

Academic Assessment Report
Department of Philosophy, Fulbright College, University of Arkansas
Philosophy BA Degree
September 2023

Procedures: All Philosophy majors are required to take PHIL 4983 (Capstone Course for Philosophy Majors) or write an honors thesis. Majors are assessed on the basis of written work (including a lengthy final paper) and class participation. For purposes of assessment of program goals and outcomes, papers collected by the instructor of PHIL 4983 receive detailed comments and students are numerically rated along the following dimensions and learning outcomes:

- 1) Increased critical thinking, communication and writing skills, including but not limited to:
 - The student writes with clarity and accuracy;
 - The student displays care in understanding positions with accuracy and fairness and in presenting his or her own ideas clearly and in ways that are relevant to his or her main points;
 - The student shows ability and sophistication in the analysis and evaluation of arguments;
 - The student proceeds critically in examining his or her own presuppositions and assumptions.

- 2) Increased knowledge and understanding of content, including but not limited to:
 - The student's written work displays understanding of central concepts and terminology;
 - The student's written work shows a grasp of main trends and theories in the areas under consideration and their application;
 - The student understands historically important positions and figures where relevant;
 - The student's thinking on the issues shows significant coherence, breadth and depth.

The instructor assigns a numerical score of 0-3 to each of these two dimensions, using the following scale:

- 0) Does not meet expectations;
- 1) Minimally meets expectations;
- 2) Meets expectations well, with room for improvement;
- 3) Exceeds expectations.

He or she will summarize these numerical scores and write a brief report on where in general students' written work needs improvement and where it displays positive outcomes. These results will be shared with the faculty.

Quantitative assessment of student work by instructor: Eight graduating majors were assessed on their final term paper (one enrolled student did not hand in a final assignment for medical reasons and received an incomplete). Students received suggested paper topics but were allowed to choose their own as well; all wrote on a suggested topic.

Dimension 1 (communication skills and critical thinking), average rating: 2.25

Dimension 2 (knowledge and understanding of content), average rating: 2.375

Three students wrote genuinely outstanding papers; the rest displayed a good grasp of the material, and with one exception, good writing and thinking skills. That student showed a good grasp of difficult material and performed well on the six short written assignments prior to the final paper.

Summary of results and suggestions for improvement from the instructor: “This was the third time I taught the Capstone. This was clearly the strongest group of students. Judging from their performance, we should be quite pleased with our majors. Of the three outstanding papers, two were ambitious and quite creative; the third explored an important critical point in depth. Our best students are clearly doing very well.

I found the work of the rest of the group impressive as well. All grappled with fairly advanced and difficult points and for the most part stated their main points clearly and forcefully. I think that all were helped by having written six short papers (“critical comments” summarizing main points in the reading and raising questions that we discussed in class). In particular, this forced them to keep up with the class and readings and helped to formulate ideas for final papers. In line with previous reports on the Capstone, I think this year’s students were better at digesting and summarizing materials than in formulating sharp lines of criticism and/or developing their own thoughts about directions to explore more deeply on a particular topic. I attribute some of this to risk aversion and perhaps a little to “senioritis”.

I did not have students hand in drafts or outlines, and I am sure this would have led to some improvement. Some, but not all, talked to me about their final papers. Nevertheless, the papers were really good – better than the norm for undergraduates in a regular 4000-level class.

I had students write reflections on their “process of learning in college and what [they] have gotten from the Philosophy major” (syllabus). I told them that these could be as personal or impersonal as they wanted, and that they could be of any length. I handed in grades and wrote the above assessment before reading these, but did not anonymize. I thought it would be interesting to see how they responded to the major.

As expected, I received a range of responses, ranging from responses to particular classes to fairly detailed narratives of accomplishments and struggles. All felt that philosophy had helped with critical thinking and communication skills and had encouraged self-examination. Several thought that philosophy classes had deepened their engagement with their other majors (psychology and political science). As for the Capstone, they enjoyed the small size of the class and the opportunity for discussion; I think they liked each other, and this was a good environment in which to take advantage of that.

One student, who on the whole was positive about their experience, felt that they had “faced bias in my classes that often made [them] feel biased in [their] beliefs”. I could not tell anything about where this student was coming from or which classes might be involved, nor could I tell whether the discomfort came from specific events or a general atmosphere. This student mentioned

several classes from which they had particularly benefitted; and practically every reflection had positive things to say about particular classes and teachers.”

This feedback will be reported to all 100% appointed faculty who are teaching 3000 and 4000-level courses during AY 2023-24.