Annual Academic Assessment Report Cover Sheet

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

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<td>Department Chair</td>
<td>David Beisecker</td>
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<tr>
<td>Assessment Coordinator</td>
<td>Todd Jones</td>
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<td>Date Submitted</td>
<td>December 19, 16</td>
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<tr>
<td>Contact Person for This Report</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Name</td>
<td>Todd Jones</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phone</td>
<td>X 4691</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Email</td>
<td><a href="mailto:tjones@unlv.nevada.edu">tjones@unlv.nevada.edu</a></td>
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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 its assessment of activities in the 2015-2016 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. This year, as part of our 3 year plan, we wanted to look especially carefully at the communication outcome:

Communication
Graduates are able to write and speak effectively to both general and specialized audiences, create effective visuals that support written or spoken communication, and use electronic media common to one's field or profession. Specific outcomes for all students include:
• Demonstrate general academic literacy, including how to respond to the needs of audiences and to different kinds of rhetorical situations, analyze and evaluate reasons and evidence, and construct research-based arguments using Standard Written English.
• Effectively use the common genres and conventions for writing within a particular discipline or profession.
• Prepare and deliver effective oral presentations.
• Collaborate effectively with others to share information, solve problems, or complete tasks.
• Produce effective visuals using different media.
Apply the up-to-date technologies commonly used to research and communicate within one's field.

Because of the importance of critical thinking to our own program, and because of its centrality to general education we also opted to continue to look, in particular, at 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.
2. **Measuring success regarding learning outcomes.**

Our major method of assessing the communication and critical thinking skills of philosophy majors 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 year as a philosophy major. We collected the first set of papers during our Milestone Experience orientation seminar, in hopes of getting a large sample. In principle, collecting them during this 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 academic year, the Milestone Experience instructor instructed all seminar participants to send him a copy of what they considered the best philosophy paper they had written during the year. The assessment committee then read a sample of 8 of these papers (4 pre-declaration, and 4 end of the year) and scored them based on a previously agreed upon metric.

This assessment procedure was created on the basis of a pilot study of communication assessment done the previous year. That year, in addition to our other assessments, we did a preliminary communication assessment with an eye to seeing what kind of assessment tools did and didn’t work. One thing we learned then was that the small benefits of student anonymity seemed less important than the costs of not really being able to compare individual before and after papers. This year we improved things by collecting before and after papers from the same student. We also found that a single semester wasn’t enough time to see if students had really improved. So this year we collected “after” samples at the end of the year, rather than the end of the semester. We also found that some of the items we looked at in our evaluation metric didn’t seem to assess exactly what we were looking for. So this year we used a somewhat more fine-tuned metric.

Because the Philosophy Department teaches a number of service courses, we were also in the position of being able to assess our contribution to the gen ed skills of students in other departments. In addition to being useful to UNLV, this also enables us to compare students in other departments with Philosophy Students. One of the members of the Philosophy Department assessment committee (David Forman) was able to conduct a separate study of the communication and critical thinking skills of students taking different Engineering Ethics courses taught by 3 different members of the philosophy
This study was also done by examining a sample of student papers, and assessing them using a rubric that was similar to the ones used for assessing philosophy student papers.

In addition to these, we also did two smaller studies:

   a. We assessed critical thinking abilities in the incoming class of philosophy majors by requiring those taking the Milestone Experience class to take an on-line mini course in critical thinking, with an argument-diagramming test at the end.

   b. The Assessment coordinator was able to do some informal assessing of the oral communication skills of some graduating philosophy students by observing presentations they gave during a Philosophy Capstone course.

3. What was learned.

It was observed that most of the students in the Capstone class were quite skilled at giving oral presentations. Their reports were well-prepared and to the point. Their ability and confidence in answer questions from other students was impressive. They were much more impressive in the oral presentations than in their written papers.

There was a small improvement in student scores in communication skills over the course of the year.

Why the improvement wasn’t greater is a bit unclear. One reason might be that, in the sample we looked at, the entry-level paper communication scores were quite high, so there wasn’t much room for improvement. It was also observed that most of the strengths and weaknesses students had in the entry-level papers tended to be the same strengths and weaknesses they had at the end of the year. Perhaps writing habits are difficult to change, especially in the course of a single year. Instructors should keep in mind how much work improving student writing may take.

All of the incoming Milestone experiment students were able to pass the critical thinking online mini-course test.

Critical thinking scores on student papers were did not improve in the course of a year. It is not clear why not. We suspect that this was partly an artifact of the small sample. There was one paper that pulled the entry level average way up, and one that pulled that end of the year paper average way down.

Like the previous year, this year we observed that when, making arguments, students often do not to a good job raising and responding to objections. This problem isn’t specific to philosophy students. We found the same thing was true of the papers written by engineering students in the engineering ethics papers looked at. Clearly, this is
something instructors should emphasize. We did find that this year the problem was not as bad as we had seen in the previous year. In our sample, nearly half of the papers this year did attempt to respond to objections. That shows us that doing very badly at this isn’t inevitable. We also got some feedback from professors that, sometimes, failing to do so need doesn’t indicate anything lacking in the students work or the professors instructions. Sometimes responding to an objection can be built-in to the initial argument. And, occasionally, doing so isn’t appropriate within the confines of the assignment. In future evaluations, we will try to figure out when failing to raise and respond to objections has more to do with the parameters of assignment than any deficits in critical thinking abilities.

We also learned some things about the assessment process. We had a smaller sample of beginning and end of the year papers to look at than we wished, because several of the people who handed in papers at the beginning of the year, didn’t hand in end of the year papers. (There was no penalty for not doing so). There are certainly ways we could get bigger samples. We also realized that while it was better to compare papers written by the same students, comparison was still difficult because the papers we were comparing were different sorts of assignments. That caused more comparison difficulties than expected.

We also realized that there was more fine-tuning of our evaluation criteria to be done. For example, asking questions about quality of “most sentences” or paragraphs in a paper doesn’t really measure what is relevant. If ninety percent of the sentences are adequate, but ten percent are incomprehensible, then a paper is still poorly written.

4. Closing the loop/future activities

This year we tried to make use of the findings of last year’s assessment by discussing the findings in a department meeting. The most important specific thing that we learned from that assessment was that our students tend not to consider and reply to possible objections to the theses of their papers. In only 2 of the 14 papers looked at that year were objections considered at all. We considered 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. We wondered whether students were not doing this in their papers because they have not been instructed to do so, or because they have been instructed to, but were still failing to do. Most department members said that replying to objections was a specific part of the instructions for paper assignments. At this meeting, Assessment Committee members stressed that this instruction should probably be given more specifically and firmly. In addition, near the end of the semester, the Assessment Coordinator sent all full time instructors an email explicitly reminding them that this was one of the critical thinking
and communication skills students appeared not to do well on in last years assessment, and that it would likely help to give students more explicit instructions this year.

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The assessment committee plans to discuss its communications and critical thinking assessment findings with the whole department in an early spring semester meeting. We will discuss various ways to remedy different deficits.

The assessment committee and the department as a whole will work to redesign an exit survey that will be given to graduating students to collect information about their experiences in the philosophy department and at the university for future assessments.

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