Annual Academic Assessment Report Cover Sheet

Assessment reports are due the 1st Wednesday after the Fall Term
Email to: assessment@unlv.edu

Program Information:

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<th>Program Assessed</th>
<th>Undergraduate</th>
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<td>Department</td>
<td>Philosophy</td>
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<td>College</td>
<td>Liberal Arts</td>
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<td>Department Chair</td>
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<td>Todd Jones</td>
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<td>Date Submitted</td>
<td>December 16, 15</td>
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Contact Person for This Report

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Please attach a narrative (not to exceed 4 pages, excluding appendices) addressing the following:

- What are the student learning outcomes? Please provide a numbered list.
- Which learning outcomes were assessed?
- How were they assessed? (Programs must use at least one direct assessment of student learning.)
- Undergraduate programs should assess at least one University Undergraduate Learning Outcome (UULO) each year, which may or may not overlap with a program learning outcome.
- Graduate programs should assess at least one outcome related to one of the following graduate level requirements each year:
  - student engagement in research, scholarship, creative expression and/or appropriate high-level professional practice.
  - activities requiring originality, critical analysis and expertise.
  - the development of extensive knowledge in the field under study.
- What was learned from the assessment results?
- How did the program respond to what was learned?

Please limit the narrative portion of your report to no more than four pages. You may attach appendices with data, tables, charts, or other materials as needed. Please explain the relevant conclusions from any appendices in your narrative. Please contact the Office of Academic Assessment if you have questions or need assistance.
1. Learning Objectives being assessed

The Philosophy Department’s began it’s assessment of activities in the 2014-2015 Academic year with the following department student learning outcomes in mind.

Goal I: To exhibit facility in the theory and practice of argumentation, reasoning, and critical thinking:
Students shall be able to:

1. Master the practice of reasoning well, including
   - The ability to construct clear and concise summarizations and assessments of the reasoning in complex passages by
     Extracting their conclusions,
     Distilling the lines of reasoning in support of those conclusions, and
     Evaluating how well such reasoning supports those conclusions.
   - The ability to construct cogent arguments for their own conclusions and to express their reasoning in a coherent and convincing manner.

2. Demonstrate knowledge of, and competence with, the theory of argumentation and logic through their abilities to:
   - Describe different approaches to logical theory, and to articulate their aims and scope,
   - Define and apply central concepts and techniques of logical theory,
   - Describe major results of logical theory, and
   - Sketch how to arrive at those results.

Goal II: To demonstrate an understanding of the classics of Western philosophy from antiquity to the present:
Students shall be able to:

- Identify major works or figures from at least three periods of the history of Western philosophy,
- Articulate and, when appropriate, compare or contrast, the overall philosophical positions taken by these works or figures,
- Summarize the major motivations or arguments for these positions,
- Present objections that have been raised or could be raised to these positions,
- Assess the relative merits of these arguments and objections.

Goal III: To demonstrate knowledge about central problems in major branches of (non-value) contemporary philosophical theory, such as metaphysics, epistemology, and the philosophy of science:
Students shall be able to:

- Identify central issues or debates in at least two core areas of contemporary philosophical theory,
- Articulate and, when appropriate, compare or contrast, different views that might be taken with respect to these issues,
- Summarize major motivations or arguments for these alternative positions,
- Present significant objections that have or could be raised to these positions,
- Assess the relative merits of these arguments and objections.
Goal IV: To demonstrate knowledge about central problems in major branches of value-centered contemporary philosophical theory, such as ethics, political philosophy, and aesthetics.

Students shall be able to:
• Identify central issues or debates in an area of contemporary philosophical value theory,
• Articulate and, when appropriate, compare or contrast, different views that might be taken with respect to these issues,
• Summarize major motivations or arguments for these alternative positions,
• Present significant objections that have or could be raised to these positions,
• Assess the relative merits of these arguments and objections.

Goal V: To demonstrate the ability to present arguments and to discuss philosophical ideas clearly in writing and speaking.

Students shall be able to:
• Clearly articulate a thesis and make arguments for it.
• Clearly articulate what objections people might find with these arguments.
• Clearly articulate alternatives to the thesis.
• Clearly articulate the merits of these arguments and objections.

