

Academic Assessment Report
Department of Philosophy, Fulbright College, University of Arkansas
Philosophy BA Degree
May 2024

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: Seventeen graduating majors were assessed on the basis of a final term paper, a shorter paper, and several more modest written assignments. Students were free to specify their own paper topics in consultation with the instructor.

Dimension 1 (communication skills and critical thinking), average rating: 2.47

Dimension 2 (knowledge and understanding of content), average rating: 2.53

Several students wrote excellent, sophisticated final papers on quite conceptually demanding subject matter. Students generally displayed a good grasp of the philosophical issues they discussed. The writing was generally of a high standard, although a small minority of students could have significantly clarified the logical structure of their papers by improving their organization of the material discussed.

Summary of results and suggestions for improvement from the instructor:

This was the first time that I [Prof. Ward] taught the capstone. The course covered a broad variety of material including logical positivism, Kantianism about space, non-Euclidean geometries and neo-Kantianism, cognitive closure, Gould's Non-Overlapping Magisteria thesis regarding science and religion, some metaethics, the ethics of belief, and the social structures of science and pseudoscience. While most of the readings were drawn from twentieth and twenty first century authors, there were also readings from Hume, Kant, William James, and W.K. Clifford.

Overall, the level of the students was very good. I found the standard of in-class engagement with some of the more challenging material very impressive, and there was a good level of critical discussion throughout the semester. In addition to some minor writing assignments, each student wrote one short paper and one long final paper for the course (on different topics). The best students (about 1/3 of the class) did very well on both papers, writing clear, well-organized papers that demonstrated a robust understanding of the subject matter, and crucially provided some reasonably novel critical insights. Students who did less well, typically manifested good levels of understanding, but brought less insight and novelty to their papers.

One area where I think there was scope for considerable improvement for some students, was in their understanding of the rules of dialectical engagement as they apply to paper writing. When writing a paper on an author's position, the writer has a *prima facie* duty to address the argument (or arguments) offered by the author for that position. However, I found several students who, on the first paper, while purporting to address a given author, instead merely offered their own entirely distinct argument that the author's position was false, neglecting the author's argument and hence, not properly addressing their position.

One other dialectical consideration that was sometimes salient was a failure to track the burden of proof in a given discussion. So, I would find some students attempting to refute an author's far from uncontroversial premise—a task which is often overly ambitious—when they might legitimately have just pointed out that the author had provided little or no evidence for the premise. While these are considerations we often take for granted as philosophers, and I found that students were generally quite good at tracking them in classroom discussion, some seemed to lose perspective when writing their papers.

Finally, as mentioned above, some students might have paid more attention to the organization of their paper, both in the sequencing of material so that the paper had a coherent logical structure,

and in signposting what they are doing. However, these were problems for a small minority of the students. The standard was generally high.

This feedback will be reported to all 100% appointed faculty who are teaching 3000 and 4000-level courses during AY 2024-25.