

2018-19 Academic Year  
Outcomes Assessment Report  
Department of Philosophy

This year the department focused assessment efforts on the learning goals for the philosophy major. The first of these is that students are able to synthesize knowledge from two different historical periods of philosophy, and was measured by applying the Historical Synthesis Rubric to a final examination question administered to philosophy majors in the History of Modern Philosophy course. Most of the majors were juniors or seniors.

Historical Synthesis Rubric

Prompt Question:

*Choose one modern philosopher covered in our course whose position on some philosophical question is interestingly similar to, or different from, some ancient or medieval philosopher you have studied in another course. Describe the relevant aspects of both philosophers in order to compare and/or contrast their positions on the philosophical issue. What, if anything, does this comparison/contrast help you understand about the issue itself? NB: please identify the prior course in which you learned about the ancient or medieval philosopher.*

Learning Outcome	Fails to Meet Expectations (1pt)	Meets Expectations (2 pts)	Exceeds Expectations (3 pts)
Explains a theme from Modern Philosophy	Student fails to portray the position of a modern philosopher, or significantly misrepresents the philosopher's position on the chosen topic.	Student's portrayal of the modern philosopher is accurate, demonstrating a level of knowledge commensurate with an upper-level undergraduate	Student's portrayal of the modern philosopher is not only accurate, but suggests an expert level knowledge normally possessed only by graduate students or professors.
Explains a theme from Ancient or Medieval Philosophy	Student fails to portray the position of an ancient/medieval philosopher, or significantly misrepresents the philosopher's position on the chosen topic.	Student's portrayal of the ancient/medieval philosopher is accurate, demonstrating a level of knowledge commensurate with an upper-level undergraduate	Student's portrayal of the ancient/medieval philosopher is not only accurate, but suggests an expert level knowledge normally possessed only by graduate students or professors.
Integrates knowledge from the two historical periods	Student fails to identify a clear topic for comparison/contrast, or misrepresents the relevant similarities and differences between the chosen philosophers.	Student clearly identifies a topic for comparison/contrast, accurately presenting relevant similarities and differences without too much irrelevant	None of the student's points are irrelevant to the comparison, and the discussion suggests a grasp of the philosophical issues

		information being presented. Suggests a grasp of the philosophical issues commensurate to an advanced undergraduate.	commensurate with graduate or professional status.
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Results (each row is a student):

<u>Other Period</u>	<u>Course</u>	Row 1 <u>Knowledge of Modern</u>	Row 2 <u>Knowledge of Other</u>	Row 3 <u>Quality of Synthesis</u>
Ancient	Intro	2	2	1.5
Ancient	Thomistic Epistemology	3	2	2
Medieval	Medieval	2	2	3
Medieval	Thomistic Epistemology	2	2	1
Medieval	Medieval	2	3	3
Medieval	Phil of Religion	2	2	1
Ancient	History of Ancient	2	2	2
Ancient	Intro	1	2	2
Medieval	Medieval	2	2	2
Ancient	Not Identified	2	2	2
Medieval	Medieval	2	2	2
Ancient	Not Identified	2	2	2
Medieval	Aquinas Institute Course	2	2	3
Ancient	Intro	2	2	2
Ancient	History of Ancient	2	2	2
Ancient	Not Identified	2	2	1
Ancient	History of Ancient	2	2	2
Medieval	Medieval	2	2	2
Ancient	History of Ancient	1	2	2
AVERAGES:		1.95	2.05	1.97

Since a student meeting expectations on a row of the rubric receives 2 points, student learning in the major overall for this outcome meets expectation is the average is around 2. These results suggest that the curriculum is achieving the learning goal under study, so no changes to the curriculum are called for at this time.

However, it is worth noting that these results do not include the answers of four students who did not follow the prompt. They either did not answer the question or did not relate material from the modern course to other historical material. One such student noted that he had not taken any other historical courses. A check of transcripts revealed that another was in the same position, but did not say so. Two students had the relevant historical course background, but did not follow the instructions. It is difficult

to say whether these students are simply bad at following instructions, or whether they did not follow because they knew they lacked the requisite synthetic skill. In giving the test, the instructor told students they would basically get full credit for completing an answer to this question, which probably reduced the level of effort that students put forth. In the future the instructor will not do that, but will prompt students in advance that a historical synthesis question will be on the exam.

