Unit Plan for Assessing and Improving
Student Learning in Degree Programs

Unit: Department of Philosophy Date: May 8, 2008
Unit Head approval: Robert Cummins, Chair

This document contains two parts:
Part I: The undergraduate program
Part II: The Graduate program

Part I: The Undergraduate Program

Contents:

SECTION 1: PAST ASSESSMENT RESULTS

How the 1998 Assessment Plan was used.

For undergraduates the plan proposed looking at the Senior Survey, asking fro GRE, LSAT and other post-graduate exam scores, comparing the work of Philosophy majors in our large required courses which contain mostly non-majors, and using the Undergraduate Philosophy Club more effectively for finding out undergraduate concerns and desires.

Changes. We changed the course requirement for the undergraduate major, so that students did not end up one hour short of the required hours, which was happening often. Gathering the data from post-graduate exams turned out to be difficult, since the LSATs, for example, are proprietary. A large number of our students apply to law schools, but we have no accurate data of whether they get accepted or where. The feedback from our large courses was mainly anecdotal; we did some comparisons but were frustrated by Banner's inability to tell us who were double-majoring in Philosophy. We had more success working with our Undergraduate Philosophy Club. We also worked at regularly emailing our majors (a timely, accurate list of majors and double-majors is critical) about calls for papers for undergraduates and other events that our majors might find interesting. A number commented that they found this interesting and helpful. Students submitted papers and had papers accepted at conferences, one student won a prize for her submission.

SECTION 2: REVISED ASSESSMENT PLAN

(a) PROCESS: *How the present revision was developed*.

A member of the committees attended several of the campus presentations on the assessment plans. The Undergraduate Program Committee and the Graduate Program Committee looked at publications on the matter, including the American Philosophical Association's publication and recommendations on assessment plans. The Graduate Program Committee was already in the midst of recommending major changes that have been adopted by the Department in the past month.

The Undergraduate Program Committee met at the end of October and was generally agreed on a proposal to revise the course requirements for the Major, but found itself unable to agree what would be the best way to measure outcomes: requiring student portfolios? Course distribution? Or comment reviews? After further discussions within the committee and with the Chair, it was decided to bring to the Department a single recommendation that included both a revised course distribution and a recommendation that the comments that instructors regularly write on philosophy papers be gathered for our majors and reviewed when our majors reach their senior year.

The proposal was brought to the Department in early February. The course distribution changes were well received; the proposal to review paper comments met considerable resistance, with some concerned that comments tend to be critical and would seem harsh, others doubted that the comments by themselves would be adequate. It was also pointed out that courses such as our symbolic logic courses do not require papers. It was suggested that instead we gather the GRE and LSAT scores and identify where, if they do, our undergrads get admitted to graduate school. After considerable back and forth it was finally agreed that the Department would put the proposal to review paper comments to a two year test.

(b) STUDENT OUTCOMES: *The student outcomes that we seek to develop.*

The Department continues to support seeking to produce the following outcomes in our students:

Undergraduate Students

- Ability to comprehend complex material.
- Ability to critically evaluate reasoning and arguments.
- Ability to recognize assumptions underlying claims.
- Ability to note relevant consequences of stated principles or hypotheses.
- Ability to suggest alternative hypotheses to those presented.
- Familiarity with major historical schools of thought in philosophy.
- Familiarity with central epistemological and metaphysical views.

• Familiarity with influential competing ethical theories.

• Familiarity with current developments in professional philosophy.

• Ability to write critically about complex matters.

(c) <u>MEASURES AND METHODS USED TO MEASURE OUTCOMES:</u>

1. Comment Review. Faculty in the Department of Philosophy regularly write comments on students' papers. Each faculty member would be requested, for each Philosophy major in his or her class, to make a copy of any set of comments for the student's file. A group of faculty would then review comments from a range of semesters from our seniors' folders, looking for evidence of problems that our students are having or evidence that students have improved in various respects over the semesters.

An advantage of this proposal is that comments such as Philosophy instructors write are assessments of student work that are not commonly done across campus. They do contain information about the quality of our students' work that goes well beyond what is recorded in grades. An attractive feature is that this would merely use information that faculty already produce. The review imagined would be just of the comments, not of the papers commented on.

2. Course Distribution. At present majors must take 32 hours in Philosophy, with a logic course (102, 103 or 202), 203, 206 and 421 designated. They need at least 9 additional advanced hours. In place of requiring 421, we would require them to take 400-level courses in ethics and value theory, and 400-level courses in metaphysics and epistemology (see below for specific courses). Their performance in these classes would assure our students' familiarity with a range of central philosophical issues that we might otherwise not be sure they had covered. We have submitted this proposed revision to the college.

