



# DHARMA GATES

A semester of contemplative training

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**The Problem or Opportunity:** More young people are taking taking time off before or during college for personal or emotional reasons.<sup>1</sup> Existing gap year programs are expensive and inaccessible to low-income families. There is a growing mental health crisis on college campuses.<sup>2</sup> Many studies support the benefits of meditation.<sup>3</sup> In the context of political unrest and environmental collapse, we need determined, composed, and compassionate young leaders.

**The Solution:** Dharma Gates will offer **a)** a gap semester program connecting high-school graduates and students taking time off from college to meditation centers for three months of intensive training and workshops on Buddhist environmentalism, compassionate activism, and contemplative neuroscience and **b)** membership to an Intercollegiate Meditation Network (IMN), an organization connecting and supporting student-run meditation groups at universities across the US. The IMN will provide ongoing training, resources, and networking opportunities to student leaders. The IMN will funnel applicants to Dharma Gates, and Dharma Gates alumni will strengthen the IMN. We will offer generous need-based financial aid to ensure the program's accessibility. Financial resources generated through the gap semester may be used to fund retreats and workshops at universities around the country for the IMN. Together, these projects will promote socially-conscious engagement with meditation practice, intercollegiate cooperation, and a healthier culture at universities across the country.

**The Ecosystem:** The gap year market has grown significantly in the last ten years, although nobody knows the actual market size<sup>1</sup>. Gap year consultants I have spoken to indicate that there is a shortage of unique programs and shortage of national programs in the market. Rival programs such as Wheretherebedragons and Rustic Pathways cost in the range of \$15,000 per semester. Dharma Gates will be the only affordable, national, meditation intensive program on the market. There is a fascination with Buddhist philosophy and meditation on many campuses, but student leaders lack access to qualified instructors. This impairs student leaders' ability to continue to learn and instruct others. Student groups often dissolve after individual student leaders graduate. There is little to no collaboration between student groups across multiple universities.

**Metrics<sup>1</sup>:** We will evaluate the success of our program by the number of students we connect to meditation centers and retreats, ongoing interviews and questionnaires with students during and after their experiences, as well as by their ongoing engagement with meditation practice and the effects they have on the communities they engage with.

**Team:** Nicholas Antonellis '17 received his masters in physics from Wesleyan in 2018 and Aaron Stryker will graduate with a Bachelor's degree in philosophy in the spring of 2019. Miles Bukiet graduated in 2011 and spent 5 years studying

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<sup>1</sup> <https://gapyearassociation.org/data-benefits.php>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.apa.org/advocacy/higher-education/mental-health/index.aspx>

<sup>3</sup> <https://effectivehealthcare.ahrq.gov/topics/meditation/research/>

meditation full time in Asia and the US. He is an expert at interpersonal meditation, and will serve as the main facilitator and leader of our retreats. Nicky and Aaron will be in charge of recruitment and logistics.

**Our Valued Mentors Include:** Makaela Kingsley, the Director of the Patricelli Center for Social Entrepreneurship at Wesleyan University, Rabbi David Teva, the Director of Religious and Spiritual Life and Mindfulness at Wesleyan University, and Jogen Salzberg, one of the guiding Dharma Teachers at Great Vow Zen Monastery, Dokuro Jaeckal, the Buddhist Chaplain at Harvard College.

**Timeline:** At Wesleyan, Nicky and Aaron founded Wes Sangha, a student-run meditation group, through which they brought 60 students to a Zen monastery in New York. There they saw what a powerful support for students meditation and meeting like-minded students can be. Aaron worked on Dharma Gates with Makaela Kingsley, the Director of the Patricelli Center for Social Entrepreneurship, in her course “Start-Up Incubator” in Fall of 2018. He received “Best Business Model” at the MEWS+ Pitch competition and “Best Executive Summary” at the Connecticut New Venture Competition. Through their work on Dharma Gates, Miles and Aaron realized the necessity of establishing an Intercollegiate Meditation Network to share resources, organize retreats and workshops, and give institutional support to existing student-run meditation groups at universities across the US. The IMN currently has 33 members from 13 universities nationwide. Our first retreat took place from January 16-22 at Dai Bosatsu Zendo outside Livingston Manor, NY. Students from six universities attended. Our second retreat is planned for March 2019. Aaron met with a member of the American Gap Association in January and began marketing for first cohort in the fall of 2019 at the USA Gap Year Fair in Boston. Next summer, we plan to incorporate Dharma Gates, offer our third retreat with the IMN, and begin full-scale marketing for our pilot program in spring 2020. We will market through developing a social media presence as well as targeted outreach to Gap Year Consultants, Offices of Religious Life, Career Centers, and Professors of Buddhism.

### **Budget:**

**Start Up:** This grant will help fund our start-up costs, including paying for marketing materials (\$750), subsidizing outreach retreats (\$1250), the cost of incorporation (\$500), and the cost of membership to the American Gap Association (\$350). The remainder of the funding will subsidize Aaron’s housing and board at the Ann Arbor Zen Temple this summer, where he will work on Dharma Gates and the IMN full time (\$2000).

**Income:** Our income so far is a \$500 prize from the Connecticut New Venture Competition. We’ve applied to the Multi-Institutional Innovation Grant from Middlebury College, and the Frederick P. Lenz Foundation for additional funding. This will further support retreat subsidies, Aaron’s cost of living, and our financial aid fund.

**Sustainability:** Once the first round of applicants matriculate to the program, we will be able to pay-off any remaining cost of start-up. Full tuition will be \$5250 per person. Assuming we have 12 full-tuition students, we will have \$24,000 per year to support program growth and our cost of living. Both Nicky and I, the only staff on pay-roll, will be living at Monasteries or in low-cost meditation communities for the first several years of the program, which means this will be plenty.

**Generous Financial Aid:** Per existing monastery policy, low-income students will not be asked to donate to the monasteries for their time. Only costs of the retreats and minimal overhead will need to be covered by our financial aid fund, which means that nearly half (eight of twenty) of our program participants can be on near full financial aid in a given semester.