

Undergraduate Degree Program Assessment Progress Report Cover Sheet

Degree: B.A. Philosophy (Plan #20)

For Calendar Year: 2009

(Date submitted to college committee:) 3/3/10

(Date posted on college assessment website:) _____

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Overall Rating: _____

Respond to all six parts following the “Degree Program Assessment Progress Report Instructions.” Attach additional pages as needed.

(NOTE: Parts 1 through 4 can be copied from the relevant sections of your assessment plan.)

(1) Student learning goal(s) addressed this year:

Our goals are that students completing the program of study should be able to:

A. clearly convey their understanding of historical and contemporary philosophical inquiry—i.e., the philosophical theses and arguments that have been offered by others on such topics as the fundamental nature of human beings and the wider reality of which they are a part, what counts as a human life lived well, and the limits of human understanding

Relevant Blue Ribbon Competencies: Critical Thinking, Ethical and Moral Consciousness, Historical Consciousness, International Awareness, Philosophy and Methods of Science, Social and Cultural Awareness, and Verbal Literacy

B. demonstrate their ability to think for themselves about a philosophical problem and clearly defend and express their views.

Relevant Blue Ribbon Competencies: Critical Thinking, Verbal Literacy

(2) Learning outcomes/objectives for those goals addressed this year:

1. clearly explain the considerations that give rise to a particular philosophical problem (Goal A);

2. clearly explain how a particular thinker has attempted to address a philosophical problem, including the reasoning offered in support of addressing the problem in that way (Goal A);

4. identify relevant considerations and mount a good argument of their own in support of a philosophical thesis—a thesis that may be critical or constructive in

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nature (GOAL B).

(3) Courses & activities where assessed:

We randomly sampled short (2-3 pp.) critical summary essays from the course, PHIL1310: Introduction to Philosophy. This fits into the following five year cycle:

First year (2009): collection and analysis of critical summary papers from Introduction to Philosophy. Objectives 1,2, and 4 assessed to establish a base-line.

2nd year: collection and analysis of papers from 3000-level History of Philosophy course. All four objectives assessed.

3rd year: collection and analysis of papers from 4000-level seminar. All four objectives assessed.

4th year: collective analysis of data from papers and graduate surveys (issued annually) from previous three years.

5th year: Assessment plan reviewed and revised as needed.

By focusing on these points in the curriculum, we hope to be able to assess whether we are successfully encouraging the increasing refinement of a set of important skills as students progress through the program.

(4) Methods used:

The method of assessment is via examination of a short paper from Introduction to Philosophy wherein students are assigned a three page critical summary paper two weeks into the course. The assignment is structured around two tasks: i) charitably and accurately summarizing an author's argument for some position on a problem in philosophy (objectives 1 and 2); and ii) evaluating the strength of the author's argument (objective 4).

The validity and reliability of this method is supported by two factors. First, a common template for the relevant assignments is to be used by all instructors of the courses from which assessment data is to be gathered. For example, in Introduction to Philosophy, the instructor assigns a 3 page paper that follows the critical summary format:

- In your own words, clearly and charitably* explain X's view on problem Z and the argument s/he has given to support that view. (objectives 1 and 2)

*(To engage in this task charitably is to present the material in the best possible light and so to learn how to give a fair hearing to views with which one might

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disagree prior to engaging in an evaluation of those views.)

- Evaluate X's argument. Does it adequately support X's view? (objective 4)

Such a template ensures that the assignment targets the relevant skills (validity) across sections and over time (reliability).

Second, a common assessment rubric is used in rating student performance so that there is standardization of scoring across raters and over time. The rubric is divided into sections for the rating of performance in relation to each of the relevant objectives. For each objective, students will be given a score of 0-3, where:

0 = demonstrates no significant degree of competence in relation to learning objective

1 = demonstrates minimal degree of competence in relation to learning objective

2 = demonstrates satisfactory degree of competence in relation to learning objective

3 = demonstrates exemplary degree of competence in relation to learning objective

Assessment artifacts are scored by full-time faculty members who teach in the philosophy curriculum. Names of students are removed before scoring takes place. Each paper is scored by at least two separate raters. Faculty members then reconvene to share and discuss their scores in order to identify and resolve any significant discrepancies between those scoring the same paper (a divergence of more than 1.0 on any particular objective—divergences of 1.0 or less in score will be averaged).

