2010 Program Assessment Report
Department of Philosophy

PROGRAM ASSESSMENT REPORT
AY 2009-2010

Report Date: **September 21, 2010**

School/College: **Arts & Sciences**

Department/Program: **Philosophy**

Person completing the Report: **Jeffrey Paris, Chair, Department of Philosophy**

1. **Overview Statement:** Briefly summarize the assessment activities that were undertaken this academic year, indicating**:**

    a. <u>**Which program learning outcomes were assessed this year.**</u>

At the end of the 2009-2010 Academic Year, the Philosophy Department assessed the Program Learning Outcomes for what we are calling "Tier II, Area or Theme-Based Courses." The Department has divided our courses (for majors) into three Tiers based on the *kind* of course that it is, and on the *level of familiarity* with issues in philosophy that it presupposes. In addition, the three Tiers may loosely correlate to *level of difficulty*, but this is not a hard and fast rule.

Tier I: Includes the three required courses for the major: Ancient Philosophy (310), Modern Philosophy (312), and Ethics for Majors (315). It may also include Logic (319), which though not required for completion of the major nonetheless serves as a "foundational" course for the Philosophy major.

Tier II: Includes courses, typically at the 300-level but not always, that aspire to introduce students to a particular area or theme in Philosophy (often, Philosophy "of" a topic, such as Philosophy of Emotion, Philosophy of Mind, but also African-American Philosophy, Feminist Philosophy, etc.). In some cases, a course listed as 400-level may be taught in this manner, by not incorporating a research element into the course structure or assignments. These courses do not presume in-depth familiarity with Philosophy, and thus expect to revisit the work or ideas

of major figures. Tier II Learning Outcomes are:

- Students demonstrate familiarity with the major issues related to the theme of the course (either a historical period or a special topic);

- Students appraise classic or contemporary texts associated with the theme of the course;

- Students write historical and argumentative essays on philosophical issues central to the theme of the course.

Tier III: Includes those courses, typically at the 400-level, that both presuppose substantial background in the history of Philosophy as well as engage students in a critical research project over an extended period of time during the semester - usually these will be upwards of 10-page papers requiring engagement with the relevant literature on the topic and developed via discussion and reflection with the Professor.

b. **Who in your department/program was involved in the assessment of the above learning outcomes**

Tier II Learning Outcomes were assessed by faculty teaching Tier II courses over the 2009-2010 annual year, namely, Ray Dennehy, David Kim, Jeffrey Paris, and Gerard Kuperus. Additionally, Faculty teaching Tier I courses assessed in 2008-2009 were asked to provide accounts of curricular or classroom changes on the basis of that year's assessment, namely, Marjolein Oele, Ray Dennehy, and Tom Cavanaugh.

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

a. **What did you do?**

- Develop a Course Evaluation Rubric for Second Tier (Theme- and Area-Based) Philosophy Courses to assess student learning;

- Ask Faculty to provide an overall description of the positives and negatives of the course,

along with any changes they think would improve student learning vis-a-vis outcomes in the future;

• Collect responses from Faculty teaching Tier I courses regarding any curricular or student performance changes based on the 2008-2009 assessment of Learning Outcomes for those courses, i.e., "closing the loop" on prior assessment.

b. <u>What did the faculty in the department or program learn this year</u>?

Faculty found, overall, that the rubrics served as appropriate and helpful guides for the assessment of student learning. The stated Tier II Learning Outcomes are closely tied in each case to existing assignments, which tend to ask students to demonstrate (in writing) familiarity with themes and figures of the course, appraise relevant texts, and to evaluate arguments presented in course material.

Among the courses assessed over this year, one of them had anomalously (according to the instructor) poor performance overall, while the remainder were consistently meeting or exceeding expectations for the vast majority of students. Due to the small sample size, this may be due as much to the good quality of the students currently in the program, but it provides at least prima facie evidence for the appropriate curricular organization, and the emerging philosophical skills among students who had taken Tier I courses.

In two of the courses, difficulties emerged around Learning Outcome #1, based specifically on the failure to adequately demonstrate abilities to "identify and explain the basic components of the theme of the course; properly organize central tenets of the theories." In both cases, this was clearly due to a lack of familiarity with background themes in philosophy regarding the contexts and significance of Modern Philosophy vis-a-vis Kant, the Enlightenment, and conceptions of rationality that emerged in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. While students could sometimes identify relevant texts or figures from these periods, many struggled to describe the general significance of the period in question.

Excerpts and paraphrases from submitted faculty responses follow, with length of the excerpt dependent on the challenges posed by the data collected:

329, Nineteenth-Century Philosophy (Gerard Kuperus): Six of the twelve students *in some assignments* achieved a less than adequate ability to demonstrate familiarity with major issues related to the theme of the course; specifically, they were either confused about central tenets in the course, or they were unable to explain basic components of the discussed theories. The cause of this problem was a lack of background knowledge since many of the students in the course had not taken a modern philosophy course and none had studied Kant. Students achieved higher in the appraisal of classic texts based on the numerous class assignments directed toward this Learning Outcome. All students were able to present the central philosophical issues coherently and many exceeded expectations in that they were able to focus on the most important issues.

362, Philosophy of Mind: Comparative Issues (David Kim): The majority of the students showed adequate satisfaction of each of the Learning Outcomes.

