July 10, 2019

Dear Selection Committee,

Two years ago, George Rainbolt nominated Dr. Sandra Dwyer for the first APA Prize for Excellence in Philosophy Teaching. She was selected as one of the finalists but did not win. I am nominating her again, in the hopes she will be considered carefully for this award, and perhaps will win it before she retires (in 2020). Below my brief letter here, I am including the nomination letter from former Chair, George Rainbolt, which outlines her innovative pedagogy program, and a letter from her former student.

Dr. Dwyer is outstanding as a teacher, a mentor, and trainer of philosophy teachers. I have known Sandy for the 16 years I have taught at GSU, and she is a true mensch. I already knew that she is essential to our graduate and undergraduate teaching, but now that I’ve become chair, I can more fully understand how much she does to prepare our 50+ MA students to teach over 3,000 undergraduate students each year. She is truly irreplaceable. Though I’m sure your committee takes student evaluation measures for just what they are worth, I thought I would highlight that Dr. Dwyer typically receives scores from students in the 4.5-5.0 (out of 5) range, even on courses such as Business Ethics (most recently, 4.74 on the overall quality question), the Teaching Practicums preparing MA students to teach (4.6, 4.8, and 4.9), and Critical Thinking (4.8), as well as her upper-level philosophy courses, such as Biomedical Ethics (4.9) and Topics in Ethics (4.6 undergrad, 5.0 grad). These scores are above the averages in the department and the university and are some additional evidence of her abilities in the classroom.

Dr. Dwyer has not rested on her laurels. Even as she approaches retirement, she applied for and won a grant from our University’s new College-to-Career (CtC) program so that she could create a CtC module in the core courses she oversees (Critical Thinking and Intro to Philosophy). Please let me know if you have any questions about the information submitted below or if I can submit more information (beyond this 2000 word limit).

Sincerely,

Eddy Nahmias  
Professor and Chair  
Department of Philosophy  
Georgia State University  
enahmias@gsu.edu
From Dr. Rainbolt’s nomination letter:

Dr. Dwyer has developed and runs a ground-breaking teacher preparation program in the Department of Philosophy at Georgia State University that has had an outstanding impact on the student learning of more than 50,000 undergraduate philosophy students.

Graduate students often teach their own courses. Unfortunately, they often receive little preparation before they teach and little assistance while they are teaching. Student learning at the undergraduate level suffers because their instructors (through no fault of their own) are not adequately prepared. Under Dr. Dwyer’s leadership, the Department set out to do better.

The heart of Dr. Dwyer’s program is a sequence of three courses. The first course, Phil 8970, Teaching Philosophy, is taken by every potential graduate-student instructor in their first semester in the Department. The graduate students sit in on a section of the course they will be teaching (Phil 1010, Critical Thinking) taught by Dr. Dwyer. They meet weekly with Dr. Dwyer to cover issues such as preparing and delivering lectures, organizing class discussion, and grading assignments.

The second course, Phil 8980, Teaching Philosophy Practicum, is taken by every graduate-student instructor in the first semester that they teach. This course meets weekly and Dr. Dwyer helps graduate-student instructors with the practical issues that arise for first-time instructors (e.g., chronically late students, encouraging all students to speak, and the special issues faced by first-generation college students). Dr. Dwyer also points out places where students often misunderstand a point and suggests ways to minimize or correct the misunderstanding. She also does classroom observations of each graduate student and provides them with extensive written feedback.

The third course, Phil 8985, Advanced Teaching Philosophy Practicum, is taken by every graduate-student instructor in each subsequent semester of teaching. Dr. Dwyer guides these more experienced graduate-student instructors through any problems that may arise. Phil 8985 also provides an opportunity for students to meet requirements of the Certificate of Teaching Excellence from the College of Arts & Sciences.

Dr. Dwyer’s task is difficult because the Department’s graduate program is only at the master’s level. Students typically stay for two years. As they cannot teach in their first year, Dr. Dwyer is constantly supervising a large group of first-time graduate-student instructors, typically over 20 each year.

Dr. Dwyer’s work to increase the instructional effectiveness of our graduate-student instructors goes beyond these three classes. She develops standard syllabi, assignments, and exams for all seventy-five sections of Phil 1010 (enrolling approximately 3,000 students per year). She reviews the syllabi, assignments, and exams for approximately thirty-five sections of Phil 2010, Intro to Philosophy (enrolling approximately 1,000 students per year). Her work dramatically increases the quality of these materials and thus the student learning that occurs in these classes.
Dr. Dwyer has long been a leader in the creative and effective use of high quality pedagogies. She began by incorporating Supplemental Instruction (SI) into the Department’s core courses. She then “flipped” Phil 1010. In a flipped classroom, students listen to lectures at home (via the web) and do their “homework” in class, often in small groups and with the assistance of the instructor. Dr. Dwyer coordinated the development of voice-over PowerPoint slides that deliver lectures. Because Phil 1010 uses common exams and has a test bank, and because the number of students in Phil 1010 is large, Dr. Dwyer was able to make a statistically rigorous evaluation of the flipped technique. She found that the flipped technique led to a 17 percentage point increase in the percent of students who earned an A or a B on the final exam.

