70-90 per student. This includes daily lunches for all participants and a philosophy book for each student. Both of these expenditures are central to the Lyceum’s success. By providing lunch for all participants, we give students the opportunity to engage with the Lyceum instructors outside of the classroom. By giving each student a book that is selected based on their individual philosophical interests, we help promote continued interest in philosophy.

Use of Funds and Results

The award from the APA Berry Fund supplemented other, locally-raised funds that we used to support our broaden and build efforts. Below we highlight three ways in which these funds advanced the objectives of both the WMU Lyceum and the larger philosophical community.

(1) We were successful with our primary objective: growing and diversifying the camp. Working with various partners at WMU, including the Dean’s Office, we identified strategies for recruiting a larger and more diverse group of campers from local high schools. These efforts included a targeted email campaign aimed at local high school principals, in person meetings with WMU outreach officers, and leveraging the resources of the WMU Marketing and Communications Office.

These efforts paid off. Enrollment in the camp was up nearly 30% (it would have been an over 50% jump but for several last minute cancelation). Moreover, not only did we draw students from two new Kalamazoo area high schools, but we also attracted students from the wider region: one student commuted from Indiana (two hours away) and a pair of students from the Detroit suburbs (also two hours away) booked a hotel room in Kalamazoo so that they could attend the camp!

That high school students were willing to make commitments like these was one of the most delightful surprises of the 2019 Lyceum. Not only does it speak to the deep interest in academically-oriented summer enrichment programs, but it reveals an opportunity. The philosophical community can—and should—be developing more philosophy-oriented summer camps like the Lyceum. To this extent, we have developed a template for those interested in doing this (see appendix) and we are working with partners to spread the word (more on this below).

(2) We were also delighted to see that, of our 14 participants, 7 were female and 7 were people of color. So here too there’s an opportunity for philosophy departments. As we know, interest in philosophy among females and people of color drops off in college. Our experience suggests that summer camps like the Lyceum can stimulate the interests of these students in philosophy before they arrive in college. That, in turn, may help diversify the disciple.

On this front, our data collection efforts illuminate the impact philosophy summer camps can have. For instance, our survey results suggest that the camp programing was successful not only in increasing the interest of women and students of color in philosophy, but also in bolstering their confidence in defending their view in front of others. On a more anecdotal note, one of this year’s campers was a high school senior attending the Lyceum for the second summer in a row. In the fall,
she enrolled at WMU as a freshman and has declared Philosophy as her major. As she explained in her exit survey, the Lyceum “was a huge factor in my decision to major in philosophy” at Western Michigan.

(3) The Berry Grant brought additional, unanticipated benefits. Of particular note, our efforts to publicize the award drew the attention of Roberta Israeloff, Executive Director of the Squire Family Foundation and a member of the Executive Committee for the Philosophy Learning And Teaching Organization (PLATO). For the past several months, we have been working with Roberta to help grow the Lyceum and better spread the word about the benefits of summer philosophy enrichment camps (e.g., publicizing and sharing the template for running a camp that we developed). On this front, our efforts are already bearing fruit: the Philosophy Department at Stony Brook University is using the template we developed to start up a philosophy summer camp of their own.

Future Plans

Our plans for the 4th WMU Lyceum are already well underway. For instance, later this week, we will be meeting with a local principal to discuss ways to bring philosophy into his high school. We have found that there is significant overlap between students who attend the Lyceum and students who participate in high school Ethics Bowl (WMU Philosophy Department currently sponsors one high school team). The principal is interested in having us sponsor an Ethics Bowl team for his students, and we are excited about this opportunity—it will be a great way for us to both bring philosophy to another area school and draw more attention to enrichment opportunities like the Lyceum.

