Dear members of the selection committee,

I write to nominate Prof. Mara Harrell, Teaching Professor of Philosophy at Carnegie Mellon University, for the 2018 Prize for Excellence in Philosophy Teaching. (Prof. Harrell was a finalist for the inaugural prize last year.) Prof. Harrell is an outstanding teacher who has made an enormous, direct positive impact on our students during her fifteen years at CMU. In addition, she has developed novel pedagogical methods, implemented them in the classroom, demonstrated their effectiveness, and worked to spread those innovations through multiple avenues. And on top of her in-classroom excellence and innovation, she is a leader in the national and global philosophy teaching communities. In short, she excels on all three of the criteria for the Prize and would be a worthy recipient.

In the classroom, Prof. Harrell is a highly effective teacher whose classes are innovative and enjoyable. Students often describe her classes in glowing terms, such as:

- “easily one of the more intellectually stimulating classes I’ve taken at CMU”
- “amazing learning experience for me”
- “one of the most important classes I have taken”

These responses are particularly impressive since Prof. Harrell has, for many years now, had the unenviable task of teaching our (relatively) large Introduction to Philosophy course. Introductory classes are often caught between two competing interests: keeping the course engaging for students who might not have a deep interest in the subject, and ensuring students actually learn and acquire new skills and knowledge. Through the use of innovative, empirically validated teaching techniques—argument diagramming (discussed in more detail below), problem-based learning, “flipped” classrooms, and others—Prof. Harrell has transformed our introductory course so that it has, in one student’s words, “established a base of philosophy on which I intend to build for the rest of my life.”

This commitment to the use of high-quality, pedagogical methods runs throughout all of Prof. Harrell’s courses. For example, her Engineering Ethics course implements the latest educational research on problem-based learning in a class that is entirely designed around engagement with case studies, culminating in a student-conducted “mock trial” about the Fukushima nuclear reactor disaster. By approaching the course in a student-centric manner, Prof. Harrell developed a course that was a clear subjective success in student enjoyment (e.g., one student said it was “one of the highlights of my CMU career”). Crucially, it was also a clear objective success in learning, as the students exhibited statistically significant improvements on both dimensions of the Engineering and Science Issues Test (ESIT), which assesses the ability to apply general moral principles to particular situations relevant to science and engineering.

Of course, not every pedagogical innovation will work successfully; high-quality teaching inevitably involves some risk-taking. Prof. Harrell’s commitment to student learning thus also shows in her willingness to adapt to the needs of the particular class or students. She does not dogmatically persist in using a teaching method even if it is not working, but rather adjusts to ensure continued student learning. This adaptability is even recognized by her students; for example, one student observed that “The professor made clear steps in trying to fit her teaching style to the needs of the class, which is something that I've seen so few other professors try to do.” (emphasis added)
As a result of her pedagogical knowledge and ability, Prof. Harrell has become the educational “fixer” for our department: when a course must be created or updated (whether because it is problematic or simply old), we turn to her to redesign the class in innovative ways. Every member of our faculty has learned from her experiences, and many of us have adapted our own classes by following her lead. Prof. Harrell has had a deep influence on every course in our department, not simply her own.

Of course, there are many inspiring, effective philosophy instructors in this world. Prof. Harrell stands apart because of her significant pedagogical innovation, development, and validation, primarily using the framework of argument diagrams. As we all know, a significant challenge in philosophy courses is helping the students learn how to read and critically analyze philosophical arguments. Key premises and conclusions are often distributed throughout an essay, and so it can be difficult for students even to reconstruct the argument, never mind analyzing it. Argument diagrams provide a graphical representation: they explicitly distinguish premises, sub-conclusions, and the overall conclusion(s) of an argument, and then use arrows to indicate the argumentative relationships between the different components. Argument diagrams are first found in early 20th century legal contexts, and aspects of the framework were most famously explored (though informally) by Stephen Toulmin.

Beginning in Fall 2005, Prof. Harrell started using argument diagramming as the central vehicle for all discussions and analyses in Introduction to Philosophy. Argument diagrams (or argument maps, as they are sometimes called) have become increasingly common over the past decade, but Prof. Harrell was one of the “early adopters.” Moreover, she was not content with students’ anecdotal reports that argument diagramming was useful in this and other courses. Instead, she designed a series of studies involving pre- and post-testing of students in different course sections, taught in different ways. Those studies revealed a large positive impact of argument diagramming across students in five different semesters ranging over a decade of instruction: students taught to read, construct, and use argument diagrams showed significant improvements in a range of critical thinking skills, particularly understanding, evaluating, creating, and analyzing arguments. To the best of my knowledge, her studies provided the first non-anecdotal, appropriately controlled evidence that argument diagrams have a significant positive impact when used as the primary pedagogical tool for introductory philosophy classes. She has since published a dozen papers and book chapters demonstrating, in a range of conditions, the positive benefits of argument diagramming for critical thinking skills and introductory philosophy courses.

