

**PROGRAM ASSESSMENT REPORT**  
**AY 2008-2009**

**Report Date:** June 23, 2009

**School/College:** Arts & Science

**Department/Program:** Philosophy

**Person completing the Report:** David Kim (Dept. Chair)

1. **Overview Statement:** Briefly summarize the assessment activities that were undertaken this academic year, indicating:
  - a. which program learning outcomes were assessed this year.
  - b. who in your department/program was involved in the assessment of the above learning outcomes

As backdrop for the report to follow, it should be noted that the three-year WASC program assessment coincides with the beginning years of our reconstructed major. In brief, the department's previous major consisted of 5 required foundational courses and 5 electives, two of which had to be upper division seminars and no more than two of which could be lower division Core classes. The new major is explicitly configured by 3 main categories – History of Philosophy, Value Theory, and MEAP (Metaphysics, Epistemology, and Analytic Philosophy). And it permits no more than one Core course (presumably the one that leads the student to the major) and requires three major courses, mostly electives, in each of the three categories. Of these 9 distribution courses, three are required: Ancient and Medieval Philosophy (PHI 310), Modern Philosophy (PHI 312), and Ethics for Majors (PHI 315).

The reconstruction of the major was motivated by a concern that too many Core courses were counting toward the major. Thus, a limit of one Core course would ensure the opportunity for deeper learning. In addition, introducing the three-category configuration would explicitly align the structure of the major with conceptions of the discipline found in the history of philosophy and in graduate schools. The WASC program assessment, then, offers the department a way to review its new major, and the collective self-evaluation that generated the new major informs the construction and application of the WASC rubrics at the program and the course levels.

The program assessment concerns three main learning outcomes: 1) the ability to identify primary philosophical themes in the writings of major philosophers; 2) the ability to write historical and argumentative essays on central philosophical issues; and 3) the ability to develop philosophical arguments using methods originated by historical and contemporary philosophers. The first of these was evaluated through a consideration of the three required courses for the major; the second will be assessed in light of lower-division electives (typically 300-level) in the three distribution areas; and the third will be examined through reflection on advanced electives (typically 400-level) in the three distribution areas.

The first of these learning outcomes was the focus of the first year of program assessment. The philosophy department examined its three required courses for the major, namely Ancient and Medieval Philosophy (PHI 310), Modern Philosophy (PHI 312), and Ethics for Majors (PHI 315). Specifically, it measured the attainment of the program learning outcome by constructing evaluative rubrics, including course learning outcomes, for each of the three courses and applying these rubrics to essays, exams, and other assignments in the three courses. All faculty who were full-time as of Spring 2009 were involved in some part of the construction of the rubrics. And the full-time faculty who taught the three courses in question applied the rubric and reported back with their findings. Marjolein Oele taught Ancient and Medieval Philosophy. Ray Dennehy taught Modern Philosophy. And Tom Cavanaugh taught Ethics for Majors. A fuller discussion of the findings and their implications will take place in department's Fall Retreat at the start of the Fall semester. This will also be an opportunity to discuss the department's findings on its Core D1 and D3 curriculum and pedagogy. At that time, the department will also set up its assessment for the remaining two learning outcomes.

**2. Please Answers the Following Questions for Each of the Student Outcomes Assessed:**

**a. What did you do?**

Describe clearly and concisely how you assessed the learning outcomes that were evaluated this year (e.g., measures, research methods, etc.).  
[please use bullet points to answer this question]

The faculty who taught the three relevant courses over AY 2008-9 drew assessment material from exams, papers, class discussion, and individual student-faculty discussion. And subcommittees (drawn from faculty who normally teach the courses in question) created evaluative rubrics for each of the three courses. The three relevant instructors of AY 2008-9 then applied the rubrics to their assessment material, looking for distinctive elements and significant patterns.

Each of the three rubrics consists of three or four course learning outcomes and three levels of achievement. The course learning outcomes primarily concern a student's ability to demonstrate familiarity with, and the ability to appraise, classic themes, texts, and figures, in early philosophy, Modern philosophy, and ethics. These learning outcomes clearly contribute to the relevant program learning outcome, which is the ability to identify primary philosophical themes in the writings of major philosophers. The three levels of achievement delineated in the rubrics are "less than adequate achievement," "expected achievement," and "highest achievement." These rubrics are attached to this report.

**b. What did the faculty in the department or program learn?**

Summarize your findings and conclusions as a result of the assessment indicating strengths and weaknesses in student learning demonstrated by this assessment.

**Ancient and Medieval Philosophy (PHI 310):** This assessment involved three learning

outcomes: 1) demonstrating familiarity with the major themes in Ancient and Hellenistic thinking (being and becoming; nomos/physis or skepticism and doubt; sense and intellect; fate/chance); 2) demonstrating familiarity with the major themes in Medieval thinking (universals; faith and reason; God's existence; the beginning and eternity of the cosmos); and 3) appraising key Ancient, Hellenistic and Medieval texts associated with the themes listed in outcomes 1 and 2.

