

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

Procedures: Master's students are regularly assessed on the basis of coursework (short papers, term papers, and essay exams). This coursework assures adequate coverage of historical figures and contemporary issues. In addition, and crucial to the program's goals, each Master's student writes a thesis which is read and orally examined by a committee of at least three faculty.

For purposes of assessment and program goals and outcomes, the main thesis advisor, on the basis of the student's thesis and oral examination and in consultation with the thesis committee, evaluates the Master's thesis on the two dimensions of:

- 1) Significant critical thinking, communication and writing skills, including but not limited to:
  - a) The student writes with clarity and accuracy;
  - b) The student displays care and insight 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;
  - c) The student shows sophistication and insight in the analysis and evaluation of arguments;
  - d) The student proceeds critically in examining his or her own presuppositions and assumptions.
  
- 2) Knowledge and understanding of content, including but not limited to:
  - a) The student's work displays a deep grasp of central concepts and terminology and their importance;
  - b) The student's work shows a mastery of main trends and theories in the areas under consideration;
  - c) The student understands and can effectively explicate historically important positions and figures where relevant;
  - d) The student's thinking on the issues shows significant coherence, breadth and depth.
  - e) The student's thinking is making a solid contribution to the current state of knowledge on the issues under discussion.

The advisor 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.

To explain these numerical evaluations, the advisor provides a brief summary of where the student's thesis needs improvement and where it displays positive outcomes. These results will be shared with the faculty.

Quantitative assessment of student work by MA advisors: We had three successful MA thesis defenses since the previous assessment report.

Dimension 1 (communication skills and critical thinking), average rating: 2.33  
Dimension 2 (knowledge and understanding of content), average rating: 2.33

Summary of results and suggestions for improvement from the MA advisors:

The MA theses were, by and large, well-written and displayed mastery of the relevant academic literatures. They put our students in a position to be competitive for admission and funding at good PhD programs.

Feedback on thesis #1: Their writing is lucid and careful. The student demonstrated a clear mastery of the most important concepts, especially those necessary to articulate their positions. They are able to make nuanced distinctions that both carve out a unique position for themselves and advance the current state of the debate. The writing certainly displays depth. They know the historical predecessors of their positions well. What is particularly noteworthy about their thesis but is not included in the criteria is that their writing is professional: it contains a significant number of scholarly footnotes, the writing is virtually free of careless superficial errors, and its physical presentation is painstakingly neat. However, the student could have taken greater care in identifying alternative positions and presenting reasons to favor their view over any rivals.

Feedback on thesis #2: The thesis was entirely up to date regarding relevant literature. The student was also well versed in relevant historical discussion of related issues. The thesis would have been improved if they had made more searching critiques of some of the views discussed. However, the most significant component of the thesis displayed good insight in critically undermining an important recent objection. That piece, with suitable minor modifications, should be publishable.

Feedback on thesis #3: The student had a good handle on the relevant literature. While there was some concern amongst the committee about a particular account they gave of a key concept, for the most part the student demonstrated a fine understanding of the concepts and arguments discussed. The thesis was novel. On the whole, it was judged a success by the committee (which did not insist on any changes before it is submitted to the Graduate School).

Areas for improvement:

\* Students should be encouraged to submit work periodically and in small chunks to get timely feedback and direction before the student is too far along.

\* Students should be encouraged to present portions of their research to the department or at conference in order to gauge their progress and to get better at explaining their projects. To some extent, this is already done with our students, but it could be improved.

This feedback will be delivered to all who are supervising Master's theses.