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(5) What are the assessment findings? How did you analyze them?

Here are the average scores in relation to each of the learning objectives assessed:

1. clearly explained the considerations that give rise to a particular philosophical problem.

Score: 0.71

2. clearly explains how a particular thinker has attempted to address a philosophical problem, including the reasoning offered in support of addressing the problem in that way.

Score: 1.29

4. identify relevant considerations and mount a good argument of their own in support of a philosophical thesis—a thesis that may be critical or constructive in nature.

Score: 0.52

Since these were measured in an introductory level course just two weeks into the semester, we expected the scores to be relatively low. Again, the main idea here is to get a baseline reading against which to measure the increasing refinement of a set of skills as students progress through the program. The score on objective #2 corresponded to our expectations in this regard. Students do come into the class with experience articulating explanations, so one would expect at least some minimal competence in this area. Yet they have often not had much practice explaining the reasoning of an author.

The scores on objectives #1 and #4 seemed exceptionally low. The cause of the low score on objective #1 was easy for us to diagnose. In the instructions for the assignment (and in the assessment format stated above on which it was based), the task of explaining the problem to which the author was responding was not clearly distinguished from the task of explaining the way the author sought to address the problem.

Diagnosing the cause of the exceptionally low score on objective #4 is not so straightforward. The standard deviation of the scores on this objective was quite a bit higher than with objective #1. Some students did not even attempt to address that particular aspect of the assignment, yielding a score of "0," despite the fact that the relevant assignment instructions were very clear. Two considerations may be relevant. First, the skill highlighted in objective #4 is arguably the most demanding of those assessed. The skill of criticizing material presented in class is foreign to many beginning college students. Instead of simply retaining material presented in a textbook, the assignment requires students to assess the material, specifically to evaluate whether an argument successfully leads to a conclusion. Adopting the necessary critical attitude towards material studied for class departs from the skills students practice in some of their other classes. Thus, for this reason alone, one might expect scores on that item to be lower in comparison to scores on the other objectives. Second and relatedly, there may be an intimidation factor involved. Early in one's study of philosophy, it is not

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uncommon to feel as though one lacks sufficient know-how and thus standing to raise critical questions about the published work of a philosopher. Thus, students are sometimes reluctant to even try their hand at doing so.

(6) What conclusions were drawn and what decisions were made as a result? How were stakeholder groups involved?

Based on the data and our analysis, there are three main conclusions we've drawn:

1. We need to pry apart--in both the assessment template and in the instructions on the relevant assignment--the explanatory tasks involved in learning objective #1 and #2. That is, we need to make clear that it's one thing to explain a philosophical problem and another to explain someone's response to it.
2. With introductory students, we need to find ways to more explicitly address the way in which philosophical critical evaluation (objective #4) is different from what students may have been asked to do before. This will perhaps make our expectations clearer.
3. We need to find better ways to encourage students to take a stab at critical evaluation, even when they may feel initially reluctant to do so. This will likely involve some combination of "lowering the stakes" in early assignments and providing more models for how it might be done. This may help to address the intimidation factor.

Stakeholder Involvement:

Three of the four full-time faculty in philosophy were involved in the scoring of the essays and preliminary discussion of the results and analysis. The results will now be shared more widely in the department for discussion at the next faculty meeting. In that context, we'll discuss what changes might serve to address the concerns highlighted in conclusions #2-3 above.

Results will also be posted on the departmental listserv and website so that students, alumni, and other stakeholders have access to the information and a chance to comment.

Surveys are sent each year to recent graduates, asking them for feedback on our learning objectives and whether their experience suggests that the curriculum is designed well to meet those objectives. Data from these surveys is examined in the fourth year of our assessment cycle.

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