380, Embodiment (David Kim): The majority of students in the seminar satisfied the learning outcomes at a level that was slightly above merely adequate performance and slightly below fully exceptional achievement. Many of the students had some background in the material and thus they were able to enrich the discussion and their own perspectives accordingly. Allowance of student creative expression in the form of oral presentations was conducive for LO achievement.

406, Postmodernism (Jeffrey Paris): Whereas most students could properly organize central tenets of the theories, some (those with less philosophical background) struggled to identify and explain the basic components of the theme of the course. Nearly all students were able to organize key texts in a logical and historical time-line and to recognize key passages in major works. Perhaps most impressively, students were successfully able to present central philosophical issues correctly and coherently; and to evaluate arguments used by figures associated with the development of the theme of the course using original arguments.

484, Topics in Ethics: Abortion & Euthanasia (Ray Dennehy): Student performance in this seminar was anomalous and disappointing. Of the twelve students enrolled, only seven successfully completed the course assignments. Of these, three performed consistently to expected achievement, three to the highest achievement, and one with a foot in each.

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

Faculty have expressed in some cases an interest in slight modifications to their syllabi and to uphold stricter standards of advising and enrollment, dissuading students without proper background from enrolling. Of the two 400-level courses taught in that year's iteration as Tier II rather than Tier III courses, one of the instructors (Paris) became concerned that the course ought only to be taught in the future as a Tier III course, an advanced or research seminar, but also remains committed to making the course available to students throughout the University. However, this nonetheless raises the question of how, in a Program based on a small set of foundational courses and then electives with distribution requirements, the Department can guarantee that students can be assured of fulfilling the Tier III research component (which will be assessed in 2011).

Though no definitive action will be taken immediately, the Department will discuss the effectiveness of student preparation for area/theme courses, particularly those in the History designation (from which the two more problematic courses regarding student background emerged). In the following section (as well as in the 2009 Program Assessment Report), it is shown that there are no *inherent* structural or curricular problems with the Tier I courses as they are currently maintained; nonetheless, there is a question as to whether students receive an adequate quantity of historical background to be able to properly identify key historical movements and ideas.

d. **What actions were taken this academic year "to close the loop" relative to what was discovered from last years assessment activities?**

310, Ancient & Medieval Philosophy (Marjolein Oele): The greatest concern from the prior year's assessment was the "special challenge [posed regarding Medieval Philosophy] because the course is configured by a particularly acute version of the classic pedagogical tension between seeking depth and seeking breadth." In response, additional material in Medieval Philosophy, specifically proofs for the existence of God, was added. Still, the amount of material to be covered prevents adequate *breadth* with regard to medieval philosophy, and thus there is no guarantee that the Learning Outcome "demonstrates familiarity with the major themes in

Medieval thinking" can be achieved. The instructor also made changes to the selected texts that allowed for greater comparison between figures addressed in course material (specifically, Plato, Aristotle and Aquinas), and the student abilities to write historical and argumentative essays improved substantially. Finally, the inclusion of regular reflection-essays allowed for a bit more creative freedom, allowing students to phrase philosophical ideas in their own words and to informally demonstrate critical thinking skills.

312, Modern Philosophy (Ray Dennehy): In the prior year's assessment, it was recommended 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." As a result, the course was modified to add considerable lecture material about the philosophers' overall doctrines, including more emphasis on their various salient points. Nevertheless, for reasons possibly unrelated to pedagogical alterations, student performance dipped from the prior year, and the course will require further study in the future.

315, Ethics for Majors (Tom Cavanaugh): The previous assessment of Ethics for Majors noted a need to attend to the Learning Outcome addressing students' evaluation of "classic ethical positions vis-à-vis an additional ethical field (e.g. natural law theory, post-Kantian ethics, feminist ethics)." This was improved by investigating the ethical field of contemporary natural law casuistry (in conversation with contemporary consequentialist thinkers) as found in contemporary debates concerning physician-assisted suicide, euthanasia, and the just conduct of war (military ethics). Students were assisted in overcoming past weaknesses in writing and analysis by being provided the opportunity to address one topic throughout the semester, comprised of three separate writing assignments (an opposing articles review, book review, and final research paper). This approach was deemed successful in that it engaged students in the skill of surmounting a large research project by breaking it into a number of related smaller projects based in literature reviews, argument analysis and development, and research organization.

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. Curricular discussions are omnipresent and ongoing, as department faculty actively engage the correct balance between required and elective courses, and the management of elective course offerings in line with the Major's distribution requirements for electives. Continued attention to advising of both new and returning students enhances the elective and research-based courses by ensuring that students have completed Tier I courses prior to enrollment in Tiers II and III courses. (Though by no means guaranteed, students have been more carefully placed into Tier I courses immediately upon declaring as a Philosophy major or minor, an effect which is in part due to the "Advising Hold" now placed on all Philosophy majors before registration.) The 2011 Program assessment will look to Learning Outcomes for Tier III courses, at which time a more global evaluation of the Program's successes and possible improvements can be determined.

Please return to: Provost Office by June 1, 2010

You can send your replies as either a Word attachment (to: marin@usfca.edu) or as a hard copy to: Provost Office, Lone Mountain Rossi Wing 4th floor.

If you have any questions, please contact: William Murry, Director of Institutional Assessment (wmurry@usfca.edu or x5486).