

## MEMORANDUM

**TO:** Teresa LaGrange, Associate Dean, CLASS

**FROM:** Diane Steinberg, Chair, PHL

**DATE:** May 31, 2007

**SUBJECT:** Annual Report on Assessment  
Undergraduate Program in Philosophy

### 1. Introduction.

In 2006 the Assessment Review Team recommended that the Philosophy Department continue to implement its assessment plan. The plan (described in detail in section 4, below) includes both a direct measure—collecting and analyzing a random sample of student papers—and an indirect measure—requesting completion of an exit survey by recent graduates.

In 2006-07 the Department completed the third cycle of its direct assessment procedure and initiated the indirect procedure by sending all its 05-06 graduates a request to fill out an exit survey.

During 2006-07 the Department also collected data (student essays) which will be analyzed and reviewed in Fall, 2007. During Summer 07 a request to fill out an exit survey will be sent to 06-07 graduates.

### 2. Goals.

Philosophy has two primary goals for student learning in the undergraduate major program:

#### A. Subject matter knowledge of Philosophy:

Philosophy majors are expected:

1. to understand the philosophical positions of the main figures and movements in the history of philosophy
2. to study one or more of the main fields of philosophy (such as ethics, theory of knowledge, metaphysics, etc.) in greater depth.

#### B. Development of Analytical Skills: capacities for interpretation, analysis, argumentation and critical thinking.

These goals, and the outcomes described below in section 3, were developed through discussion that involved the whole department. They were codified in a revision to a previous assessment plan in November 2002. As stated in our full assessment plan, they reflect the goals for the major programs in philosophy described by the

American Philosophical Association in its report on the philosophy major. They have not been modified as the result of our assessment information

### 3. Outcomes.

By the end of our program, we expect students to be able to write a paper that:

- states a philosophical problem clearly.  
Note: Different courses study different kinds of problems. Depending on the course, the student may be addressing a problem of metaphysics, an interpretation of a significant philosophical text, or an applied problem of ethics, to give a few illustrative examples.
- has a clear goal in relation to the stated problem:  
Note: depending on the problem addressed, the goal might be evaluating competing alternative solutions to a problem, arriving at a new interpretation of a text, arguing against a position or argument, proposing a solution to a practical problem in ethics, etc.
- draws on appropriate philosophical resources to discuss the problem.
  - the paper uses appropriate primary sources.
  - the paper uses appropriate secondary sources
  - the paper cites sources correctly
- explains complex philosophical positions clearly, and in appropriate detail.
- analyzes the strengths and weaknesses of the different approaches to the problem with relevant arguments.
- draws a conclusion supported by the analysis and argumentation of the paper.
- demonstrates relevant knowledge of the historical context of philosophical work.  
For papers from courses at the 400 level: demonstrates an in-depth knowledge of an area of philosophy

These outcomes have not been modified as the result of our assessment information.

### 4. Research Methods.

The best evidence that we are meeting our goals, and achieving the outcomes listed above, is contained in the written work (essays and essay exams) of our students. Written work by students who have had 4 or more philosophy courses should reflect increased knowledge of the history of philosophy and improved skills of explication, interpretation, analysis, and argumentation, compared to the performance of students with fewer philosophy courses.

In the light of this, the Philosophy Department agreed to use the following **direct** assessment procedure to measure whether we are successful in attaining our outcomes:

- a. Each year the department collects about 20 writing samples (essay tests or papers) chosen randomly from students in courses that count toward the philosophy major at the 200, 300 and/or 400 level. The instructor is asked to include a copy of the exam or guidelines for the writing assignment, as appropriate. (Note: In a given year we aim for

an even distribution of work from courses at the 200 level and work from more advanced courses. Over time, we will rotate the courses selected so that the cumulative sample will reflect from the entire spectrum of the philosophy major program. Since most of our courses have few prerequisites, students with a range of course-backgrounds are found in all of our courses.)

- b. Student names are removed from the writing samples prior to departmental review, but each student whose work is included in the sample fills out a brief questionnaire indicating whether s/he has declared a Philosophy major or minor, and listing previous philosophy courses taken.
- c. Writing samples are reviewed by a small committee consisting of two faculty each year. Criteria used relate directly to goals for student learning appropriate to our discipline at the undergraduate level, as described above.
- d. Each member of the committee uses a simple grid to be prepared by the department to evaluate the papers in the writing sample on each factor. After evaluation, these are correlated with the information about the number of courses in Philosophy the student has completed. For the purposes of program assessment, we do not expect that papers written by students who have had fewer courses will meet all the goals above. We would expect that by the time most students complete the major program their work would meet those goals.
- e. The faculty committee reports to the department each year, assessing whether we are meeting our programmatic goals and making recommendations for change as necessary.

