Hello Friend!

Congratulations on your acceptance to Carleton! Given your interest in philosophy, the Carleton admissions team clearly made an excellent decision by admitting you. There are, of course, many interesting fields to pursue at Carleton, so we know that you might not end up in our neck of the woods, but we hope that you do. (Third floor Leighton. We have a free espresso machine. You should stop by.)

Wilfred Sellars, one of the most famous (and cryptic) philosophers of the 20th century, said that, “the aim of philosophy...is to understand how things in the broadest possible sense of the term hang together in the broadest possible sense of the term”. This is definitely part of philosophy’s aim, and it is reflected in the kinds of questions you will encounter in some of our courses: What is consciousness (PHIL 225: Philosophy of Mind)? What is time (PHIL 211: Being, Time, and Identity)? Could we ever prove God’s existence (PHIL 272: Early Modern Philosophy)? What is knowledge and do we have any (PHIL 212: Epistemology)? Are values “out there” waiting to be discovered (PHIL 213: Ethics)?

But philosophy is equally engaged with questions that inform—and are informed by—our everyday lives: Can clinicians ever lie to patients (PHIL 222: Medical Ethics)? How should a just society be arranged (PHIL 232: Social and Political Philosophy)? Is it ethical to kill animals for food (PHIL 243: Animal Ethics)? What is gender (PHIL 230: Philosophy of Gender)? What are the connections between climate change and capitalism (PHIL 214: Ecology, Ethics, and Economics)?

What unites all these questions under the banner of “philosophy”? Well, that’s a philosophical question too (and subject to much debate!). But here’s one answer: in addressing all of these questions, philosophers use tools that emphasize clarity, rigor, and argument. We’re always looking for the reasons and arguments to believe some things and not others, and so whatever questions we ask, we want try to figure out what we think and why we think it. What are our assumptions? Are they justified? Do our convictions really follow from our assumptions or not? Do our assumptions yield other, less attractive—or maybe even downright absurd—conclusions?

As philosophers, we dig deep in an effort to get to the bottom of big issues. We get there in ways you might expect (reading, writing, discussing, debate) as well as in ways you might not (like going into a local elementary school to do philosophy with first graders).

We hope that sounds exciting to you. If it does, that’s reason enough to spend some time with us. But in addition to being inherently interesting, philosophy is excellent preparation for just about any career or further course of study. Philosophy majors also end up making more money than you might think. Part of the reason is that they do really well on the tests that get you into graduate school, law school, and
medical school. (Yup, medical school; we have sent quite a few majors to med school.)

Why do philosophy majors do so well on these exams? Because philosophy majors have been trained to think and to write with clarity and rigor.

We’re a small department, which means that our majors form a tight knit community who get to know us (the professors) really well. We hope you’ll think about joining that community. If you have any questions that I might be able to answer about philosophy at Carleton or about Carleton generally, feel free to contact me at the above address or by email at: dgroll@carleton.edu.

Best Regards,

Daniel Groll
Chair, Philosophy Department

1 The following website contains additional details and links to some statistics:
https://sites.google.com/site/whystudyphilosophy/.