We are also exploring other ways to spread the word about value of philosophy-oriented summer camps. On this front, we are working with the team at PLATO to identify strategies for getting the message out. Of particular interest here are opportunities to talk about our experiences on blogs, in Op-Ed pieces, and in articles in venues like the Chronical and Inside High Ed.
Appendix

A Template for High School Philosophy Summer Camps at Colleges and Universities
By Adam Waggoner and Charlie Kurth

This document has been inspired by our experiences leading the Western Michigan University Lyceum, a weeklong philosophy summer camp for high school students facilitated primarily by graduate students. At the WMU Lyceum, students engage in discussions and participate in fun activities that are geared toward introducing them to philosophy and helping them improve their critical thinking and writing skills. The WMU Lyceum has evolved each year, starting with six graduate students who worked with four local high school students. For the summer of 2019, the Lyceum planning involved over a dozen graduate students, a faculty advisor, local high school administrators, and wide-reaching discourse across the University, which resulted in the attendance of fourteen high school students from across and beyond the state of Michigan, including seven female students and seven students of color.

1. Why run a high school philosophy summer camp?

A well-run high school philosophy summer camp at a college or university has at least three distinct beneficiaries: high school participants; the camp leaders; and the college or university associated with the camp.

By participating in philosophy summer camps, high school students are exposed to philosophy in a fun, engaging, and supportive environment. Along with honing participants’ critical thinking skills, philosophy summer camps tend to draw high school students interested in discussing “Big Questions” about themselves and the world with their peers. This often leads to exciting new friendships forged by students from a diversity of schools, grade levels, convictions, and socioeconomic backgrounds. Moreover, the opportunity to engage with one another and the camp leaders in a college setting tends to leave students more comfortable discussing their views with others, helps them identify problems with their own views and the views of those around them, and increases their college readiness. These benefits are recognized not only by camp leaders and parents, but by high school students themselves:

“Lyceum cultivates an environment of friendship, casual learning, and respect for one another’s ideas that is not present in a typical high school classroom. Students are encouraged to speak their minds, to take a stance, to seek answers, and to question others. I have learned to create and present a strong argument, but also to listen to others and to change my mind. I have met some really incredible and interesting people through this summer camp, and I would absolutely recommend Lyceum to anyone interested in Philosophy, in exciting discussions, or in thinking about the world.”

–2nd and 3rd Annual WMU Lyceum Participant

Philosophy summer camps can also be an incredibly enriching experience for the camp leaders, whether they be faculty members, graduate students, or undergraduate students. Working with high school students in an environment less formal than a classroom often rekindles a passion for both
teaching and studying philosophy among camp leaders, while also stretching them to facilitate philosophical conversation in new, innovative ways:

“Last year, the Lyceum took place in the middle of the Summer semester. And at this point in my first year of grad school, I was feeling a little burnt out with respect to philosophy. Participating in the lyceum really recharged my batteries, though. The Lyceum is an environment where there is more fun to be had doing philosophy. And it is also a kind of workshop space for those instructing or delivering any content. It is a really interesting challenge to deliver accurate and quality content on these subjects in a way that is accessible and engaging for the high school audience. My overall experience with the lyceum has been wholly positive, a great growth experience, and a ton of fun.”

–2nd and 3rd Annual WMU Lyceum Graduate Student Leader

A philosophy summer camp is also advantageous to both the department that supports the program and the respective college or university: high school students—and their parents—gain a close, hopefully positive, personal connection to the camp leaders, the campus, and the department whose students and faculty are leading the camp efforts. Such positive connections increase the likelihood of high school students attending the college or university and taking classes, or even majoring, in philosophy.

2. What resources does it take to run a philosophy summer camp well?

An answer to this question largely depends on the size and scope of the camp in question. For example, a smaller philosophy summer camp can flourish with only a few camp leaders while a larger camp is difficult to facilitate without more support. Thus, running a philosophy summer camp well requires a sense of how many students and faculty are willing to participate in the camp before planning recruitment strategies.

Despite the major differences across philosophy summer camps, a core group of undergraduate or graduate students willing to plan and attend the camp, as well as some departmental or institutional support, is vital for almost any camp’s success. And while departmental or institutional support may take a variety of forms, it is ideal to have at least one advisor who can serve as a bridge between students and administrators, help students plan curriculum where needed, and establish the programs reputation among prospective parents and local schools.

