

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

Procedures: Doctoral students are regularly assessed on the basis of coursework (short papers, term papers, and essay exams). This coursework assures comprehensive coverage of historical figures and contemporary issues. In addition, as crucial to the program's goals, each doctoral student:

1. Prepares a reading list for his or her area of specialization and takes a comprehensive written examination on the material covered by the reading list;
2. Writes a prospectus detailing his or her dissertation project, complete with comprehensive bibliography, and is examined on this to determine the project's viability;
3. Writes a dissertation and defends it in an oral examination. The dissertation is read and examined by a committee of at least three faculty.

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

1) Significant critical thinking, communication and writing skills, including but not limited to:

- \* The student writes with professional levels of clarity, accuracy and rigor;
- \* The student displays care and insight in understanding positions with accuracy, and fairness in presenting his or her own ideas clearly and in ways that are relevant to his or her main points;
- \* The student shows significant sophistication and insight in the analysis and evaluation of 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 work displays a deep grasp of central concepts and terminology and their importance;
- \* The student's work shows expertise in main trends and theories in the areas under consideration;
- \* The student demonstrates expertise with regard to historically important positions and figures where relevant;
- \* The student's thinking on the issues shows genuine coherence, breadth and depth.
- \* The student's thinking is making an original 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 dissertation needs improvement and where it displays positive outcomes. These results will be shared with the faculty.

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

Dimension 1 (communication skills and critical thinking), average rating: 3  
Dimension 2 (knowledge and understanding of content), average rating: 3

The PhD dissertations from this past academic year were of an unusually high caliber. All three PhD students also secured full-time academic employment.

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

The PhD dissertations were extremely well-written and researched to a very high professional standard. Versions of some chapters from these dissertations have already been published in highly regarded philosophy journals.

Feedback on dissertation #1: The dissertation was masterful throughout. They worked tirelessly (and quickly) from prospectus through the oral examination. The topic is important and was dealt with philosophically and with careful attention to the literature. Everyone on the committee was impressed with the defense. There was little previous philosophical analysis in this area, but the student was familiar with the psychological literature as well as what philosophical literature there is. The dissertation also brought in major historical figures, although the student treated them in this context more as sources of insights and as jumping off points. This was not a thesis on historical exegesis.

Feedback on dissertation #2: The dissertation contains in excess of 500 footnotes, many of which go far beyond citing the works discussed, and include substantive content themselves. The bibliography consists of around 150 books, articles, and encyclopedia entries. What is striking about this dissertation in particular is that writing it required both a knowledge of the relevant literature in philosophy, but also the relevant knowledge in theology. The thesis defended is an impressive synthesis of, and advance on, the views defended by philosophers and theologians.

Feedback on thesis #3: This dissertation makes a very significant contribution to the current literature in this area of philosophy of religion. In fact, versions of multiple chapters have already been published as original research articles, some of which have received responses of their own. In the oral defense, the student displayed a mastery of the literature and conceptual space that one would expect to see from a tenure-track faculty member at a R1 institution. This was one of the more impressive dissertations and defenses from recent years.

Areas for improvement:

- \* Having the secondary committee members provide more feedback to the student prior to the defense stage
- \* Making sure that all students keep to the desired timeline
- \* Encouraging PhD students to publish portions of their dissertation or otherwise present their material as appropriate

This feedback will be delivered to all who are supervising doctoral dissertations.