

PLATO Philosophy Fund Application

Thank you for Applying!

Project Title: __Philosophical Conversation Starters__

Dates for Project: __August 1, 2019 – May 31, 2020__

Amount of Funding Requested: __\$6,996__

1. Please describe the project, including any work that has already been done to develop it. (500 words max)

The mission of the Society of Philosophers in America (SOPHIA) is to “use the tools of philosophical inquiry to improve people’s lives and enrich the profession of philosophy through conversation and community building.” In 2008, we tested a SOPHIA One-Sheet process, using a single-sheet (front and back) prompt for philosophical conversations that is accessible, about matters relevant to public and personal life, and thought-provoking. “[It’s Over Debbie](#),” a short, controversial essay that was published in the *Journal of the American Medical Association*, was the basis of our first try. Facilitators drafted questions and the meeting was a great success even though attendees had no reading assignment in advance, rendering our chat more accessible.

In this project, we propose to dedicate 5% of our Executive Director’s time over the grant period to the drafting of an accessible research paper on philosophical conversation-starting and philosophical community-building, to the supervision of ~8 hours per month of a graduate student’s organizational work in calling for proposals for SOPHIA One-Sheets and having them peer-reviewed. In addition, the grant would pay each One-Sheet author(s) \$100 for the creation and subsequent revision if accepted upon resubmission for each of ten one-sheets (\$100 total per one-sheet, divided if coauthored). The graduate student, with the Executive Director’s guidance, would also secure reviewers for each One-Sheet, paid \$50 each, assigned to perform an initial review and a follow-up review upon resubmission.

Since 2008, SOPHIA has held a number of meetings, but has long faced difficulties in finding or creating similar short, accessible one-sheet documents for our meetings. In 2015, when we engaged in strategic planning that resulted in our new mission statement, we decided also to launch a radio show and podcast, [Philosophy Bakes Bread](#), as well as a journal, [Civil American](#). Initial plans are to have One-Sheets made about our most popular essays and podcast episodes, though we will poll our membership and chapters first to determine topics of greatest interest to them as our top priority.

We presently have a document presenting [Guidelines for Creating SOPHIA One-Sheets](#), which is featured on our new [Meeting Resources page](#). In addition, we have a number of

examples of kinds of One-Sheets, including one on "[The Molemen and Plato's Cave Today](#)" and another on "[Kneeling and Civil Protest](#)."

Given SOPHIA's growth over the last two years, and the limitations of our resources, we are supporting the creation of our chapters but desperately need the tools to explain, introduce, and share with them how to easily and successfully guide rich conversations. We also need more One-Sheet tools. In addition, it is worth noting that many teachers in colleges and universities and some in high schools have let us know that they are making use of our existing One-Sheet documents in their courses. One example is Chicago High School philosophy teacher [Nick Caltagirone, a guest in Episode 37](#) whom Eric Weber met at the Chicago PLATO meeting a few summers ago, and whose group recently applied for a SOPHIA Chapter Seed Grant.

2. What is the purpose of this project? (500 words max)

The purpose of the present project is to support research and creative activity that will advance knowledge about philosophical conversation starting in and with the public as well as to generate tools and introductory material to enable groups to build communities of philosophical conversation.

Too often, institutions of higher education see public engagement and engagement with K-12 classrooms, as something other than research. The same attitude is sometimes applied to the work of researching, preparing, and creating materials to be used for such conversations. Such work is thought of only in terms of teaching or "outreach," a subset of service. At many colleges and universities, teaching is only valued when it is in the traditional college setting, where students pay for credit hours, and "outreach" is treated as ancillary to research, as something you do, maybe, if you're feeling generous or obliged, and only *after* you have developed real, actual research.

The present project would center around a research program concerning the direction of efforts to build communities of philosophical conversation and the creation of accessible and rich philosophical conversation starters. The project would both theorize about such work and engage in it through the direction of a graduate student's work to coordinate the processes of securing authors and reviewers. The graduate student would also participate in the research process under the mentorship of Executive Director Weber, and thus would gain experience needed to grow as a leader in fostering philosophical community and facilitating philosophical conversations.

Our overarching purpose in SOPHIA for this project is to help render our culture more philosophical, more thoughtful and humane, by building communities across difference and by cultivating philosophical attitudes of mind and interaction. Given that, we plan for our One-Sheet documents to be made available for free on our Web site, and featuring a very grateful thanks to the institutions that support our work. We encourage people to become members of SOPHIA, but we want them to make use of our tools whether or not they are members. A research essay and introductory document to people interested in learning about our One-Sheet methodology, our history, and our processes for building community will benefit from

the research that this project would support and our One-Sheets will enable them to try out our methods for themselves in their own local or online communities.

3. Who will benefit from the project, and how? (500 words max)

Our primary aim is to benefit friends of SOPHIA, who wish to make use of our One-Sheet documents in holding local philosophical conversations. We are interested also in groups who choose to make use of our materials, including K-12 schools and colleges, who use One-Sheets as pedagogical tools.