We have also begun to send an **exit survey** to students who complete our program. The survey asks students to identify which of five program goals apply to them, and to rate the program on the extent to which it enabled them to achieve those goals. The goals are the following:

1. To prepare students to enter graduate programs in philosophy;
2. To prepare students for professional programs, such as law;
3. To provide students with a conceptual foundation for synthesizing their learning in other areas;
4. To provide specialized philosophical training to those with double majors in philosophy and fields such as English, history, political science, nursing, etc.;
5. To provide opportunities for personal enrichment to any person seriously interested in the study of philosophy.

Students can also specify a goal which is not listed. The rating is on a scale of 1 – 10, with 1 being the worst, and 10 the best. The survey also asks several open-ended questions regarding strengths and weaknesses of the program and the faculty.

## 5. Findings.

### A. Assessment of Student Papers

In Spring, 2007, 17 student papers (which had been gathered, according to the procedure described above, in 2004-05) were read by a department assessment committee, consisting of two faculty members.

The papers from all levels were assessed on the first 7 objectives listed below. In addition, the papers at the 400-level were assessed on objective number 8. Each paper was scored on each applicable objective by two instructors, on a scale of 1 to 5. The highest score, 5, indicates that the paper “Shows mastery of objective.” The lowest score, 1, indicates “Does not meet objective.” The middle score, 3, is “Meets objective minimally.”

Readers did not know the names of the students nor how many philosophy courses the students had taken. All scores were tabulated in two sets, one comprised of students who had taken 4 or more philosophy courses (7 students), and the other of students who had taken 3 or fewer philosophy courses (10 students).

**The following table shows the average score on each objective for each group, and the difference between the two groups:**

**TABLE 1: 05-06**

<u>Objective</u>	<u>10 at Less than 4</u>	<u>7 at 4 or more</u>	<u>Difference</u>
1. States a philosophical problem clearly	4.1	3.93	.17
2. Has a clear goal in relation to stated problem	4.05	3.92	.13
3. Draws on appropriate sources	4.35	4.17	.18
4. Explains complex problems clearly	3.7	3.42	.28
5. Analyzes strengths/weaknesses with relevant arguments	3.4	3.77	.37
6. Draws a conclusion supported by the analysis and argumentation of the paper	3.65	3.87	.22
7. Demonstrates relevant knowledge of historical context	3.35	4.0	.65
Average Objective Score (items 1 – 7)	3.8	3.86	.06

8. Demonstrates in depth knowledge of an area in philosophy	4	4	0
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**For purposes of comparison, TABLE 2 and TABLE 3 (below) show the average score on each objective for each group, and the difference between the two groups for the student papers analyzed in Fall, 2005 (collected in 2004-05) and Fall, 2004 (collected in 2002-03), respectively.**

**TABLE 2 (04-05)**

<b>Objective</b>	<b>Less than 4</b>	<b>4 or more</b>	<b>Difference</b>
1. States a philosophical problem clearly	2.19	2.9	.71
2. Has a clear goal in relation to stated problem	2.06	2.6	.54
3. Draws on appropriate sources	2.37	2.85	.48
4. Explains complex problems clearly	2.06	3	.94
5. Analyzes strengths/weaknesses with relevant arguments	2.06	2.65	.59
6. Draws a conclusion supported by the analysis and argumentation of the paper	1.81	2.75	.94
7. Demonstrates relevant knowledge of historical context	2.44	2.55	.11
Average Objective Score (items 1 – 7)	2.14	2.76	.62
8. Demonstrates in depth knowledge of an area in philosophy	1.5	2.5	1.0

**TABLE 3 (02-03)<sup>1</sup>**

<b>Objective</b>	<b>Less than 4</b>	<b>4 or more</b>	<b>Difference</b>
1. States a philosophical problem clearly	3.40	3.72	.32
2. Has a clear goal in relation to stated problem	3.36	3.88	.52
3. Draws on appropriate sources	3.59	4.16	.57
4. Explains complex problems clearly	2.86	3.61	.72
5. Analyzes strengths/weaknesses with relevant arguments	2.95	3.27	.32
6. Draws a conclusion supported by the analysis and argumentation of the paper	3.08	3.73	.65
7. Demonstrates relevant knowledge of historical context	3.43	3.94	.51
Average Objective Score	3.18	3.75	.57

