

COLLEGE OF HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES

Department of Philosophy
Program Performance Review

Dean's Summary Report and Recommendations
April 2013

Overview

The faculty in the Department of Philosophy are recognized by the College and the University for their outstanding scholarship and intentional teaching. The department has a clearly written and carefully reviewed set of goals whose clarity serves as a touchstone for curricular and administrative decisions and plans. The PPR demonstrates the close alignment between the identified goals as well as the existing and anticipated strategies for implementation.

As my remarks below will indicate, the department faculty serve as a pillar for the College, modeling for students what it means to be active and engaged researchers and writers, informed and informing teachers, and generous members of the community on campus and off campus. Among its most noteworthy accomplishments are the manner in which Philosophy students are engaged in research and the recent success they have had in securing grants to support faculty research.

Faculty and Student Success

As the reviewers note, the Philosophy faculty are “actively and enthusiastically engaged in research” (1). The list of faculty publications is indeed impressive as is the funding received through external grants. The chair of Philosophy, with assigned time from our office, is heading up an ad hoc committee on external grants, a group that I expect will provide useful information about funding sources and funding success in the humanities and social sciences.

The impressive scholarly record of the faculty is due, in part, to the successful and thoughtful hiring done by the department. Not only are faculty to be recognized for having hired individuals who show great promise as researchers and scholars, but also for having kept the curricular needs in mind. That they are “ahead of the curve” in globalization and Asian philosophy and in pluralism with respect to Analytic and Continental Philosophy is most certainly tied to planning and disciplinary understanding.

As the PPR indicates, and the reviewer’s report confirms, the department could have greater gender and cultural balance in both the faculty and student populations. The recently created Climate Committee should provide useful information in that regard, as might the HSS Survey data. I support the department’s decision to make these goals a priority.

The success of students who graduate with a Philosophy degree is the first indication of the success of the department (p. 30). I encourage the department to take advantage of their illustrious group of alumni. That is, given the students’ interest with receiving more “information about pursuing degrees in philosophy” and the chair’s concern with the time this kind of advising involves, the department could to draw on its alumni as an important resource. Making stronger connections between current students and graduates who are now or were in graduate programs would be a great way to get information to students. Perhaps the Philosophy student organization could organize an event, or include a session on the topic as part of the Philosophy Symposium.

The reviewers' report rightly acknowledges the extraordinary nature of the long-standing Philosophy symposium. Among the features that make the Symposium so remarkable is the manner in which students are not just invited to participate, but are essentially involved in the creation of the event through their own courses and course work. This is a fine example of student/faculty research and mentoring.

Graduation and Retention

The department has worked hard to achieve a balance between having a curriculum that represents the complexity of the discipline and one that is navigable by its students. As the PPR suggests, streamlining the major and minor requirements is an important step toward helping students to understand the requirements and move more expeditiously toward graduation (11). Students have already confirmed this in their conversation with the team of reviewers. In addition to helping students, the structural changes you have made should make it easier for the department to schedule classes predictably.

In making curricular adjustments, the department has balanced good pedagogy with innovation and budget. That is, for example, you have identified a way for your minors to demonstrate their critical thinking and writing skills without using SFR-rich major seminars. The department has also added more online courses, an indication of an interest in accessibility and currency.

While I can see the difficulty in analyzing the graduation rate data, it is, nonetheless, important to consider the implications of its unevenness. That is, among first time freshmen, the six-year graduation rate has declined since 2001(see table 1). And given how few students are in the cohort, this decline is particularly troublesome.

Table 1
First-Time Full-Time Freshmen

Headcount	Headcount						
	Initial Cohort	Graduated in 6 yrs or less in other major	Total graduated in 6 yrs or less	% Graduated 6 yrs or less	Graduated in 6 yrs or less or enrolled fall yr 7 in major	Graduated in 6 yrs or less or enrolled fall yr 7 in other major	
Fall 2000	1	0	0	0.0%	0	1	
Fall 2001	4	3	3	75.0%	0	3	
Fall 2002	3	0	3	100.0%	3	0	
Fall 2003	4	1	1	25.0%	0	1	
Fall 2004	8	2	3	37.5%	1	3	
Fall 2005	1	0	0	0.0%	0	1	
Fall 2006	4						
Fall 2007	6						
Fall 2008	3						

The six year graduation rate among transfers has also been uneven, with the 2002 and 2005 cohorts both dipping well below the previous average (see table 2).

Table 2
New Upper Division Transfers

Headcount

	Initial Cohort	Graduated in 6 yrs or less in major	Total graduated in 6 yrs or less	% Graduated 6 yrs or less	Graduated in 6 yrs or less or enrolled fall yr 7 in major	Graduated in 6 yrs or less or enrolled fall yr 7 in other major
Fall 2000	7	5	5	71.4%	5	0
Fall 2001	7	5	5	71.4%	5	0
Fall 2002	7	3	4	57.1%	3	1
Fall 2003	8	5	6	75.0%	5	1
Fall 2004	7	3	5	71.4%	3	2
Fall 2005	18	5	8	44.4%	5	3
Fall 2006	17					
Fall 2007	19					
Fall 2008	13					
Fall 2009	17					
Fall 2010	24					

I look forward to hearing what you learn from your comparison with other CSU and UC campuses. In the meantime, I recommend that the department look at its curriculum to see if students are able to get the classes they need and review their advising plan (p. 30). As a major that is not ladderred or structured by prerequisites, the soft requirements that can be put in place through advising are especially important. You might also drill down more deeply into the progress of individual students to see where/how their progress is getting derailed. And, finally, although the department seems to be satisfied with the rate of growth of its majors, you could use NSO to provide advising more effectively and reach out to undeclared students. That is, assuming that one reason students are moving slowly to graduation is because of ineffective study plans, the sooner Philosophy advisors can get them on the right track, the better.

