

MEMORANDUM

TO: Teresa LaGrange, Associate Dean, CLASS

FROM: Diane Steinberg, Chair, PHL

DATE: May 31, 2007

SUBJECT: Annual Report on Assessment
M.A. Program in Philosophy

1. Introduction,

In 2006 the Assessment Review Team recommended that the Department continue to follow the revised assessment plan it had devised in 2005, including a new instrument for measuring student achievement with respect to Goal B (see secs. 2, 3, 4 below) and an exit survey. The Department attempted to implement both of these measures, although with limited success (see sec. 5).

The Review Team also recommended that the department continue to implement the other actions which had been taken or proposed in light of previous findings with respect to Goal A (see secs. 2, 3, 4 below). Accordingly, we have continued to offer more courses in the history of philosophy in which two or more figures are covered, and we have begun to keep statistics on the passage and first-time passage rates for the comprehensive exams. We have not completed the rewriting of the comprehensive exams, although we expect this task to be finished by the end of fall, 2007.

2. Goals.

Philosophy has three goals for student learning in our graduate program.

- A. Advanced subject matter knowledge of philosophy.
All M.A. graduates must have a knowledge of the history of philosophy appropriate to entering a doctoral program in philosophy or teaching introductory courses in philosophy at a two or four year college, or at a university.
- B. Research Skills in Philosophy
 - 1. All M.A. graduates must be able to write papers that demonstrate competent analysis of arguments from a variety of philosophical primary sources.
 - 2. All M.A. graduates must show that they can find relevant current scholarship and incorporate it appropriately into their research.

These goals were developed through discussion that involved the whole department when assessment procedures were first discussed. They have not been modified based on assessment information.

3. Outcomes.

Our original assessment plan referred to the following outcome for **Goal A**:

All M.A. graduates must pass a seven hour comprehensive exam.

This outcome was developed through discussion that involved the whole department when assessment procedures were first discussed, and has not been modified.

Our original assessment plan referred to an outcome for Goal B which involved presentation of a portfolio of papers by all graduating MA students. This outcome was modified in 2005 due to the impracticality of enforcing the requirement that students collect portfolios and the time-consuming nature of portfolio evaluation. The outcome with respect to **Goal B** is now understood as:

M.A. graduates are expected to be able to write a paper which approximates a first draft of a journal or conference submission (including submission to a graduate student conference or journal).

This outcome was developed through discussion that involved the whole department in Fall, 2004. .

4. Research Methods.

Research with respect to Goal A: advanced subject matter in philosophy.

No national test (such as the GRE) exists for Philosophy. The Philosophy Department developed a comprehensive exam in the history of philosophy, which it has administered for more than twenty years. Approximately ten years ago we introduced a separate, comparable, exam in the history of ethics and bioethics for students in the bioethics concentration within our M.A. program. Passing one of these exams is a requirement for the M.A. degree. The comprehensive exam is a prepared exam, based on study questions students have in advance, but the students must write their exams without using notes or books. Student names do not appear on the exams, which are not hand-written. Faculty committees grade the exams "blind."

An extensive revision of the comprehensive exam in the history of philosophy is nearly complete. Since a number of new online courses are now being developed for our MA with a Concentration in Bioethics, our intention is to wait until these web courses are available before doing any revision of the comprehensive exam in the history of ethics and bioethics..

We have begun to keep track of the passage rate and first-time passage rate for students taking the comprehensive exams.

Research with respect to Goal B: Research skills in philosophy

About ten years ago the Philosophy Department developed its course, “Research Methods in Philosophy” in order to remedy weaknesses in graduate student research and writing. Each student in the course undertakes a significant piece of research for another course, but receives intensive instruction and feedback on the research and writing process throughout the whole semester from the Research Methods instructor. Our initial plan for evaluating the success of the Research Methods course and whether or not students in the program continued to maintain and develop the research and writing skills which the course aims to impart, involved having the students compile a portfolio of three papers, including the one from the Research Methods course and two others written subsequently. For the reasons noted above in section 3, we have discontinued the requirement of student portfolios.

In order to determine the degree to which students in our program are successful in developing and maintaining professional-level research and writing skills, the department developed an instrument which uses 12 objectives to measure these skills, and allows a student’s research paper to be ranked by an instructor with respect to each objective, on a scale of 1 (worst) to 5 (best). Instructors use this instrument (called the “Assessment Evaluation of Student Term Paper”) to provide a totally anonymous, hence candid, evaluation of all term papers written by students who have previously taken at least 20 hours of graduate work in philosophy.¹

Research with respect to Goal A and Goal B:

We have begun to send an exit survey to students who complete the 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 Ph. D. programs in philosophy
2. To prepare students for other professional programs, such as law
3. To prepare students to teach philosophy at the community college level, or to teach introductory courses at a four year college
4. To provide specialized philosophical training to professionals in other disciplines, particularly in the field of health care
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

With respect to Goal A:

¹ These evaluation forms are anonymous both with respect to the instructor and the student, thus encouraging instructors to be candid in their evaluations.