The instructor noted that students performed "well overall" with respect to learning outcome #1. Students showed competence in identifying major themes in Ancient/Hellenistic thought and organizing the central tenets of the theories. To facilitate student learning at the highest level of achievement, the instructor has suggested that the course could spend more time tracking the development of certain themes – for example, conceptions of change and causality from Heraclitus all the way through to Aristotle – so that students can better understand how objections and counter-arguments are formed and appraised. Outcome #2, which focuses on Medieval thought, was considered to be a special challenge because the course is configured by a particularly acute version of the classic pedagogical tension between seeking depth and seeking breadth. Achieving breadth of coverage in both Ancient/Hellenistic and Medieval thought (a temporal span exceeding 1000 years, to say nothing of linguistic and civilizational diversity) runs the risk of losing some ground with respect to learning outcome #1. This challenge will be discussed in the Fall Retreat. Finally, regarding outcome #3, students performed competently in appraising themes found in Ancient/Hellenistic thought, but were less well-prepared to appraise themes in Medieval thought. This reveals the impact of the special challenge just noted.

**Modern Philosophy (PHI 312):** Assessment for this course was configured by four learning outcomes: 1) demonstrating familiarity with major themes in Modern Philosophy (e.g. Scientific Revolution, rationalism and empiricism); 2) appraising texts and figures associated with Modern philosophy (e.g. Descartes, Hume, Kant); 3) writing historical and argumentative essays on central issues in Modern philosophy; and 4) developing philosophical arguments on issues in Modern philosophy, based on Modern texts and figures.

The instructor offered a global impression of *overall* student performance in the course: most students did work that reached the "expected achievement" level and a few produced work that lies between "expected achievement" and "highest achievement." Students performed solidly with respect to outcomes 1 and 2. They were able explain themes well and organize key texts and arguments in the appropriate ways. Outcomes 3-4 crucially involve critical engagement with texts and themes. Here, the instructor noted that the complexity and quantity of the material covered posed a challenge for students performing at the highest level of achievement, specifically in regards to using *original* arguments in evaluating the classic figures and to making *novel* use of source material. A proposal for the Fall Retreat is to consider whether the language of the highest level of achievement for outcomes 3 and 4 should shift from "original" and "novel" to "outstanding." At the pedagogical level, a suggestion was offered that instructors could make a special point of focusing the course material on themes unique to certain philosophers or common to all so as to give students a reading goal and a clear path of learning development.

**Ethics for Majors (PHI 315):** Four learning outcomes formed the evaluative rubric: 1) demonstrating familiarity with classic accounts of ethical conception and justification (Consequentialism, Deontology, and Virtue Ethics); 2) appraising classic texts associated with the classic accounts; 3) assessing classic ethical positions vis-à-vis an additional ethical field (e.g. natural law theory, post-Kantian ethics, feminist ethics); and 4) applying ethical theories to moral issues or controversies.

The instructor noted that through written work and class discussion on Aristotle, Kant, and Mill, students overall demonstrated expected achievement for learning outcomes 1 and 2. As for the application of the theories to issues and controversies (outcome 4), here too the students overall showed expected achievement, and this through a review of peer-reviewed articles on a moral controversy and a final paper on the same. Learning outcome 3 was not achieved because the course was not organized in such a way as to require a comparison of classical with non-classical ethical theories or fields. The rubric for this course was created *after* the course syllabus was formed. So, in future versions of this course, the comparative element of outcome 3 will be embedded in some of the course assignments.

**Overall Pattern:** The main *program* learning outcome salient here is the ability to identify the main philosophical themes in the writings of the main philosophers of our tradition. Given the reports from the three instructors of the three required course for the majors, our program overall enables students to satisfy this learning outcome with at least an expected level of achievement. Future collective self-reflection, then, will focus on assisting students to truly excel in this aspect of philosophical learning. And some of the specific challenges noted above (the problem of coverage in Ancient and Medieval Philosophy, and the problem of originality in Modern Philosophy) will form a part of this discussion.

c. **What will be done differently as a result of what was learned?**

Discuss how courses and/or curricula will be changed to improve student learning as a result of the assessment. Include a discussion of how the faculty will help students overcome their weaknesses and improve their strengths.

Some suggestions have already been noted. But until a fuller departmental discussion takes place, there are no commitments yet to curricular changes. In August, during a Fall Retreat, the department will consider how to interpret the findings summarized above and what to make of the suggestions proffered by the relevant instructors.

3. **Attach a copy of the components of the department/program assessment plan that have been modified since its initial submission:**

- a. Program Mission
- b. Program Learning Goals
- c. Program Learning Outcomes

- d. Program Learning Rubrics aligned with outcomes
- e. Curriculum map that shows the courses that pertain to the outcome

No component of the assessment plan has been modified. But it should be noted again that after much discussion the entire major was recently reconstructed and was introduced just as this review began. Also, again, a more careful consideration of the assessment findings and their implications will be conducted in the department's Fall Retreat.