A disappointing result shown by the 04-05 sample (Table 2) was that average scores of student work were lower across the board than those in the 2002-03 sample (Table 3). The 2005-06 sample (Table 1), however, shows student scores to be up, generally comparable to, or better than, those achieved by students in the 02-03 sample (Table 3). This could be due to different evaluators, but it also could be the result of faculty having been alerted to the need to construct assignments which require and develop the skills we aim to impart, and to incorporate other activities into their teaching which will build these skills.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Since none of the papers collected were from 400 level courses, none were analyzed with respect to objective 8.

<sup>2</sup> The department Assessment Committee (2005) communicated its findings to the entire department in a written report in December, 2005. In their report they recommended that “time at a department faculty meeting be set aside to discuss how our writing requirements might be better coordinated with our stated (department approved) objectives.” This topic was part of the agenda at a department meeting on April 18, 2006, at which time the Committee’s findings and ways to tailor assignments and otherwise assist students to meet the objectives were discussed.

An unexpected result shown by the 05-06 sample (Table 1) is that on the first four objectives students with more philosophy courses scored worse than students with fewer courses, and the overall average objective score of students with more courses was only negligibly better (.06) than that of students with fewer philosophy courses. This tendency toward convergence is somewhat alarming, since it seems to indicate that students who have taken more philosophy courses have no greater mastery of our objectives than those who have taken fewer. The following considerations, however, indicate another possible explanation:

- (i) On three of the four objectives (1 – 3) on which the students with fewer courses performed best, the differences were small.
- (ii) All four of the objectives (1 – 4) on which students with fewer courses outperformed students with more courses are ones which relate to the most basic skills of good writing in general—stating and explaining a problem clearly, having a clear goal in mind, and using appropriate sources.
- (iii) On the three objectives (5 – 7) on which students with more philosophy courses outperformed those with fewer, they did so by a significant margin. Further, these objectives relate to the more complex skills of analysis and argumentation, and the understanding of the relevance of historical context.

It seems possible, therefore, that if faculty focused their teaching on building the most basic skills, they enabled students with fewer courses partially to overcome the disadvantage of having taken fewer philosophy courses<sup>3</sup>. Thus, students with fewer courses and those with more courses performed nearly equally on objectives 1-3, and students with fewer courses even did better than students with more courses on objective 4. Students with fewer courses were not, however, able entirely to “catch up” with students with more courses, and accordingly did significantly worse on those objectives which measure the more complex skills (5–7).

Nevertheless, the results from 05-06 clearly suggest the need to watch future trends.

## B. Exit Survey Results

In summer 2006 we mailed exit survey to all 05-06 graduates. Only three were returned, a number which is insufficient from which to draw conclusions. Of the three which were returned, all identified goal 1 (“To prepare students to enter graduate programs in philosophy”) and goal 5 (“To provide opportunities for personal enrichment to any person seriously interested in the study of philosophy”), and all rated the program at 10 with respect to these goals. One response also identified goal 3 (“To provide students with a conceptual foundation for synthesizing their learning in other areas”) and goal 4 (“To provide specialized philosophical training to those with double majors in philosophy and in fields such as English, History, Political Science, Nursing, etc.), and rated the program at 10 for both these goals.

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<sup>3</sup> See note 2, above.

## 6. Review.

The department Assessment Committee (2006) has produced a written report on its findings (as reported in section 5A above) which will be communicated to the department and discussed at a meeting early in Fall, 2007. The results of our exit survey (section 5B above), although inconclusive, will also be communicated to the department at that time.

## 7. Actions.

The department will continue its discussion of how best to impart the skills of explication, interpretation, analysis and argumentation at a department meeting early in fall, 2007.

With respect to **assessment activities**, we continue to rotate membership on the assessment committee among all members of the department, and have appointed a new (two-person) committee for 2007-08. Rotating this responsibility facilitates awareness and communication among the faculty regarding student learning needs and how to effectively meet those needs.

We will send out our second round of exit surveys to B.A. graduates in summer 07.