Following the switch to semesters there appeared to be a decline in the number of students who were able to pass the entire comprehensive exam on the first try. We attributed this at least partly to the fact that under quarters students were exposed to more figures in the history of philosophy than under semesters. Accordingly, we decided to alter our curriculum so as to offer more courses in which at least two or more figures, or an entire movement in the history of philosophy, were covered. **In 2006-07 all of our historical courses covered at an entire movement or at least two important figures.**

In the two year period Summer 04 – Spring 06, ten students attempted, and eight students successfully completed, the comprehensive exams. Of those eight who successfully completed the exams, five passed on the first try, and two of these received a “high pass.”² From summer 06 – spring 07, eight students attempted, and five students successfully completed, the comprehensive exams. Of these five, three passed on the first try. These statistics may indicate we should do more to help our students prepare to pass these exams. In particular, we may need to do better with respect to communicating what is required for a passing essay.³

With respect to Goal B:

Beginning in 2004-05, instructors of graduate courses have been asked to fill out an “Assessment Evaluation of Student Term Paper” for each student who had taken more than 20 hours of graduate work in philosophy in previous terms. The data which has been gathered for the last three years is represented on the **Historical Table** at the end of this report (pp. 6-7). **The table shows a general significant decline in scores on nearly all objectives from 04-05 to 05-06, but a general tendency toward recovery from 05-06 to 06-07. Average scores on most objectives for 06-07 seem to show that our students are achieving our goal with respect to their research skills. An exception to the latter tendency, however, is shown on objective 12, “Approximates a first draft of a journal or conference submission (including submission to a graduate student conference or journal).” On this objective the average score has declined both in 05-06 and in 06-07, although the decline is less in 06-07. Decline on this objective, which is a kind of overall estimation of a student’s term paper, may be an issue to be addressed.**

With respect to both Goal A and Goal B: As of May 31, 2006, three exit surveys had been returned, and although we have sent them to all graduates, no more have been received since then. As reported last year, this is not enough from which to draw conclusions. The only program goal which was identified by all three responses was goal 5 (“To provide opportunities for personal enrichment to any person seriously interested in the study of philosophy”), and the average of the responses was 9.6 (out of possible 10). Two responses identified goal 3 (“To prepare students to teach philosophy at the

² Note this is a correction to data reported last year.

³ But note that the three who attempted and did not successfully complete the comprehensive exam during the period summer 06-spring 07 also did not make a second attempt at the exam. Students are allowed up to two retakes, and nearly all are successful on the first retake.

community college level, or to teach introductory courses at a four year college”), with an average response of 9.

6. Review.

The findings with respect to Goal B for 2004-05 were shared with the entire department at a department meeting on August 31, 2005. **The findings with respect to Goal B for 2005-06 and 2006-07 will be shared with the department at a meeting early in fall, 2007.**

The findings with respect to Goal A (pass/fail rate on the comprehensive exams) will be shared with the department at a meeting early in fall, 2007.

7. Actions.

- a. In order to help students acquire the breadth of knowledge needed to pass the comprehensive exams, we continue to offer more courses in philosophical movements (PHL 510) and courses in which two or more figures are covered, rather than a single figure. **In fact all our our historical courses offered in 2006-07 covered either an entire movement or two or more figures; and all of our historical courses scheduled for 2007-08 will cover either an entire movement or two or more figures.**
- b. We have nearly completed the revision of our comprehensive exam in the history of philosophy.
- c. We have continued use of our redesigned method for assessing the degree to which our program is successful in imparting professional research/writing skills.
- d. We have continued to send an exit survey to students who complete our M.A. program.
- e. **We have made statistics on the passage rate for the comprehensive exams a permanent part of our assessment procedure.**
- f. **We will discuss and consider how to implement ways to help our students pass the comprehensive exams on the first try.**
- g. **We will discuss the decline in the average score of objective 12 on the “Term Paper Assessment Evaluation” and consider how this might be addressed.**

ASSESSMENT EVALUATION OF STUDENT TERM PAPER – HISTORICAL TABLE

<u>Objective</u>	<u>04-05(6)⁴</u>	<u>05-06 (4)</u>	<u>06-07 (5)⁵</u>
1. Addresses a genuinely philosophical issue or question.	5	4.25	4.4
2. Contains a clear explication of the problem or issue it addresses.	4.67	3.625	4.4
3. Shows ability to analyze and accurately state primary philosophical arguments.	4.33	3.5	4.4
4. Shows ability to analyze and accurately state secondary philosophical arguments.	4.33	3.5	4
5. Shows an ability to deal with complex ideas.	4.17	3.25	4.2
6. Shows an ability to display ideas in their intellectual historical context.	4.20	3.375	4.2
7. Is well-organized and develops a significant argument for a thesis or position.	4.33	3.25	4.4
8. Shows ability to find material relevant to a philosophical problem or issue, in journals, books, etc.	4.67	4.75	4
9. Shows the ability to discriminate between appropriate and inappropriate sources, or does not cite inappropriate sources.	4.83	5	4.6

⁴ Numbers in parentheses indicate how many student papers were included in the data.

⁵ One paper was excluded from the data because it was determined to be a plagiarism.

<u>Objective</u>	<u>04-05(6)⁶</u>	<u>05-06 (4)</u>	<u>06-07 (5)⁷</u>
10. Shows knowledge of when documentation is needed.	5	4.25	4.4
11. Utilizes an appropriate form or style of documentation.	5	4.5	4.6
12. Approximates a first draft of a journal or conference submission (including submission to a graduate student conference or journal).	4	3.5	3.4

⁶ Numbers in parentheses indicate how many student papers were included in the data.

⁷ One paper was excluded from the data because it was determined to be a plagiarism.