

Department Assessment Plan

Philosophy Department

TO: Claudia Beversluis, Dean for Instruction,
for the Assessment Committee
FROM: David Hoekema, for the Philosophy Department
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[The following assessment plan was prepared by the Curriculum and Pedagogy Committee of the department (Kevin Corcoran, John Hare, and David Hoekema, chair) and revised in response to numerous suggestions received from department members when it was discussed at department business meetings in April and May. We hope it will meet college requirements for assessment, and we anticipate that it will help us enhance the strength of the philosophy program at Calvin in the years to come.]

Programs

The only degree program for which the Philosophy Department is responsible is the college's program of undergraduate study in philosophy, leading to completion of a major or minor. Our major program serves three broad classes of students: those who intend to pursue advanced study in the field of philosophy, those planning to pursue graduate study in another discipline, and those who will pursue a career or profession outside academia. We do not differentiate between these groups in our program objectives, which we believe are appropriate for all students completing a philosophy major. Some of our proposed means of assessment, however, are directed to one of these groups, reflecting the special importance that attaches to certain objectives for certain classes of majors and graduates.

A majority of the department's instructional efforts are devoted to teaching students who are not, and are not likely to become, departmental majors. It is our understanding that the assessment of how successfully the Philosophy Department achieves college objectives in courses offered primarily to non-majors falls under the college's overall assessment plan, including in particular the assessment plan that was adopted with the revised core curriculum. The department wishes to voice its concern that, when assessment tasks are divided between the department and the college, courses that do not occupy a central place either in the College's core curriculum or in the department's sequence of courses for majors may escape close oversight. We address these courses in some of our assessment measures below, but we urge the Assessment Committee to reflect on whether there is a need for a "middle-level" mode of assessment that is narrower in focus than assessment of the core curriculum but broader than departmental and program assessment.

Objectives

The overall aim of Calvin's philosophy program is to introduce students to the rich intellectual traditions of the discipline of philosophy as it is practiced in the Reformed tradition of Protestant Christianity. It is not our purpose to persuade students to adhere to any particular school of Reformed philosophy or any specific set of philosophical doctrines. Rather, we seek to infect them with the love for learning and the boundless intellectual curiosity that are among the great historical treasures of our theological tradition. To be a Reformed Christian is to be engaged in a lifelong quest for deeper understanding, fuller knowledge of God and ourselves, and more effective engagement in seeking God's kingdom. To study philosophy at Calvin is to engage in a sustained conversation with faculty members who embrace that vision of the calling of the Christian philosopher. More specifically, the aim of the program can be summarized under the following headings:

1. Students should have a broad acquaintance with the major figures and movements of the Western philosophical tradition, including most of the following:
 - a. Ancient philosophy
 - b. Medieval philosophy
 - c. Early modern philosophy through Kant
 - d. Post-Kantian Continental philosophy
 - e. Post-Kantian Anglo-American philosophyIn addition, students are encouraged to study non-Western traditions of philosophical reflection such as those of South Asia, East Asia or Africa.
2. Students should be familiar with the principal systematic areas of philosophy, including metaphysics, epistemology, and ethics.
3. Students should develop the intellectual skills that characterize the discipline of philosophy, including:
 - a. Close, critical, and careful reading of texts in historical and cultural context
 - b. Independent research using primary and secondary sources
 - c. Hermeneutical sensitivity
 - d. Analysis of texts and the arguments that they advance
 - e. Construction and assessment of argument and its formal structures
 - f. Clear, coherent, and effective writing
 - g. Respectful and constructive oral argument
4. Students should be aware of the Reformed tradition and other major traditions of Christian philosophical reflection and should understand the nature of inquiry that is grounded in and shaped by Christian faith.
5. Students should understand themselves and their calling in relation to a Christian worldview.
6. In their academic work, students should exemplify the traits of honesty, diligence, charity, wisdom, and creativity, along with a sense of passionate engagement with philosophical ideas, and they should demonstrate a commitment to justice and shalom.