The Department of Philosophy should probably consider undertaking a “curriculum mapping” exercise, where the courses relevant to the historical synthetic ability are identified (these answers are a good start but there may be other relevant courses) and their syllabi are studied, perhaps with discussion amongst those instructors taking place to determine if they would like to emphasize certain themes more. For example, I note that in these results, really only one student related modern philosophy to an **ethical** issue in another period. The focus of the students was on metaphysics or epistemology. This is not surprising given that those are the foci of the modern course. However, if the department wishes to promote historical synthetic thinking in the area of ethics as well as in metaphysics and epistemology, then some deliberate reform of the curriculum may be in order. Only further study and discussion would reveal whether such change is really needed, or whether ethical synthesis is occurring in other areas of the major curriculum.

The other learning goals for the philosophy major are articulated on the Senior Capstone Rubric:

Learning Outcome	Fails to Meet Expectations (1pt)	Meets Expectations (2pts)	Exceeds Expectations (3pts)
Student correctly employs principles of logical reasoning in philosophical analysis.	Student fails to identify fallacies in the reasoning of others discussed in the paper, or the student’s own argumentation is logically flawed.	When needed, student makes the logical structure of arguments explicit in order to identify fallacies in the reasoning of others or to clarify the student’s own reasoning. Student commits no fallacies.	Student consistently uses logical analysis to render other author’s positions more clear than they did themselves, or demonstrates a grasp of logical principles exceeding those taught in introductory logic courses.
Student analyzes and defends a philosophical position on a philosophical problem.	Student fails to understand key aspects of chosen problem, or fails to articulate a clear position, or fails to consider or respond to relevant criticisms of the position.	Student clearly articulates a philosophical problem, takes a clear position on that problem, and defends own position against relevant and plausible lines of criticism.	Student’s grasp of the problem, novelty of position, or depth of analysis and sophistication of argumentation are commensurate with graduate or professional status.
Student gathers sources relevant to a philosophical problem.	Student fails to include necessary sources for the topic or includes irrelevant sources.	Student includes all and only relevant primary and secondary sources. and accurately interprets those writings. The student’s paper is a good snapshot of the current state of	Student includes groundbreaking research into primary sources or synthesizes information in novel ways that advance the current discussion of the topic.

		discussion.	
Student interprets sources relevant to a philosophical problem.	Student significantly misinterprets sources	Student's interpretation of sources is accurate and plausible on all significant points.	Student offers a compelling interpretation of sources that is novel or groundbreaking in some way.
Student synthesizes sources relevant to a philosophical problem.	Student's synthesis misrepresents the current state of the debate on the topic or fails to adequately connect to the student's defense of own position.	Thesis presents an accurate, unified snapshot of the current state of discussion and the student's own argument clearly draws on or relates to this snapshot.	Thesis portrays the current state of discussion in a way that is not only accurate and unified, but also novel—opening up new possibilities for research or argument. The student's own position draws on this portrayal.

Philosophy graduated 13 majors this year and feedback forms were completed by faculty for 10 of those students. The results are attached if you want to look at the details. What follows here is an analysis of those results with suggestions for future assessment work.

As with the historical learning outcome, an average of around 2 suggests that majors are on average achieving the desired learning outcomes. Here are the average results for the 5 outcomes on the senior inquiry rubric:

Logic:	2
Analyzes and Defends a Position:	2.1
Gathers Sources:	2.1
Interprets Sources:	2
Synthesizes Sources:	2.2

The quantitative part of the survey tool therefore does not suggest a need for program revision. However, note the following two qualitative comments:

weak on citation of sources

student only completed one draft. I identified problems and I think the second draft will be better. I would have liked more drafts

These two comments fit together with themes from an informal assessment discussion that occurred among philosophy faculty who were present for the students' oral presentations of their senior inquiry projects. Faculty noted that because the department's model for this capstone is the independent study, the methods for pedagogy, timelines of due dates, and standards of assessment vary widely from one faculty member to another. Faculty admitted to one another that directing these projects is often a low priority, especially as the end of term becomes hectic. Students who do not take their own initiative can easily fall through the cracks.

In light of this information, the philosophy department should discuss possible ways to modify the

curricular structure of the major capstone. One promising model: create a “capstone seminar” that would be led by a faculty member and would be mandatory for all students doing a senior inquiry. This would meet one a week, or once every other week, and would serve as a workshop and accountability group for the students, to keep them more on track to produce an initial draft of their projects by shortly after midterm. Another suggestion: create a “senior inquiry syllabus template” that sets forth timelines and standards held in common across all the students, even though they have different directors.

It should also be noted that in future iterations of the senior inquiry rubric, the professors will only be offered to choose term and year from a multiple choice menu, since in this case several professors typed the wrong year into the blank.