Assessment Report 2010-2011
Department of Philosophy
College of Arts & Letters

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Mission
The Philosophy Department offers the Bachelor of Arts in Philosophy, rigorous and up-to-date philosophy courses in General Education as well as for elective credit, a Minor, and service courses for other disciplines, particularly in applied and professional ethics. Finally, the Department functions as a center for philosophy, in particular applied and professional ethics, within the Sacramento region.

Philosophy is less content- and method-specific than other academic disciplines. The basic aim of education in Philosophy should not be to impart information nor to teach a particular technique, but to help students understand various kinds of deeply difficult intellectual problems, to interpret texts deliberating these problems, to analyze and criticize arguments, and to express themselves in ways that clarify and carry forward our thinking about the problems.

Students pursuing a major in philosophy should develop knowledge of the history of philosophy and the current state of the discipline, a grasp of representative philosophical questions and of ways to answer those questions. But more importantly, philosophy majors should be able to apply methods and techniques used in philosophy to intellectual problems generally. Thus a philosophy major should develop a critical mind, analytical and interpretative abilities, and a capacity for the imaginative application of abstract formulations to concrete situations.

These objectives may be achieved in different ways and through different kinds of methods and techniques: dialectical debate, logical proof, critical interpretation, historical comparison, counterfactual reasoning. Ideally these will be combined, though one approach or another may prevail in a given course.

For students taking philosophy as part of the GE program (the majority of students enrolling in philosophy courses at Sacramento State) the specific goals of the department are: to offer an introductory deliberation of philosophical questions, an acquaintance with some influential answers to those questions through the study of philosophers and their work; to help the students develop the analytical, logical, critical, and verbal skills essential to the study not only of philosophy, but of problems and issues outside philosophy.

Student Learning Objectives
(Adapted from “Grid of Courses by Specific Outcomes”)
1. Ability to recognize the precise question at issue, and to distinguish it from other, similar issues;
2. Clear argumentative writing;
3. Critical analysis and appraisal;
4. Grasp of fine distinctions;
5. Improved skill in formal logic and in reasoning generally

Outcomes
(The following outcomes are keyed to the “Student Learning Objectives” above.)
Students should be able to demonstrate their capacity to:
1. State the precise issue in writing.
2. Produce relevant arguments for (or against) one side of the precise issue in writing.
3. State unexpressed premises and assumptions explicitly; evaluate premises and assumptions.
4. Distinguish correctly among closely-resembling claims
5. Determine whether an argument is valid – and if not why not.

**Changes in Assessment Procedures**

In Spring 2011, the Philosophy Department approved a major revision to its assessment procedures effective Fall 2011. The new program eliminates the previous practice of administering multiple choice assessment tests in GE courses, which had been suspended in Fall 2009.

**Description of New Assessment Procedures**

I. Assessment of individual courses

1. Current course evaluation forms will now be supplemented to contain assessment-specific questions for program assessment purposes. These questions are now being developed by the assessment committee and will be administered for the first time in Fall 2011.

2. In order to increase uniformity for assessment purposes, all course evaluations will now be conducted online.

3. There will be a periodic review of selected courses with respect to the results of 1. The review will be scheduled so that the data on all courses will be reviewed on a 3 year cycle.

   a. Answers to assessment specific questions will be examined for systematic strengths and weaknesses.
   b. Grade distributions will be examined for the purpose of insuring reasonably uniform Departmental assessment of student performance in courses.
   c. Feedback and advice to specific instructors with be given with respect to any problems indicated in (a)
   d. When deemed appropriate by the assessment committee, specific instructors may be required to submit a plan for addressing problems discovered in (c) as well as evidence of having implemented said plan.

II. Assessing effectiveness of the Major

1. Beyond assessing the courses required for the major, the assessment of the program itself will be based on our newly approved one unit course Philosophy 189, which graduating seniors are required to take during their final semester. This course has four requirements, all of which will be used for assessment purposes. They are:

   a. Completion of a senior essay.
      i. The senior essay is essentially an existing requirement, but we have so far lacked an enforcement mechanism for submission, as well as an incentive (a grade) to submit a quality paper. The standard expectation is that this will be a paper written for a previous class. (The exception here is students who are enrolled in the honors program, who will be required to satisfy this requirement with their honors essay.)
b. A general knowledge and skills test.
   i. The general knowledge and skills test will provide a basis for determining to what extent our majors have the knowledge and skills provided by the core required upper-division philosophy requirements.

c. Written critiques of three philosophy events during the semester.
   i. The written critiques will be submitted with the final paper and will provide a measure of our majors' ability to assimilate and analyze orally presented material.

d. Completion of a departmental assessment questionnaire.
   i. The questionnaire will ask the philosophy majors specific questions about the overall quality and integrity of the philosophy program. It will be developed by the Assessment Committee and submitted to the Department for approval. After this, questions will be added, subtracted, and modified at the Committee's discretion for the purpose of improving it as an assessment tool.

e. Follow up questionnaire.
   i. Roughly a year after graduation, majors will be sent a modified version of the questionnaire from (d) by e-mail. Responses will be compared to answers given the year of graduation.