As an example, the 2019 WMU Lyceum had a core group of three individuals who did the bulk of the recruiting, overall organization, and daily lesson plan design. For the camp itself, the typical session had about a 3:1 student to facilitator ratio. This low ratio fosters opportunities for participants to form close relationships with camp leaders, inviting conversations about their college and career plans, as well as the various, non-philosophical activities they enjoy. The hour lunch sessions—where both graduate students, faculty, and high school participants eat together—has been a particularly effective venue for these conversations. It allows us to, at week’s end, provide each camper with a philosophy book aimed at an issue they’ve shown interest in over the course of the camp. We have found that our budget runs approximately $50-$75 per student and our central costs are: background checks for graduate student facilitators, a food budget (we provide snacks and lunch to campers and instructors), field trip expenses (admission, transportation), and a book budget.
3. How should a philosophy summer camp be planned?

The following is based on a rough timeline for the WMU Lyceum. This timeline will likely work for those starting a program from the ground up, but it may be wise to start exploring faculty and student interest in late-summer or right at the beginning of the semester rather than waiting until early fall.

➤ Early-Mid Fall
   ○ Hold an interest meeting to see how many students and faculty are interested in participating in the philosophy summer camp.
   ○ Begin thinking about the following:
     ▪ Will the camp have a theme? If so, what will it be?
     ▪ When will the camp take place?
     ▪ What leadership roles are important? Who will occupy them?
     ▪ What costs will the camp have (books? food? field trip?) Should the camp have a small fee paid by the campers or be funded? If it will be funded, where will the funds come from?
     ▪ What are some ways to advertise the camp to high school students?
       ● Recruit from high school ethics bowl or debate teams
       ● Contact high school principals and teachers
       ● Identify college/university connections to local schools
   ○ Begin researching funding opportunities
     ▪ Student Government
     ▪ Department Funding
     ▪ External Grants
   ○ Check with college/university administrators about the need for things like background checks for camp instructors, official college/university approval for the camp, and other administrative/legal requirements

➤ Before the end of Fall Semester
   ○ Finalize date and theme, any potential field trips, and the camp’s location
   ○ Discuss promotional materials and recruitment strategy for spring semester

➤ When classes resume after winter break
   ○ Finalize promotional materials
     ▪ Website
     ▪ Poster
     ▪ Officially register the camp with the college or university
   ○ Send out promotional materials to local high schools, community organizations and intercampus resources

➤ A month before classes end
   ○ Finalize camp leaders
   ○ Begin planning curriculum (see the next section for an example)
4. How should a philosophy summer camp be taught?

The following curriculum is based on the 2019 WMU Lyceum: Philosophy and Technology, which met from 10am-5pm Tuesday-Friday and concluded with student presentations from approximately 10am-12pm on Saturday.

T-R, 10-11: Introduction & Logic
T-R, 11-12: Metaphysics & Epistemology
T-F, 12-1: Lunch in the University Cafeteria
T, 1-3: Normative Ethics
T, 3-5: Censorship and Social Media
W, 1-3: Campus Tour
W, 3-5: Research
R, 1-3: Brains, Minds, and Artificial Intelligence
R, 3-5: Virtual Reality Tour
F, 10-11: Virtual Reality Follow-Up
F, 11-12; 1-2: Research
F, 2-3: Ethics of Self-Driving Cars
F, 3-5: Student Choice/Sendoff

Note that this is only a rough skeleton for the camp. Each day’s sessions should anticipate and aim to take advantage of occasions where fruitful conversations develop organically, molding the content and questions of the camp to the interests of the participants, not molding the interests of the participants to the pre-planned content and questions of the camp. While the content and style of these individual sessions varied quite a bit in our case by topic and the graduate students who facilitated them, both camp leaders and student participants reported that problem-based, group-oriented, active learning better achieved the camp’s goals than lecture-based learning. For example, rather than camp leaders explaining the difficulties faced by various theories of what constitutes the self, they might instead first facilitate a brainstorming session among participants on what makes them the individuals they are, split participants into groups, and then work with them to engage in a debate.