Prof. Harrell subsequently worked actively to make this pedagogical innovation readily available to other educators. She developed a set of free, online modules (in CMU’s Open Learning Initiative) that teach argument diagramming; this courseware has now been used by literally thousands of students at CMU, other universities, small colleges, community colleges, and even high schools. These modules have provided instructors with scientifically grounded materials to teach the framework. More importantly, the modules enable class discussion to focus on the use of these representations, rather than spending precious “face time” teaching the basics of the framework. That is, the online material make it possible for instructors to focus on the important part of teaching: helping the students understand, reason, and think clearly. For her research and development of these pedagogically innovative online modules, Prof. Harrell was awarded an inaugural CMU Teaching Innovation Award (in 2016), and was named the first Dean’s Innovation Scholar for the Dietrich College of Humanities & Social Sciences at CMU.

This research and development also led directly to the publication of her textbook *What is the Argument? An Introduction to the Practice of Philosophy* (2016; MIT Press). This introductory philosophy
The textbook is entirely grounded in argument diagramming as a tool to understand the arguments in many of the key texts in our discipline. It provides not only worked examples for students, but also student exercises that enable them to build familiarity and facility with argument diagrams. These different resources, both online and textbook, have essentially eliminated the “barriers to adoption” for argument diagramming in introductory philosophy courses; any instructor who desires can easily incorporate this proven pedagogical technique.

Moreover, argument analyses and critical thinking skills are critically important in many disciplines, not just philosophy. Prof. Harrell has thus worked to extend and transfer argument diagrams as a pedagogical tool for general, introductory writing courses. In collaboration with Prof. Danielle Wetzel (CMU English), she successfully got argument diagramming adopted into the CMU freshman writing course starting in Fall 2008. Again, Prof. Harrell was unwilling to accept anecdotal evidence of the efficacy of argument diagrams, and so she & Prof. Wetzel used pre- and post-testing to establish that instruction in argument diagramming significantly improves writing skills, particularly the quality, clarity, and detail of students’ arguments. Her pedagogical innovations have had demonstrable impacts in many different types of classrooms, not only philosophy.

In addition to her pedagogical research, development, implementation, and testing, Prof. Harrell has been heavily involved in supporting high-quality philosophy teaching both locally and globally. At CMU, she has been the Director of Graduate Student Teacher Training in the Department of Philosophy for fifteen years, and has been instrumental in ensuring that our graduate students are appropriately prepared and supported in the classroom, whether as graders, teaching assistants, or full instructors. This service has been invaluable to the department, and has resulted in multiple Philosophy graduate students winning College- and University-level teaching awards, even though we have one of the smallest Ph.D. programs at CMU. Moreover, as Director of Undergraduate Studies (yet another task!), she understands how our disparate classes fit together to form a coherent course of study for the undergraduates, and so can help our graduate students to further “tune” their teaching to the needs of the students.

Prof. Harrell has also been highly active in service to the pedagogical development of our discipline. She is now the Editor of Teaching Philosophy—the flagship journal for educational research and innovation in philosophy—after being a member of the Editorial Board for nearly a decade. She has been heavily involved in the American Association of Philosophy Teachers (AAPT), and has organized multiple workshops and conference sessions on teaching techniques & effectiveness. In short, Prof. Harrell has given significant time and energy to help improve teaching across the field, whether by herself, her students & colleagues, and the profession as a whole.

The inaugural Prize for Excellence in Philosophy Teaching calls for an exceptional individual who not only is an outstanding and innovative teacher, but also has made a broad difference in improving pedagogy throughout the profession. Prof. Mara Harrell excels on all of these dimensions, as she has:

- Shown demonstrable excellence in undergraduate teaching, including her use of teaching methods that have proven positive impacts on student learning, and her adaptation of her courses to maximize the learning of every student.
- Created, implemented, and empirically validated novel teaching methods, most notably involving the use of argument diagramming.
- Disseminated these pedagogical innovations widely through a textbook, online modules, and numerous papers and talks.
• Provided substantial service for the improvement of philosophy education, both locally at CMU and globally across the profession.

There are many outstanding educators in our profession, and many outstanding researchers. Prof. Harrell is one of the rare individuals who combines both sets of skills, and one of the even rarer people who has chosen to focus their research on pedagogical development and innovation. She has made philosophy teaching better at every level, and would be an ideal recipient of the Prize. Please do not hesitate to contact me if there is any more information that I can provide in support of this nomination of Prof. Harrell.

Sincerely,

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