The Committee proposes that our requirements for the major be changed by replacing the requirement of PHIL 421 by:

"At least one of: PHIL 421, PHIL 427, PHIL 429, PHIL 435, PHIL 436, PHIL 441, **AND**

At least one of: PHIL 425, PHIL 426, PHIL 430, PHIL 437, PHIL 438, PHIL 443"

We would then also change the present statement:
"At least 18 additional hours of course work in philosophy, with 15 of those hours being above the 100-level (including at least three 300- or 400-level courses)."
to:
"At least 15 additional hours of course work in philosophy, with 12 of those hours being above the 100-level (including at least two 300- or 400-level courses)."

This would leave the total number of hours (32) and the number of advanced hours (12) that are required the same as now.

3. Exit Survey. We are looking into the possibility of using the existing senior survey, and/or of developing our own exit survey for Philosophy majors, a one page questionnaire to be completed by. These would be distributed to senior majors in classes taken during their final year.

These three options would be further supported by any data that LAS can provide us about our students' results on such standardized tests as the GRE and LSAT.

SECTION 3: PLANS FOR USING RESULTS

(a) PLANS: We need to investigate how much historical information is already available, since the present idea is to review our graduating seniors. For each such student we may look at their work in an introductory course, in our required history of philosophy courses (203 and/or 206) and one or two advanced courses. We expect that the reviewers of the comments will bring a report to the department in the following Fall leading to a discussion of what faculty are seeing as the strengths and weaknesses of our students' work.

A committee will be established by the chair with a charge to develop a short exit survey to be administered to seniors in Philosophy Classes in academic 2008-9.

(b) TIMELINE FOR IMPLEMENTATION: (The recommended changes in the graduate program are in place to begin in the Fall of 2008.) The changes in the courses required of our undergraduate majors have been submitted to the College, but will have to go through the various levels of approval. For the undergraduate comments, we will ask some volunteers this semester to submit any such comments that they have so that we can be aware of any complications before we invite anyone who writes comments on our majors' papers to submit their comments. It was also agreed that this review process would be reviewed after its second year to see whether it provides the hoped for information or not.

Part II: The Graduate Program

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3. *Continuing Aid and Fellowship Reviews*
4. *The Stage II Qualifying Review*
5. *From Stage II to Stage III*
6. *Completion Rates and Time to Degree*
7. *Tracking Professional Destinations*

SECTION 1: INTRODUCTION

The graduate program in philosophy is strongly focused on preparing our students for productive careers in teaching and research at the college/university level. Students who complete the PhD degree normally seek academic employment, though a small number go on to prepare for other professional roles or accept jobs in government or business. The data we need to track primarily concern the effectiveness with which we perform the job or preparing academic philosophers and teachers of philosophy, and may be divided into categories corresponding to the different phases of the graduate program.

SECTION 2: PROFILES OF INCOMING STUDENTS AND ACCEPTANCE RATES

The Philosophy Department normally requires applicants for graduate study to submit GRE scores as well as complete transcripts and letters of recommendation. In addition, a substantive writing sample is required. The latter is frequently a better indicator of performance in the program than any other single factor. Tracking the GRE scores and undergraduate GPA (overall and in philosophy courses) would be relatively easy. Although we have not done this systematically in the past, we do propose to do so in the future. By using a grading scheme for the writing samples submitted by applicants, the Department could also track the quality of these over time. We propose to study the feasibility of this idea. All of these factors help us to monitor the overall quality of our incoming students and, indirectly, the perceived quality of our program.

The perceived quality of the graduate program is also reflected by the acceptance rate statistics. Again, these have not been systematically compiled over time. The Department Department proposes to track the following numbers year to year: the simple percentage of applicants admitted to the PhD and MA programs; the overall acceptance rate among those admitted; the acceptance rates for admitted applicants ranked $\leq$ 10, 15, 20 and 25; the acceptance rates among those offered various forms of financial aid.

