

Annual Assessment Report

Department: Philosophy

Academic Year: 2019

Date of Submission: September 16th, 2019

Department Chair: Jim Taylor

I. Response to the previous year PRC's recommendations

Item: "Due to small sample sizes, compile data over several years and assess it once or twice within a six-year cycle." (PRC—Feb. 8, 2018, p. 3)	Response: We are beginning to do this now. For instance, our spring 2019 assessment of our Skills PLO (reported in section II below) has given us an opportunity to compare results with our 2012 assessment of this PLO (see App. C).
Item: "Refocus the department's attention on using its existing general education teaching as a platform for thoughtful (major and minor) recruitment." (PRC—Feb. 8, 2018, p. 5)	Response: We have been redoubling our efforts to present our 15-minute Philosophy Major Recruitment PowerPoint presentation to every one of our Philosophical Perspectives courses at strategic times during the semester. We have also tried to be more consistent about sending recruitment emails to promising students after they have completed the course.
Item: "Utilize the Augustinian Scholars Program to present the beauties of philosophy to especially competent and eager students." (PRC—Feb. 8, 2018, p. 5)	Response: Both Taylor and Song have co-taught 1st-year Augustinian Scholars seminars. We have tried to use the courses as a platform for ongoing promotion of our program, encouraging Augustinians to consider majoring or minoring in philosophy (or at least to take more philosophy classes). David Vander Laan has also been a guest speaker in some ASP seminars. And we will invite Mark Nelson to be a guest speaker next semester when he returns from his sabbatical. Four out of our thirteen majors are now Augustinian Scholars.
Item: "Consider advertising/marketing that Philosophy graduates exceed national standards in critical thinking skills." (PRC—Feb. 8, 2018, p. 6)	Response: Our major (and minor) recruitment PowerPoint presentation contains slides that document that philosophy majors get the top scores in the GRE verbal reasoning and analytical writing sections and also the top scores on the LSAT.
Notes: While Taylor was on sabbatical last fall, acting chair Nelson did not submit an annual assessment report, since Tatiana told him that it wouldn't be necessary (since we had already submitted our Action Plan and Key Questions the previous spring after submitting our Six-Year Report the previous fall. So, the above items concern our response to the PRC's Feb. 8 th , 2018 response to our Six Year Report (submitted in 2017).	

II A. Program Learning Outcome (PLO) assessment

If your department participated in the ILO assessment you may use this section to report on your student learning in relation to the assessed ILO. The assessment data can be requested from the Dean of Curriculum and Educational Effectiveness.

Program Learning Outcome	The philosophy program skills PLO
Who is in Charge /Involved?	Jim Taylor
<u>Direct Assessment Methods</u>	Philosophy Senior Seminar end-of-semester essay collections
<u>Indirect Assessment Methods</u>	None
Major Findings	<p>There were three students in the class. Each of them submitted a collection of four essays at the end of the semester. Each of these four essays was a revision of an essay the student had written earlier in the semester. The prompts for each of these four essays are in Appendix A, which accompanies this report. Appendix B contains the Philosophy Major Skills Rubric, which Jim Taylor used to assess the essays. After reading the revised essays in the end-of-semester essay collection, Taylor assigned each student a score in each of the three areas of evaluation on the skills rubric (argument understanding, argument construction, and argument evaluation). A chart indicating the scores for each student in each category is contained in Appendix C. In sum, on a scale of 0-3, in which 3 is Excellent, 2 is Good, 1 is Fair, and 0 is Poor, the average score in each category is as follows: Understanding — 2.33; Construction — 2.54; Evaluation — 1.96. The score in the Understanding category was affected, to some extent, by the fact that Taylor did not give the students a copy of the rubric in advance of their completing the assignment. As a result, the students were not aware that they could not get a rating of Excellent (score of 3) in this area unless they explicitly indicated the logical structure and type of the arguments they discussed. Since doing so is not a typical feature of a standard philosophical essay, the students had no way of knowing that they should include this information —through no fault of their own (We will be sure to give the students a copy of the rubric in the future when we use it again to assess student learning relative to our skills PLO.). As a result, it isn't clear whether the understanding score is a true reflection of the students' abilities in that area. Our benchmark for our skills PLO is that each of our students is at least</p>

	80% proficient in each of the three skill areas. That benchmark was met by the class as a whole in the argument construction area (85%), but only by two of the three students considered individually (83% in the case of one student and 100% in the case of the other). Collectively, the class fell below the benchmark in the understanding area (78%) and also in the evaluation area (65%). But one student scored above 80% in one of these areas (92% in understanding). The pedagogical take-away is that, in addition to providing the rubric to the students in advance, we need to work harder and smarter on preparing our students to evaluate arguments well. Appendix C also contains the results of our 2012 Skills PLO assessment (which was also administered to a Philosophy Senior Seminar class—with four students).
Closing the Loop Activities	In the future, we plan to (1) give our majors a copy of the Skills PLO rubric early in their course of study and (2) develop more argument evaluation exercises for our upper-division courses.
Collaboration and Communication	
Vander Laan and Taylor discussed these results (and their comparison to the spring 2012 Skills PLO assessment results) in our first department meeting of this semester (Wednesday, September 11 th). We will continue our conversation about them with Nelson when he returns from his sabbatical next semester. In the meantime, we will be talking about our closing the loop activities (see above).	