Student Learning Outcomes and Assessment

In restructuring the major and minor, the department has been impressively mindful of their Student Learning Goals. As you have revised the categories of courses into which your required courses will be distributed, you have done so with appropriate cognizance of your larger goals for student learning. As you pursue your analysis of the lower-level and upper-level GPA split, you may follow leads that will dovetail with your impressively comprehensive assessment plan.

Using writing samples from across the curriculum, the department has measured students' performance in each of its identified outcomes and at various points in the curriculum. Now that this assessment process is in place, the department might consider moving to a less onerous "maintenance plan." That is, statistically useful results require that only a representative portion of the population be assessed. And the department could create a schedule for assessing only one SLO per academic year.

Continue to foreground this extensive and thorough data collection in your conversations about the curriculum. The PPR indicates that the “writing rubrics” were modified to “better reflect the learning outcomes suitable for undergraduate students” (28). You intend to establish “a common set of core skills and learning outcomes across all sections” of introductory courses (29), and you now require that students complete PHIL 315, prior to enrolling in the advanced seminars (30). As faculty continue to review their courses and the department monitors the structure of the major, the assessment data provide useful information.

Budgets and Target

As noted in the PPR report, the department has consistently met or exceeded its target every semester since the last review. I appreciate your careful analysis of lower and upper division FTES and your awareness of a loss in FTES at the lower division level. I encourage you to pursue those explanations that are in your control. In order to meet your desire for “slow and steady growth” of the major, in addition to outreach to our feeder community colleges, you may want to reach out to students in your lower division courses. Certainly having full time faculty teach the gateway courses is a way to increase the number majors as students are likely to see these faculty members as potential advisors and mentors.

The department has strategic decisions to make as it determines the best use of its allocation, deciding which immediate priorities it wishes to support. For example, if the burden on faculty to do assessment is relieved a bit by collecting smaller, but representative data samples, energies could be shifted to the Campus Climate committee or reviewed/renewed advising.

Campus wide, twelve-month chairs serve departments with 20 or more FTF. As such, these chairs are expected to be on campus year round and, contrary to what you have been lead to believe, teach 3 units/semester. Given that the department is at about 58% FTF (this number excludes the two MPP positions—Dr. Avila and Dr. Faust—with retreat rights to Philosophy), and given your interest in expanding some of your curricular offerings and achieving more gender and cultural balance, it would certainly be appropriate for the department to grow toward the 20 FTEF marker.

However, keeping in mind the desire to grow the number of FTF and the number of majors—albeit slowly (the number of majors grew noticeably in 2006, but has since remained at 30-35/year)--you should consider also the potential impact that reducing the number of PTF (who generate more instructional units) could have on your course distribution. That is, while FTF currently distribute their individual targets across three rather than four sections (with supervision, internships, etc. completing their workload), having fewer PTF will increase the instructional burden on FTF. Also, much of the current increase in FTES has been as a result of increased number of students in upper division GE rather than in an increased number of students in the major. Until the latter also increases, it will be costly to offer more courses in the major and likely that FTF will, thus, be teaching more GE courses.

Facilities

The department has created an enviable space for students and faculty to congregate; Plato's Cave provides a relatively private and comfortable location for studying, meetings, and informal gathering. While I appreciate the commitment of PTF to the department and vice versa and the desire to have the entire department centrally located, such relocation doesn't come easily. I encourage the chair to participate in the upcoming conversations of the College Space Committee that will meet this spring to discuss and propose College priorities in making decisions about best ways to assign and reassign space.

The College is in the process of reviewing the existing ratios of staff/students/faculty in each academic unit as well as the nature of the workload in each unit. Since the specter of additional budget cuts has diminished for the moment, the College is revisiting the way in which staff is distributed among departments. However, given that the College itself has not seen an increase in the number of staff positions it receives from the Provost's office in many years, the staff/faculty/student ratio across the College is a difficult, if not zero-sum game.

Summary of recommendations

1. Review advising practices so as to help students navigate the program and graduate within the time frame they intend.
2. Create some outreach plans to alumni, using them as a resource for providing your majors with information about graduate programs and other professional opportunities.
3. Look more closely at student retention (perhaps as part of your Climate study) to see where/how their progress is getting derailed.
4. Use NSO to provide advising more effectively and reach out to undeclared students.
5. Make your assessment plan less cumbersome by reducing the number of assignments reviewed each year and selecting only one or two SLOs to review each year.

Final thoughts

The Department of Philosophy is strong and healthy. Hard work in the classroom, thoughtful curricular decisions, and an international reputation place the department's faculty in just the right position to make strategic decisions that will guide them into the future.

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