2010-2011 Assessment Results
Certain elements of the old assessment procedures continue. Those include

I. Course Materials Review

Last year the Department changed the procedure for implementing this policy from a review by the Curriculum Committee to a certification by the faculty member that, for every course, the program goals and GE goals (if any) were met, and that the outcomes, including GE outcomes, were being measured.

The certification takes the form of a checklist which must be submitted for each course. The checklists revealed that the program goals, as well as the department's syllabus requirements, have become universal, and that omissions are minor and usually inadvertent.

That is, the department has achieved universal and total compliance on a demanding set of syllabus requirements. Those requirements include: course objectives; student learning goals which operationalize the student objectives; complete listing of all requirements and work for course; definitions of grades (definition of grades of written work is already standard within the department); due dates for assignments and exams; weekly course outline, etc.

II. Senior Paper Submission Review

Compliance with this senior requirement continued to acceptable this year, as a result of prompting by the faculty. With the establishment of PHIL 189 requirement, however, compliance will eventually become universal among majors who graduate under the new catalog.
This year the Committee noted an increase in compliance with the “Writing Guidelines for Philosophy Papers,” published on the Department’s website. Furthermore, none of the papers failed to meet the minimum standards for acceptability as measured by the Department’s “Grading Standards,” also published on our website. Of the papers submitted roughly 40% were of very good to excellent quality; 30% of good quality; 30% acceptable. This is an improvement from previous years.

The Committee noted that all the papers submitted were properly argumentative and analytical in form; the arguments presented were relevant and cogent. However, the Committee recommended increased emphasis on the need for philosophy majors to recognize objections to their arguments, and to show how such objections can be met.

This point will be emphasized both to the faculty in our annual faculty meeting on assessment, and to the students during the 2011-2012 academic year, both in our semi-annual meetings with major and minors, as well as in classes and individual advisement.

Use of Assessment Data to Improve the Program.

The assessment committee will continue produce an annual report summarizing and analyzing all aspects of the information gathered above.

The committee will, as before, submit the report to the faculty, and at least one faculty meeting each year will be devoted to discussing the implications of the report, and responding to it where indicated.

Departmental Response to Previous Assessment Concerns

1. Aside from the revision of the assessment program itself, the Department responded to growing concerns that our majors were not receiving optimal training in the history of philosophy and inductive logic.

   a. In response to the concern about the history of philosophy, the Department revised the major by creating two upper-division history of philosophy courses (127 and 128) which philosophy majors are now required to take instead of the previous required lower-division GE courses (25 and 27).

   b. In response to the concern about inductive logic, the Department developed and approved a course in inductive logic (61). It revised the program to require this course for the logic and philosophy of science concentration, and to make it an alternative to deductive logic (60) for the other concentrations. The Department would eventually like to make both of these courses required for all majors, but is currently prevented from doing so due to university-mandated restrictions on growth.

2. In the course of evaluating all faculty with in-class visitations (which, note, is not itself an aspect of our assessment program) it was brought to the attention of the Assessment Committee that some faculty webpages were not updated with current syllabi at the beginning of each new semester. The Committee determined that this was partly because of uncertainty about the
nature of this departmental requirement, as some faculty believed it was sufficient to have syllabi to their students on SacCT. This impression has been corrected.

3. The Department also addressed concerns about communicating important information effectively with students by redesigning the departmental website for ease of use. One particularly popular innovation has been the integration of a Facebook feed which students can now follow (120 followers at present writing) to receive information in a timely way on their personal Facebook pages.

4. Like all departments, Philosophy remains extremely concerned about the effect of budget cuts on the quality of instruction. In recent years, we have been forced to respond by raising class sizes and decreasing the frequency with which certain courses are offered. Because class sizes are now frequently exceed classroom capacity, faculty are permitted, and in fact encouraged, to utilize online resources, stagger meeting times, and consider the use of any methods they can to maintain contact hours. This will make it necessary to assess the effect of these forced revisions in teaching conditions and methods on the program, including GE.