We have not formally divided these objectives into the three categories mandated by the college's assessment guidelines, but we note that they encompass knowledge (objectives 1, 2, and 5), skills (objective 3), and values (objectives 4, 5, and 6).

Means of Assessment

We propose that assessment be divided into two parts, one to be conducted annually, the other at five-year intervals. Assessment will be primarily the responsibility of the Curriculum and Pedagogy Committee of the department, in cooperation with the chair and with the Dean for Instruction.

I. Elements of Annual Assessment

- I.1. Syllabi of all departmental courses, including the nature of required papers and other writing assignments, will be gathered in a departmental file and reviewed by the Curriculum and Pedagogy Committee.

Rationale: Maintaining a comprehensive course file is necessary in order to monitor of breadth of coverage, duplication between courses, and consistency in student expectations.

- I.2. Grades in departmental courses will be collected and analyzed by the Curriculum and Pedagogy Committee.

Rationale: Analysis of student grades will facilitate detection and correction of problems in preparation for advanced courses.

- I.3. Information from the annual survey of college alumni appropriate to departmental objectives will be obtained from the Social Research Center.

Rationale: This is a well-established means of gathering one-time and longitudinal information on the college's recent graduates

- I.4. Data on the performance of departmental majors on the Graduate Record Examination and on pre-professional achievement or aptitude tests (e.g., GMAT and MCAT) will be requested from the college or the testing agencies.

Rationale: Information gathered from these tests offers a valuable if indirect indication of the adequacy of preparation of philosophy majors. In the absence of any available nationally normed test specifically related to philosophy, these tests are the nearest available substitute.

- I.5. Course evaluations containing items reflecting departmental objectives will be administered to one major category of departmental courses (e.g., intermediate systematic courses or history sequence courses).

Rationale: Course evaluations are administered regularly in departmental courses. Additional questions related to departmental objectives can readily be added in order to assess the degree to which students perceive their courses as meeting departmental objectives. Identifying one major course category each year will ensure comprehensive course review over a period of 3-5 years while limiting administrative burdens.

- I.6. Students in Philosophy 395, the departmental senior seminar, will submit written self-assessments of their attainment of departmental objectives, in the form of responses to a questionnaire developed for this purpose.

Rationale: Senior majors are well-qualified to review the degree to which departmental objectives have been achieved, and those who enroll in the senior seminar can lend valuable assistance to the faculty in identifying program strengths and weaknesses.

- 1.7. A questionnaire will be sent each year to two groups of philosophy alumni: those who graduated with a philosophy major three years ago and those who graduated ten years ago. The purpose will be to assess student satisfaction with their Calvin education and the ways in which it prepared them for post-college study and work, with a particular focus on their assessment of the value of their academic work in philosophy. General comments concerning the philosophy program and how it could be improved will also be solicited.

Rationale: a specially constructed questionnaire, with some multiple-choice and some open-ended questions, can disclose a great deal about the department's success as observed by recent graduates. The two collection points--three years and ten years out of Calvin--provide enough time to gain some perspective and experience, and the responses collected over several years can be compared to identify trends.

Responsibility for annual assessment report: The Curriculum and Pedagogy Committee will review all of the items enumerated above, identify important trends or changes, and obtain additional information in any areas in which problems have been identified. The department will devote at least one meeting to receiving this report and discussing potential solutions for problems that have been identified. The results of the annual assessment review, and the steps that the department has taken in response, will be incorporated in the department chair's annual report to the Academic Dean.

2. Elements of Quinquennial Assessment

- 2.1. The Curriculum and Pedagogy Committee (or a specially appointed departmental assessment committee) will review five years' annual data as specified above.

Rationale: trends and problems will be more clearly identified through review of five years' data than in annual reviews.

- 2.2. Exit interviews will be conducted with all graduating seniors early in their last semester.

Rationale: Interviews employing a script of carefully chosen questions will generate valuable responses from all majors to supplement the written responses submitted each year by Senior Seminar students.