One-Sheets will each be announced on social media once they are shared in a list at the bottom of our [Meeting Resources page](#). Our local chapters decide how often they wish to meet, making use of social media tools for getting the word out about their meetings. Our most successful chapters make use of [MeetUp.com](#), including our largest chapter in Seattle, WA, a group based on the long-standing [Seattle Analytic Philosophy Club](#) (not exclusively focused on analytic philosophy, however, and which cares about philosophy's public relevance). We also have a [Lexington SOPHIA Chapter](#) in Kentucky, a [\(Milwaukee\) MKE SOPHIA Chapter](#), and a chapter also in Tacoma, WA, the [Tacoma Philosophy Group, aka the South Puget Sound Chapter of SOPHIA](#). In addition, we also have a chapter at Kamala Nehru Women's College of the University of New Delhi, in India, called the [Shining Network SOPHIA Chapter](#) (the "in America" part of our name is historical, not meant to limit us regionally). We are presently reviewing seed grant applications (\$600 each) to launch new chapters around the country, including in Cleveland, Chicago, Philadelphia, and in Fitchburg, MA. These and other chapters will have some support from SOPHIA to pay for tools like MeetUp.com and other needs, but SOPHIA's resources are quite limited, especially because we strive to keep our membership costs very low for the sake of accessibility. And, only 3 people must be members in order to launch a chapter. Our aim is not to require more and more people to be members, but for more and more people to benefit from our organization. Therefore, we rely on fundraising and grant writing to expand.

At the same time, SOPHIA is growing faster than we had anticipated, and members are eager to hold frequent meetings. Given that, we have needs for the creation of One-Sheet documents, and SOPHIA has funded the creation of some of them, which are listed at the bottom of our [Meeting Resources page](#). We need more, however. What chapters will do is to look over the existing resources and request new ones. Some of them occasionally create such tools, but the ones we most wish to share are ones guided by a [philosophical set of values and aims](#), and tested out for their success as accessible and fun guides to conversation and community building. People will access our new One-Sheets by heading to our Web site and using the digital versions of our PDF files or printing them. Authors of One-Sheets will benefit from the experience of creating them, and the same for reviewers about their reviews. As we release each one-sheet, we will announce each on our social media platforms, raising awareness of SOPHIA, philosophy, and sponsoring organizations.

4. What is the plan for developing and implementing the project? Include a timeline.

If this grant is awarded, Eric Weber will interview a number of graduate student candidates in May of 2019 for working with SOPHIA on this project starting in August 2019, through May of 2020. In August through December of 2019, Weber will coauthor a research paper with the graduate student on philosophical conversation starters, researching pedagogical tools, methods, and strategies both for classrooms and for social groups, such as book clubs and religious study groups. The aim will be to highlight those methods and tools most valuable for appreciating how and why our One-Sheets have worked as well as they do, as well as proposing ideas for future research on the use of such tools, which could be part of a future study about the implementation of our One-Sheets. From January 2020 through May of 2020, Weber and the graduate research assistant would coauthor a subsequent paper to serve as an accessible, introductory essay for anyone who has never attended a SOPHIA conversation before and who might be interested in participating in or leading the efforts to build a community of philosophical conversation. Weber will do the bulk of the work on the writing of these projects, but will mentor the graduate student along the way.

In August of 2019, Weber will also guide the graduate student's work to prepare a survey of existing SOPHIA members and chapter leaders about what subject matters they most would like to have One-Sheets written about, featuring examples of possible choices from our journal and radio show and podcast, as well as open-ended topic suggestions. In September of 2019, Weber would direct the graduate student's work in preparing a call for authors and reviews of One-Sheets, and plan an October meeting via Zoom video-conferencing for selected authors and reviewers to meet up online and to talk through our [values for guiding philosophical dialogue](#) as well as our ["How to Create a One-Sheet for SOPHIA Meetings" guidelines sheet](#).

We would then give the authors each 2.5 months in which to draft their first best effort to create a One-Sheet, due in mid-January. Next, the One-Sheets would go to reviewers, who would have 1.5 months in which to have their reviews completed, by March 1st. At that point, we would ask original authors to revise and resubmit their One-Sheets by April 1st for final review of any resubmissions to be completed by May 1st. We would post our One-Sheets to our Web site in May and issue payments to all authors and reviewers whose works were successfully completed, which we would hope to be all 10. We anticipate some authors and reviewers to be faster and slower, but will aim to have the whole project completed by May 31st as a hard deadline.

5. What other funding sources have you explored for this project?

In connection with this project, SOPHIA has been funding [Civil American](#), [Philosophy Bakes Bread](#), the creation of transcripts of the radio show and podcast ([example: Episode 13 on “Philosophy for Children” with Dr. Jana Mohr Lone](#)), and the [Chapter Seed Grants](#) that our members can apply for. We have paid for these things with very modest dues revenues for SOPHIA, a few donations, and occasional small grants that SOPHIA has received. In addition, the Kentucky Humanities Council funded a SOPHIA application for \$1,500 to create One-Sheet documents, but the work has proceeded very slowly given that it did not afford the Executive Director time for related research and graduate supervision. In addition, fringe benefit costs of this project will be supported by Executive Director Weber’s research support funding from the College of Education at the University of Kentucky. SOPHIA has also launched some modest fundraisers on [Facebook.com, on our page that has nearly 57,000 followers](#).

6. Please list your budget, including any amounts from other sources.

	Requested from PLATO	In-Kind Cost- Share
Executive Director Eric Weber, 5% of time x 9 months =	\$4,096	
Fringe & benefits (cost-share)		\$1,133
Graduate Research Assistant 9 months x ~8 hrs / month =	\$1,427	
Fringe & benefits (cost-share)		\$126
Author payments @ \$100 x 10 =	\$1,000	
Reviewer payments @ \$50 x 10 =	\$500	
Total:	<u>\$6,996</u>	\$1,259*

* Cost-share will be covered by Executive Director Weber’s research funding provided by the College of Education at the University of Kentucky.