

**Academic Assessment Report**  
**Department of Philosophy, Fulbright College, University of Arkansas**  
**Core Courses**  
**May, 2016**

**Results of analysis of assessment of Student Learning Outcomes – Core Courses**

**Core Program Goals**

Students in Philosophy core courses will:

- Improve critical reading, writing, thinking, and argumentative skills of the kind useful in philosophy and all subjects;
- Develop a basic understanding of the discipline of philosophy through studying a diversity of major issues and of major historical figures.

**Student Learning Outcomes**

Students in Philosophy core courses will:

- Gain practice in evaluating arguments;
- Gain skill in reading difficult and diverse philosophical texts;
- Develop skills in writing with clarity, depth and coherence;
- Gain understanding of specific issues and figures in philosophy;
- Gain practice in evaluating their own ideas and presuppositions, as well as other, possibly divergent, values and points of view.

**Means of assessment and desired level of student achievement for core courses:**

Students are regularly assessed on the basis of written work in the form of papers and essay exams.

For purposes of assessment of program goals and outcomes, papers will be collected from a selection of core courses (PHIL2003, Introduction to Philosophy, and PHIL2103, Introduction to Ethics). This procedure will be implemented more comprehensively during AY2016-2017.

In addition, for the large lecture course PHIL2003C, students will take a pre- and post-test on the basis of which their performance will be evaluated.

Each instructor will summarize these numerical scores and write a brief report on where students' work shows need for improvement and where it displays positive outcomes. These results will be reported to the departmental Assessment Committee.

**I. Assessment by instructors of student work:**

Instructors in selected courses evaluated grade papers and exams on the two dimensions of:

- 1) Critical thinking, communication and writing skills, including but not limited to:
  - The student writes with clarity and accuracy;
  - The student displays care in understanding a diversity of positions and values 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 the ability to analyze and evaluate arguments;

- The student proceeds critically in examining his or her own presuppositions and assumptions.
- 2) 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 basic ideas in the areas of philosophy under consideration and their application;
  - The student begins to explore historically important positions and figures where relevant;
  - The student's thinking on the issues shows gains in coherence, breadth and depth.

Student work was evaluated by giving 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.

**Results of Instructor Assessment:**

Students in PHIL2003C (Fall 2015), the large lecture course, scored 2.20/10 on a pretest, and 5.25/10 on a post-test.

Students in PHIL2003C (Spring 2016) scored 2.40/10 on a pretest and 4.50/10 on a post-test.

In addition, several written reports were received from sections of PHIL2003 (Introduction to Philosophy)

**Average score on dimension 1** (critical thinking and communication skills): 2.0

**Average score on dimension 2** (content): 2.2

**II. Summary Results and Suggestions for Improvement from Assessment Committee:**

The departmental Assessment Committee had the following observations about student performance in introductory (core) courses:

- Students displayed a good overall grasp of arguments and theories.
- Instructors found a marked improvement over the course of the term in understanding and explaining philosophical ideas – in particular, in reading comprehension.
- Students need more guidance in focusing on particular arguments and critical points.

Also in consultation with instructors, the departmental Assessment committee developed the following suggestions for improvement in core and introductory courses. These will be conveyed to all instructors of the relevant courses in AY2016-2017:

- Students might benefit from “practice assignments” prior to the first graded written assignments; early graded assignments should be returned in a timely fashion.
- In addition, student satisfaction and performance in these classes are enhanced by optional review sessions.
- To improve argumentative and critical skills, it may be useful in giving and explaining assignments to break down written tasks into a series of clearly demarcated steps.

## **Results of analysis of assessment of Student Learning Outcomes – Philosophy Majors**

Students in PHIL3983, the Capstone Course for Philosophy Majors, were assessed on the basis of written work, including a lengthy final position paper; and participation in class.

### **I. Assessment by instructor of student work:**

Assessment included detailed comments from the instructor and numerical ratings on 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.

Student work was evaluated along these dimensions on the following scale:

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

**Average score on dimension 1** (critical thinking and communication skills): 2.1

**Average score on dimension 2** (content): 2.3

### **II. Summary Results and Suggestions for Improvement from Assessment Committee:**

The departmental Assessment Committee, in consultation with the instructor of the Capstone Course, had the following observations:

1. With a high degree of uniformity, students did exceptionally well at assimilating and summarizing the content of the issues and positions dealt with in the course. The course was taught at a high level and on comprehension, students performed impressively.
2. While students varied significantly in their ability to express and argue for their own conclusions, for the most part their performance met expectations.
3. All students needed work in anticipating and responding to potential objections to and

problems with their stated views.

4. Therefore, students would have been well-advised to focus their arguments more precisely and to develop the specific implications of their views more carefully.

Also in consultation with the instructor, the departmental Assessment Committee developed the following suggestions for improvement in this and similar level courses:

1. Students should be given instruction in focusing their position papers more specifically.

2. All instructors in courses aimed at majors should continue to emphasize the abilities to anticipate and respond to objections and fairly to characterize those views which the student is responding to, contesting or opposing.

This feedback will be reported to all faculty who are teaching 3000 and 4000 level courses in Fall 2016 and Spring 2017.

### **Changes to degree planned or made on the basis of the assessment and analysis**

The department has added the Capstone Course to the courses that satisfy its writing requirement.