- 2.3. A portfolio analysis will be conducted on a randomly selected sample of papers submitted in Philosophy 153, in two 200-level courses, and in two 300-level courses.

Rationale: Mindful of the risk that this exercise will merely confirm the obvious (that seniors usually write better papers than first-year students), we recommend a careful analysis of the content and organization of three sets of sample papers in order to document strengths and weaknesses related to specific departmental objectives.

- 2.4. The department chair or a designated faculty member will contact the graduate advisor of every departmental graduate from the past five years to solicit an evaluation of the graduate's preparation for graduate study. When feasible, admissions directors or faculty members of professional schools (law, medicine, management) in which recent graduates are enrolled will also be contacted.

Rationale: Soliciting the judgment of graduate advisors will provide a valuable corrective to assessments completed by students and others with a continuing connection with the college, and will also facilitate a review of whether departmental curriculum and pedagogy require adjustment to meet changing expectations and approaches in graduate study.

- 2.5. The Curriculum and Pedagogy Committee will obtain information concerning curricular changes, including new courses and newly introduced joint majors, from selected peer institutions. It will assess whether changes instituted elsewhere should also be considered by Calvin's department.

Rationale: Regular comparison with peer institutions will alert the college and the department to shifts in the discipline that have an effect on the undergraduate curriculum. We do not specify here what counts as a peer institution, nor how many such should be surveyed, preferring to leave this to the discretion of the committee; it is our expectation is that, in each quinquennial review, ten to fifteen liberal arts colleges, half of them Christian colleges, might be surveyed.

- 2.6. Every ten years (i.e., at every other quinquennial review), a team of external evaluators will be invited to visit the campus, conduct interviews with faculty and students, and prepare an oral and written report on the degree to which departmental objectives are being attained. They will also offer their recommendations on whether any of the departments' stated objectives should be revised, or other objectives added.

Rationale: The inherent difficulty of identifying meaningful quantitative measures of educational achievement in a field such as philosophy, which by its very nature cultivates broad analytic and synthetic abilities applicable to a wide range of contexts rather than a specific body of knowledge or toolbox of skills, compels us to seek out effective and unbiased means of measuring student outcomes. We believe a careful review by disciplinary colleagues with no current connection with the college or the department, selected for their broad acquaintance with the field and with effective pedagogy, can serve this purpose.

Responsibility for quinquennial assessment report: The quinquennial report will be written by members of the Curriculum and Pedagogy Committee (or of a specially designated departmental assessment committee) after careful review of the results of the assessment measures enumerated above. It will be presented first to the department and forwarded, together with departmental recommendations and decisions to remedy problems that have been identified, to the Dean for Instruction and the Committee on Assessment.

Criteria to be Employed

The following questions will guide the administration of the assessment measures listed above:

1. Does careful review of syllabi, external test results, or upper-level course grades indicate any deficiency in the preparation of Philosophy majors?
2. Is the amount of work assigned in departmental courses sufficient to enable students to achieve departmental objectives?
3. Is the variety of work assigned appropriate to the development of departmental objectives?
4. Are students from nonmajority cultures and women students consistently made welcome in philosophy classes, and are ethnic and gender diversity regarded by philosophy instructors as positive elements in a Christian classroom?
5. Do students demonstrate familiarity with departmental objectives?
6. Do student responses to questionnaires and to exit interviews indicate an appropriate degree of facility in the skills of philosophical analysis and discourse?
7. Does the written work of students in advanced courses demonstrate a significant advance in knowledge and skills over that submitted in elementary courses? Furthermore, does it exhibit a spirit of independence and intellectual creativity?
8. Are students able to respond to questions concerning the attainment of departmental objectives in a way that shows their support for and their critical engagement with the department's goals?
9. Do student responses exemplify a spirit of fairness and generosity toward others with whom they disagree?
10. Do students demonstrate an awareness of the nature of a Christian worldview?
11. Are there significant disparities between Calvin's philosophy department and other excellent undergraduate departments with respect to course content, assignments, major requirements, or student performance on standardized tests that suggest needed changes in departmental courses?