or/and

II B. Key Questions

Key Question	“What kind of theoretical and practical capstone experience/course should we require of our graduating senior majors?”
Who is in Charge/Involved?	All three of the full-time philosophy faculty are participating in this process (though Taylor as chair is the main point person).
<u>Direct Assessment Methods</u>	None
<u>Indirect Assessment Methods</u>	The alumni survey we administered for our most recent six-year report included a question about Philosophy Senior Seminar as the capstone experience in our major. Feedback from our alumni indicated that a capstone experience that blends the theoretical and practical may be better than one that emphasizes only one of these categories.
Major Findings	In our philosophy department meeting discussions of this key question last spring semester, we did a lot of brainstorming. The ideas we came up with included the following: (1) a focus on alternative vocations suitable for philosophy majors; (2) an investigation into a number of ways in which philosophical learning can be applied in different contexts in life; (3) an emphasis on philosophy as the pursuit of (practical) wisdom; (4) a study of ways in

	which philosophy can contribute to living well; (5) an internship-based seminar; (6) an independent project such as a senior honors project (in which the student chooses a topic with a practical or applied component).
Recommendations	We are not yet ready to settle on a particular recommendation. Instead, we want to continue to do research on high-impact learning experiences of the sort that combine theoretical and practical components and that would be suitable for a philosophy major capstone experience. Tatiana has provided us with a number of resources to assist us in this ongoing investigation. We want to see what the evidence indicates about the best learning experiences.
Collaboration and Communication	
We had a number of discussions about this key question in department meetings last spring. Vander Laan and Taylor will continue this conversation this semester, and we will look forward to bringing Nelson back into the discussion in the spring. We will aim to decide by the end of this academic year, so that we will know what kind of capstone experience we will offer our majors in the spring of 2021.	

III. Appendices

- A. Essay prompts used to collect the data
- B. Skills PLO Rubric used to evaluate the data
- C. Comparison of spring 2019 results with spring 2012 results

Appendix A
Philosophy Senior Seminar Essay Prompts
Jim Taylor
Spring Semester 2019

Essay #1: Swinburne & Philosophy of Religion

You have been hired by Richard Swinburne to be his personal philosophical assistant. A critic of his has just published a criticism of one of the arguments he makes in *Is There a God?* (in which he lays out his overall argument for the claim that theism is probable). Swinburne has asked you to write a 1250-word essay in which you (1) state and explain the argument the critic has criticized, (2) state and explain the critic's objection to that argument, and (3) defend the argument (from a Swinburne-ian Christian standpoint) from the critic's objection.

In writing this essay, keep in mind that you are writing for an academic/professional philosophical audience consisting in philosophy professors and students. Accordingly, as you write it, engage with the concepts and language valued in the discipline of philosophy.

Essay #2: Evans & Christian Apologetics

The pastor of your church, knowing that you majored in philosophy in college, has asked you to write a 1250-word letter to members of your church who are troubled by the New Atheists' claim that Christian faith is irrational. Fortunately, you still have a copy of Evans' *Why Christian Faith Still Makes Sense: A Response to Contemporary Challenges*. Your pastor agrees that your letter should contain a general summary of the argument of this book, a summary which should cover what the New Atheists are saying, the role of natural theology, the nature and value of natural signs for God, and criteria for recognizing God's self-revelation (in other words, all the major themes of the book!).

In writing your letter, keep in mind that it should be clear, organized, and focused and that your explanations should be accessible to a wide audience and your arguments both cogent and encouraging to troubled Christians—some of whom may feel that they are in danger of losing their faith. Feel free to come up with examples and illustrations that you think would be helpful to this population. And remember that you should engage with concepts and language understandable and valued in the church. Be attentive to an audience with a range of education and experiences.

Essay #3: Moser on Method in Philosophy of Religion

The Society for Philosophy of Religion has recently become divided over the approach taken by the philosopher Paul K. Moser to philosophical questions about God's existence. Non-theistic members of the society argue that belief in God is reasonable only if it is based on adequate philosophical arguments for God's existence (which they think don't exist). Some theistic members of the society agree (but think that there *are* adequate philosophical arguments for God's existence). The other theistic

members of the society don't agree with this evidentialist constraint on reasonable theistic belief. Instead, they agree with Moser that natural theology is both inadequate and unnecessary as a rational support for belief in God. They affirm Moser's view that experiential evidence of God's existence based on direct encounters with God is both necessary and sufficient for reasonable theistic belief.