SECTION 3: CONTINUING AID AND FELLOWSHIP REVIEWS

The Department has available each year a roughly constant number of fellowships that it can assign internally and a varying number of external awards. Every student in the Department is a potential candidate for the internal fellowships, and each year there is an evaluation of students to determine the allocation of fellowship support. This involves a comparative assessment of *all* continuing graduate students in terms of their performance in courses and their satisfaction of various departmental requirements (at the Stage I and II levels), and on the dissertation (at the Stage III level). There are letters submitted on behalf of each student each year by three faculty members that know the student's work. We have found in recent years that there is a clustering of both the internal and external awards around a few students at the very top of the program, and tracking these awards is a good way of identifying and, to some extent, of comparing these students. But the cumulative evaluations allow us to assess the performance year by year of all graduate students, whether they are awarded fellowships or not. We propose to track the results of the aid evaluation over time at least to the extent of fixing the number and proportion of students continued in aid without encumbrance (and thus determined to be making normal progress). We propose to do this differentially for students in different stages in the program, and also to track the incidence of the major sorts of encumbrance and the success rates in overcoming them.

SECTION 4: THE STAGE II QUALIFYING REVIEW

On or before completion of the first stage of work in the program, the student's qualifications for further study are examined. Recommendations on this matter are made by a qualifying committee appointed each year by the Chair. When a student has completed 32 hours of work, or has been in residence three semesters, whichever comes first, the student's adviser prepares a report for the Department on the student's progress to date. The report summarizes the assessments of all faculty in the department with whom the student has worked, and frames a combined assessment of the student's progress and prospects. On the basis of this report and other available evidence, the Committee makes a recommendation to the Department on the question of whether the student should be continued and advanced in the program. We propose tracking the basic statistics that result from this process each year (in particular, GPAs for various categories of courses, as well as the percentage of students in Stage I who pass the review). These measures could assist the Department in assessing its overall success in shepherding students through the first stage in the program.

SECTION 5: FROM STATE II TO STAGE III

The Department has found that it is the transition from Stage II to Stage III of the PhD program that constitutes the greatest obstacle to normal progress for many students. It has therefore instituted a structure for the preliminary examination that is designed to facilitate a reasonable choice of a thesis area and topic and thorough preparation for research in that area on the part of the student, and an effective assessment of the student's competence to carry out the proposed research on the part of the student's prelim committee. This structure is described in detail under items 1 – 5 in the section of our *Program Regulations* on the Preliminary Examination. The dissertation proposal itself has a three-part structure including a general description of the thesis topic together with an outline of the thesis, a comprehensive literature review, and a substantial essay related to the thesis topic. After the proposal is presented, a two-hour oral examination is scheduled in which the four-member prelim committee asks questions which are not limited to the topic of the thesis description and substantial essay but range broadly over the entire area. The aim of the Committee is to frame a comprehensive assessment of both the quality of the project and whether the student is equipped to carry it out. The

Department proposes to compile the basic data resulting from the preliminary examinations from year to year: rates attaching to the outcomes *pass*, *conditional pass*, and *fail*, as well as rates of successful revision among conditional passes. These statistics should assist us in dealing with the problems affecting the transition from Stage II to Stage III of the program.

SECTION 6: COMPLETION RATES AND TIME TO DEGREE

The Department hopes that the revised Preliminary Examination structure we have adopted will positively affect the problem of ‘stalling’ at or immediately before the thesis stage (Stage III). The Department has also taken other strong measures to address this problem as it arises in Stage III, in particular, it has experimentally instituted a Thesis Seminar, which we believe will provide impetus to students to complete drafts of material for their thesis in a timely manner.

The Department needs to assess the success of these and other possible measures in designed to assist students at the dissertation stage. The primary statistics relevant to this question concern the proportion of students reaching Stage II of the program who complete the degree, and the time in takes them to do that. These numbers are readily available. We propose to compile these data in order to study their variation with a number of factors, including but not limited to the measures mentioned above.

SECTION 7: TRACKING PROFESSIONAL DESTINATIONS

The tripartite gauge of success for students who complete the degree is their getting a job in philosophy, the kind of job they get, and their success in doing it. The Department has tracked this information only informally. There are good reasons, however, for getting a more systematic picture of our students’ professional outcomes. We now face a situation in which increasing numbers of students from first-rate programs are drifting from one temporary position to another over a period of years. Frequently these temporary positions are disadvantageous. We propose to conduct a biannual survey of our recent PhDs to determine the nature of their current position (whether it is a temporary or a regular position and, if it is regular, whether it is tenure-track); the character of the department in which the position is held (the type of department and its ranking, if relevant); and their scholarly activity over that interval. In the first round, we would ask for such professional histories over the past several years. This information will enable us to estimate how long on average it is taking our students to find regular positions, and how this time varies with field and other aspects of their educational profile.