We were also aware of and wanted to assess some of the UNLV General education UULOs -- in particular the critical thinking UULO:

Inquiry and Critical Thinking
Graduates are able to identify problems, articulate questions, and use various forms of research and reasoning to guide the collection, analysis, and use of information related to those problems. Specific outcomes for all students include:
• Identify problems, articulate questions or hypotheses, and determine the need for information.
• Access and collect the needed information from appropriate primary and secondary sources.
• Use quantitative and qualitative methods, including the ability to recognize assumptions, draw inferences, make deductions, and interpret information to analyze problems in context, and then draw conclusions.
• Recognize the complexity of problems, and identify different perspectives from which problems and questions can be viewed.
• Evaluate and report on conclusions, including discussing the basis for and strength of findings, and identify areas where further inquiry is needed.

Identify, analyze, and evaluate reasoning, and construct and defend reasonable arguments and explanations.

We collected information about a number of aspects of philosophy department activity that should help us in current and future assessments. But we focused most particularly on assessing departmental performance regarding the department’s critical thinking learning objective and UNLV’s critical thinking UULO.

Our major method of assessing critical thinking involved collecting and examining samples of student papers written prior to their declaring a major in philosophy, and samples from the end of their first semester as a philosophy major. We collected these papers during our milestone experience orientation seminar, so that we would get a large sample. In principle, collecting them during the milestone experience seminar would enable us to obtain papers from all of the newly declared philosophy majors. Participants in the seminar were instructed to bring copies of their best written college paper to class, for the purposes of departmental (not individual student) assessment. At then end of the semester, the Milestone instructor had all participants send them a copy of a philosophy paper they had written during the semester. The assessment committee then read a sample of 14 of these papers (7 pre-declaration, and 7 end of the semester) and gave them a score based on a previously agreed upon metric.

We also began two other preliminary studies.

a. The communication UULO. We did a preliminary assessment of the 14 papers discussed above, using a separate, agreed upon method to assess communication skills. The purpose of this pre-assessment was to make some preliminary observations about student communication skills, and to fine-tune the assessment instrument. We wanted do get some experience assessing this, and think about which evaluation questions could be improved, and what other questions might be added in a future communication assessment.

b. Graduation rates. We seem to sometimes have fewer graduating seniors than our number of majors would warrant. We began collecting data on graduating seniors over the last five years for the purpose of determining, if there are particular patterns regarding bottlenecks or drop-offs.

3. What was learned.

The most important specific thing that we learned from this assessment was that our students tend not to consider and reply to possible objections to the thesis of their papers. In only 2 of the 14 papers were objections considered at all. We think this is an important deficit. Professor Emeritus Maurice Finocchiaro of our department has persuasively argued that an important part of arguing for a claim is to reply to actual and potential counterarguments. Whether students are not doing this in their papers because they have not been instructed to do so, or because they have been instructed to and are failing to do so, is something we will be trying to determine.

We also learned that that student critical thinking abilities appeared to improve, even after just one semester of being a formally declared philosophy major. The average score on our 14 point scale was 4.39 for the pre-major condition and 8.39 for the post-
declaration condition. We expected there would be some increase. But this increase was much larger than expected. While some aspects of critical thinking skill are not currently improving in ways we’d like, others clearly are.

Other kind of idea we discussed during assessment concerned how we can better design our assessment instruments in the future. We learned, for example, that while student anonymity may have some benefits, collecting papers non-anonymously would be more helpful. It would have been a more useful comparison to look at the before and after papers of the same students, rather than of collections of semi-anonymous students in the aggregate. We also come up with new ideas for additional questions in future assessments.

4. Closing the loop/future activities

The assessment committee plans to discuss it’s critical thinking assessment findings with the whole department in an early spring semester meeting. We will specifically discuss with the whole department, what might be done to improve student abilities to raise and reply to possible objections in the course of their class papers.

Early in the spring semester, the assessment committee will also meet to redesign a communication skills rating questionnaire, and discuss other possible ways of measuring communication skills for next year’s assessment.

We also plan to collect more student data to look for possible sources of bottlenecks and drop-offs regarding graduation time lines.

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