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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<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 20,17</td>
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<tr>
<td>Contact Person for This Report</td>
<td></td>
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<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 2016-2017 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’ve also been interested in assessing some of the UNLV General education UULOs. In previous years, we assessed the department’s critical thinking and communications outcomes (which correlate with UNV’s Inquiry and Communication’s UULLO’s. This year, as part of our 3 year plan, we wanted to look especially carefully at the department’s history outcome (which we see as part of the university’s Intellectual Breadth and Lifelong Learning ULLO).


To assess whether we were succeeding at our history goals, we began by thinking carefully about what our history goals are. Discussions were had with colleagues inside and outside of the department about the precise purposes of studying the history of philosophy. One of us wrote an e-mail discussion essay on the topic, and shared it with the two department history specialists.

Initially we thought that part of our assessment would center around interviewing department members who specialize in philosophy history regarding their impressions of student performance. But we came to see that it would be more beneficial to ask all department members about which aspects of philosophy history their students did and didn’t seem to know well.

At a May 3 department meeting, we had an open discussion about which major historical figures students seemed to have a deficient knowledge of, when these figures came up in various classes.
On December 6, we had a second department meeting, where discussion of student progress in meeting the history outcomes was a major focus. One week prior to the meeting, a notice was sent out for faculty to think about the following questions:

1. What are our main goals regarding our students understanding of the history of philosophy? (while appreciating we have lots of goals here)

2. What are the biggest deficits in meeting these goals? (while appreciating there will always be lots of deficits)

3. What are some of the things we can do to better to remedy these deficits? (while appreciating that every remedy also has costs)

In addition to the input from the faculty regarding student history learning, one professor surveyed students in one of our history-focused class. He sent home a survey to all class members with the following questions:

1. Which lack of knowledge about a historical philosopher or era has caused you the biggest problems in your philosophy classes (or other classes or other realms)?

2. How has this problem manifested itself?

3. What is the most practical thing the department could have done to remedy this problem?

We also talked with the Wilson Advising Center director about how to administer a more extensive survey to all graduating philosophy students.

3. What was learned.

At our May 3 department meeting, we discussed which gaps we have been noticing in our students’ familiarity with major historical figures. Many faculty members expressed that there seemed to be gaps in every area of student knowledge of the history of philosophy. Students’ lack of familiarity with the very important figures of Kant and Wittgenstein were mentioned as being particularly noteworthy.

At our December 6 meeting, many faculty members observed that it is very common for students in advanced courses to appear to have little familiarity with the historical figures that are brought up in most advanced classes. Faculty members often must spend lots of time familiarizing (or reminding) students of who these people were and what they did. (Though one faculty member noted that student familiarity with historical arguments did not appear as bad as their knowledge of historical people.)

There was a great deal of consensus about the causes of a lack of student familiarity. Nothing in the design of the major requires students to take courses where they learn about historical figures before they take other advanced courses. Students are specifically required to take two history-focused courses, one of which must be Ancient
or Early Modern Philosophy. But professors are granted quite a bit of leeway in how those two courses are taught, and there is no guarantee that such courses are always taught as survey of the philosophical views of those areas. (Sometimes they focus in-depth on a small number of prominent philosophers). More importantly, these courses are 400 level courses, and there is no special likelihood that they will be taken before other upper level courses are taken. Moreover, all the other courses that satisfy our history requirement (save for 310 Great Philosophers) are also 400 level courses. Such courses will have the same problems.

It was observed that this difficulty is not limited to our history concentration. Most of the courses we currently offer for majors are 400 level. The major is not structured in a way that encourages students to take sequences of any sort -- either historical or sequenced from intermediate to advanced. For numerous reasons (including a small faculty), very few 200 and 300 level philosophy courses are offered. This means that philosophy students generally select from whatever advanced 400 level courses are offered that semester, whether or not they have any knowledge of the preceding eras or of prerequisite issues.

In the course of our assessment, we also learned some things about the assessment process. Faculty members’ impressions of what students do and don’t know from class discussion does provide some information. But it is only a very rough and approximate sort. (We are reminded of how easy it is to be fooled into thinking students do know a lot about a given subject, only to be unpleasantly surprised by test results.)

We suspect direct student surveys can provide much more useful information. We did survey students. But students had little incentive to fill out the surveys, and too few were returned to get much information. In discussions with the Wilson Advising Center, we learned that, while they can administer a survey to all graduating senior majors, they also lack a mechanism for insuring that a large percentage will be returned.

If students have the deficits that we think improved assessment measures would likely show, the open faculty discussion was still extremely useful in helping us to see one of the major cause of those deficits: the top heavy (400 level) nature of our course offerings and requirements.

4. Closing the loop/future activities

4.1 Actions regarding previous findings

This year we did a number of things to try to make improvements on the basis of things findings made in previous years. Among the major findings of our last several assessments was that a. students often tend to avoid raising and responding to objections to their theses when they write papers.
b. students improve in this if they are given explicit instructions that they should do so.

These results were sent to all faculty members. They were then explicitly discussed in a department meeting. They were then resent with a highlight summary close to when papers were assigned in both Spring and Fall terms. Some professors commented that they have made sure to specifically discuss this when papers were assigned.

4.2. Future action and assessment

To help improve student knowledge of the leading historical figures, one department member will be specifically teach a Great Philosophers course on Wittgenstein. Another will teach a course prominently featuring Kant. Such courses have not been taught in the recent past.

There was considerable interest in continuing to think and talk about what might be done about the non-sequential nature and top-heavy aspects of our course offerings. We plan to continue further inter-departmental discussions of this.

We now have a draft of an extensive survey, for all graduating philosophy majors, about various aspects of what they learned in the course of their philosophy education, and the strengths and weaknesses of the program. We will be editing and amending this draft and will send it to the department as a whole for further discussion and amending. We realized that we now have a promising mechanism for making sure that all our students complete such a survey before graduating: All students are now required to take a Philosophy Capstone course. It would not be difficult to require that all students fill out this survey as part of their participation in this course. (Discussion of this survey and the issues in it might also be part of this course.) Such a survey should give us lots of good information that we can use for various types of future assessment.

This year, a lot of good preliminary work was also done looking at philosophy major graduation rate, and whether there were any particular bottlenecks that were keeping majors from graduating at the rate they should. There was a lot of careful analysis of incoming student and gradation rate statistics, as well as contacting individual majors not currently enrolled in classes try to get more information about this. We plan to continue this work.