Since you are an expert on Moser's religious epistemology, the president of the society has asked you to write an essay of at least 1200 words in which you provide a clear, thorough, and yet concise explanation of both (1) Moser's positive religious epistemological theory and his argument for it and (2) Moser's case against natural theology. The president also wants you to include a third section in your essay in which you (3) critically examine both Moser's case for experientialism and against evidentialism. Of course, the president is expecting both cogent arguments and evidence of good independent thinking in this third section.

Essay #4: Taylor on Knowing God Personally

The pastor of your church, knowing that you read my book *Knowing God Through Spiritual Practices: A Pilgrimage for the Soul*, has asked you to write a 1200-word summary of the book for your fellow parishioners. The pastor tells you that some of these congregants are skeptical about knowing God, some are satisfied with their current knowledge of God, and some are neither skeptical nor satisfied, but eager to grow in their knowledge of God. In light of this diversity, your pastor wants you to address the following three questions: (1) What is the nature, value, and possibility of knowing God?; (2) How can knowledge *about* God provide a basis for recognizing signs of God's presence and activity in one's life (and how can one recognize those signs on this basis)?; and (3) How can both individual and communal practices enable Christians to grow in their knowledge of God? In the process of writing your summary, be sure to address Christian understanding, Christian practices, and Christian affections.

In writing your summary, keep in mind that it should be clear, organized, focused, and accessible to a wide audience. Feel free to come up with examples and illustrations that you think would be helpful to this population. And remember that you should engage with concepts and language understandable and valued in the church. Be attentive to an audience with a range of education and experiences.

Philosophy Major Skills Rubric

	Poor	Fair	Good	Excellent
understanding	The student fails to notice or offer pertinent arguments; misidentifies conclusions; confuses premises and conclusions.	The student presents arguments with some errors, or with dubious relevance; vaguely or inaccurately indicates the line of reasoning; fails to note their significance.	The student presents arguments accurately; indicates the line of reasoning; describes what a given conclusion does and does not entail.	The student presents arguments precisely, clearly, and thoroughly; notes their significance; indicates their logical structure and type (e.g., inference to best explanation); identifies implicit premises; indicates what motivates crucial premises.
construction	The student fails to present arguments, or presents arguments that are invalid or weak; have implausible premises; reach irrelevant conclusions; are unoriginal.	The student leaves arguments implicit, or presents arguments that have doubtful validity or strength; have implausible premises; are unoriginal.	The student presents arguments that are valid or strong; have plausible or widely held premises; reach relevant conclusions.	The student creates arguments that are valid or strong; have plausible premises; reach substantive and significant conclusions; advance the discussion.
evaluation	The student objects to conclusions without evaluating arguments for them; fails to consider objections.	The student objects to conclusions without evaluating arguments for them; criticizes	The student identifies and explains invalid and weak inferences, implausible assumptions,	The student clearly identifies and explains invalid and weak inferences, implausible

		arguments imprecisely or superficially; rarely considers objections.	implausible consequences; considers and responds to objections.	assumptions, implausible consequences; considers and effectively responds to objections.
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Appendix C
Philosophy Senior Seminar
Jim Taylor
Spring 2019
Skills Scores on Final Essay Collection

Grading Scale

Excellent = 3
 Good = 2
 Fair = 1
 Poor = 0

Spring 2019 Assessment Results (Taylor)

Student	Arg. Understanding	Arg. Construction	Arg. Evaluation
1	2.125 (Good)	2.5 (Good/Excellent)	2 (Good)
2	2.75 (Excellent)	3 (Excellent)	2.375 (Good)
3	2.125 (Good)	2.125 (Good)	1.5 (Fair/Good)
Avg. score out of 3	2.33 (Good)	2.54(Good/Excellent)	1.96 (Good)

Spring 2012 Assessment Results (Vander Laan)

Student	Arg. Understanding	Arg. Construction	Arg. Evaluation
1	3 (Excellent)	3 (Excellent)	3 (Excellent)
2	3 (Excellent)	3 (Excellent)	3 (Excellent)
3	2 (Good)	3 (Excellent)	2 (Good)
4	2 (Good)	2 (Good)	1 (Fair)
Avg. score out of 3	2.5 (Good/Excellent)	2.75 (Excellent)	2.25 (Good)

A comparison of the results indicates that the overall scores in each category have gone down a bit. This difference could be due to the different degrees of ability of the students in the different years or to different grading standards possessed by the instructors—or to a combination of these variables. In both cases, the best scores are in argument construction and the worst are in argument evaluation, meaning that we need to continue to work hard to improve our students argument evaluation skills.