Dr. Dwyer recently piloted a plan to take Phil 1010 online. Enrollment was high and Dr. Dwyer is rigorously testing to see if students in the online course learn as much as those in the traditional classroom. Dr. Dwyer is also a co-author of *Critical Thinking: The Art of Argument*. The second edition of this textbook was released by Cengage Learning in January of 2015. (Disclaimer: I am the other co-author of this textbook.) As the release of the second edition illustrates, the book has sold very nicely and is widely used across the country.

In 2015, Dr. Dwyer’s work earned her Georgia State University University’s Award for Outstanding Instructional Effectiveness. In 2017 she received Georgia State’s Graduate Pedagogical Mentorship Award. Dr. Dwyer’s work was also noticed by those at the APA. She was invited to be part of a panel, “How to Implement Teacher Training in Philosophy: Best Practices,” at the Eastern APAs in January of 2017.

In sum, Dr. Dwyer is a fantastic teacher with a laser focus on student learning who has been a forceful advocate for quality teaching. After I left Georgia State to take up my current position, I now view Dr. Dwyer’s work within a broader perspective. The methods and techniques she has developed are not only a model for philosophy, but for all disciplines. She would be an outstanding choice for APA’s Prize for Excellence in Philosophy Teaching. If you have any questions, do not hesitate to contact me.
From Bobby Bingle, a former MA student mentored by Dr. Dwyer, now in the PhD program at Duke University:

I am honored to write this letter of support for Dr. Sandra Dwyer for the APA’s Prize for Excellence in Philosophy Teaching. As a former student of Dr. Dwyer’s and former high school teacher, I cannot think of anyone more deserving of this award.

The first course I took with Dr. Dwyer was Phil 8970, Teaching Philosophy. This course is mandatory for all first-year graduate students who will teach in their second year. During this course, we sat in on Dr. Dwyer’s Critical Thinking classes. Our grade included taking all the Critical Thinking exams, as well as teaching a lesson to the undergrads. Not only did Dr. Dwyer help us prepare the lesson, but she also observed and gave us immediate feedback. As I had discovered in my prior high school teacher training, prospective teachers often receive little direct feedback on their lessons. Not so with Dr. Dwyer. Her prompt and thoughtful feedback was immensely useful in helping us determine what we did well, what we could improve, and how we could make those improvements. In addition, we also attended a weekly seminar. In those meetings, Dr. Dwyer encouraged us to think seriously about pedagogy. For example, part of our grade was presenting and critically evaluating peer-reviewed teaching articles.

In addition, I was Dr. Dwyer’s research assistant during my first year. Together she, another former philosophy graduate student, and I prepared a report on the history of the department’s teacher training program (under revision for *Teaching Philosophy*). One of Dr. Dwyer’s goals for the report was to use data in making claims about the history and development of the program. To that end, we analyzed hundreds of undergraduate course evaluations, as well as dozens of surveys from graduate students who have moved on from the program. Indeed, Dr. Dwyer is an advocate for data-driven instruction, and is committed to improving the quality of education at Georgia State. For example, during my last year, the philosophy department offered “flipped classrooms” for Critical Thinking. As part of the program, Dr. Dwyer collected data from the standardized tests used for all Critical Thinking classes to determine if flipping the class was better than traditional teaching methods.

In my second year, I took Dr. Dwyer’s Phil 8980, Philosophy Teaching Practicum (in my first semester), and Phil 8985, Advanced Teaching Philosophy Practicum (in subsequent semesters). These weekly seminars were aimed at handling administrative and practical classroom matters. For example, we would often discuss issues that we had during the week, such as grading, encouraging student participation, and handling classroom management. Relying on her years of teaching experience, Dr. Dwyer gave us apt and helpful advice. Not only that, but she also used the seminar as an opportunity for us to develop our own pedagogical skills, and routinely encouraged us to provide our own thoughts and feedback. She also promoted a strong rapport among our cohort, such as by requiring us to take part in peer-observations. Lastly, Dr. Dwyer would also sit in on our lessons, and offer us detailed and personalized written and oral feedback about how we could improve our instruction.

Working under Dr. Dwyer, I’ve was impressed with her dedication and outstanding work ethic. Since she instructs all the teacher training courses, she is mentoring multiple cohorts at the same time. In addition to that (and teaching her own classes), she also develops the syllabi, assignments, and exams for all Critical Thinking sections, as well as reviewing all syllabi and exams.
for the graduate student taught Introduction to Philosophy sections. Her hard work has also been recognized outside of the department. During my final year in the program, she earned Georgia State’s 2015 Award for Outstanding Instructional Effectiveness. More recently, she was nominated by a group of graduate students and received Georgia State’s 2017 Graduate Pedagogical Mentorship Award.

Finally, I must mention that Dr. Dwyer cares deeply for her students. As a member of my thesis committee, she somehow found the time to read and offer substantive feedback on my writing sample, statement of purpose, and master’s thesis. Moreover, she makes clear to every new cohort that she understands how stressful graduate school can be, and that her door is always open if they need to talk. I know I speak for many graduate students when I say that I would not have been successful in the program without her steadfast dedication and support.