

**By Carlo Filice (Coordinator)—Department of Philosophy, SUNY Geneseo;
Beth Dixon—Department of Philosophy, SUNY Plattsburgh;
Robert Hinckley—Department of Political Science, SUNY Potsdam**

Introduction

We visited the Potsdam Philosophy Department on April 5-7, 2017. We are delighted to have this opportunity to report our impressions of this small but excellent Philosophy Department. Our report is based upon (a) multiple meetings with two Department faculty members: David Curry and Timothy Murphy; (b) a meeting with each of the other Department members, both full and part-time; (c) a meeting with 9 of the majors; (d) an observation of the weekly Philosophy Forums; (e) a meeting with 10 of the college “stakeholders” from Departments and programs outside Philosophy; (f) a meeting with Sandra LaRock, Departmental Secretary; (g) two meetings with Philip Neisser, Associate Dean of Arts and Sciences. We also reviewed the Department Self-Study Report, the faculty CV’s, syllabi, and additional material which had been supplied beforehand.

We want to emphasize at the outset that we were impressed with the quality of the curriculum, the faculty, and the students; our overall assessment is very positive. This is the frame within which what follows ought to be interpreted, notwithstanding some suggestions that might strengthen the program.

I. Philosophy Curriculum

The Philosophy department offers a solid curriculum supported by dedicated and outstanding teaching that lays a strong foundation for its majors and minors in many areas of Western philosophy, with occasional forays into other traditions. The Department’s sustained dedication to offering a variety of courses is reflected in their list of courses regularly offered. Despite the staffing constraints, many additional courses are offered as Independent Studies courses upon student demand. The faculty is very generous and flexible in this respect. The department also contributes to the General Education curriculum (e.g., through various 100 level intro courses).

Naturally, this means that difficult choices have to be made. Thus some areas of Philosophy receive less attention than they might deserve (for example, Eastern/Asian Philosophy, Feminist Philosophy, Political Philosophy). Nonetheless, the Department should be given credit both for covering the most important areas of Western Philosophy, and for their willingness to teach individual courses outside their already heavy 4/4 teaching load.

We do note that a course in Feminist Philosophy used to be taught, but with the retirement of Prof. Little (non-replaced) this could no longer be offered. This is unfortunate. We urge the college to hire a teacher with possible specialty in Ethics and in Feminist Thought who could teach such a course on a regular basis.

Given the budgetary problems the college has, if funding for additional Philosophy positions cannot be done, we recommend creative ways of filling multi-departmental teaching gaps. One of these would be to hire faculty as joint appointments with other departments. For example, some possible joint positions include: Philosophy-Political Science (a Political Theory person); Philosophy and Gender and Women's Studies (an Ethics and Feminist Theory person); Philosophy and History (an Asian Philosophy person). We note that spokespersons from other Departments of the college expressed support for such joint-appointments.

The department uses three different forms of assessment to evaluate their curriculum: exit exam, portfolio evaluation, and an exit survey. The data from these assessment tools indicate that a majority of students are exceeding the department's expectations, and are highly satisfied with their level of preparation provided by the philosophy curriculum. What dissatisfactions do emerge from the exit interview are related to a desire to take more kinds of courses outside of analytic philosophy. The department should be commended for attending to a thorough assessment of their program, although we would like to see more evidence that they are using the data obtained to make changes where it is indicated. The Coordinator of Academic Assessment and Institutional Research might be invited to have a conversation with the department to comment on and supply feedback about their assessment efforts and results.

II. General Education

The Department of Philosophy is central to Potsdam's general education program. The department offers a significant number of "FC" courses, and the vast majority of "PI" courses, available to students. One consequence of this arrangement is that roughly three-quarters of their courses are regularly lower division offerings, and that (according to the self-study) 85% of all courses are designed to meet the needs of a college-wide audience. This contributes to their high profile role as a campus service department.

Given that many campus stakeholders would like the philosophy department to continue playing a pivotal role in the general education program, we are concerned about current levels of staffing. Should a faculty line come open in the next year or two, and if they are unable to hire a replacement, the department would be unable to serve general education at the current level. Moreover, should understaffing limit their ability to adapt current offerings to a new set of general education requirements, this would diminish their ability to attract new majors and thereby damage the department's long run sustainability. As well, understaffing has the potential to diminish the contribution that the department makes to the education of non-majors.

III. Faculty, and faculty-related issues

During our interaction with members of the faculty, we were impressed by the level of dedication and spirit of caring for students and for the discipline. All of them, full and part-timers, are more than competent. We were especially impressed with Professors Curry, Murphy, and LaVine, who are clearly superb and passionate teachers, but who also

provide immense service to their students and to the college at large. They actively participate in various college-wide committees. They dedicate their own time to the weekly Philosophy Forum (they even travel with some of their majors to SUNY Oneonta to support their students' presentations there). Their level of dedication to the students, the discipline, and to the college, is exceptional.

a. Workload

It should not need repeating that the philosophy department has a large teaching load, requiring three or four separate preparations in one semester. Despite this, the morale of the faculty is upbeat, and they seem genuinely happy to teach at Potsdam. They have created an environment for their majors, and for each other, that is nurturing, mutually supportive, and intellectually dynamic. Their teacher-student interactions during the Philosophy Forum we witnessed (and as reported by the students themselves to us) was a joy to behold! This culture is an unusual and commendable accomplishment, and every effort should be made to compensate the faculty for their contributions to student excellence in their own department and also across the college.

One way in which excessive workload can be addressed is by classifying many of the internships, independent studies, and extra-curricular activities that faculty sponsor and supervise under "Applied Learning." In this way, individual faculty might be allowed to teach one less course in the curriculum (maybe one less general education course) in exchange for undertaking responsibility for applied learning activities for which students would register each semester. With this suggestion we would warn that introducing an Applied Learning category in the philosophy curriculum should not be the occasion to create even more work for faculty, but as a way of compensating them for activities that they are already doing.

Another institutional mechanism for addressing the amount of work undertaken by members of the philosophy department is to offer a course release in exchange for their continued efforts to maintain the Philosophy Forum every week. We have learned that this forum is not merely attended by a few philosophy students. It has a high profile across campus, attracting many students and faculty outside of the department, in some instances as many as 40! Faculty and administrative stakeholders claimed that other departments used this already established event instead of starting something similar for their own students. In effect, the entire college is benefitting from this effort on the part of a few faculty. It is obvious from our conversations both with faculty and students during our visit that this is a true institutional gem, and one that is worth bragging about. The forum makes SUNY Potsdam distinctive among other SUNY schools. For this reason the administration should make every effort to ensure that the Philosophy Forum continues by properly recognizing and supporting the faculty who devote a significant amount of their time to making it happen on a regular basis.

b. Future of the Department

Aside from the high workload that current faculty face now, there is an urgency to plan

for the future of the department looking ahead 5-10 years. The department is anticipating at least one, and maybe two, retirements in the near future. This is an excellent opportunity to meet diversity goals in hiring as articulated by the faculty themselves. The administration should make every effort to honor this goal of the department and facilitate hiring women and/or underrepresented minority faculty in full-time, tenure track positions. While students themselves assured us that the department is inclusive and welcoming to women, they also articulated a desire to see women as role models and as teachers of philosophy.

c. Promotion and Review

The department has clearly articulated the criteria for promotion and review in their departmental bylaws. These criteria emphasize the importance of teaching and service, primarily. There is less expectation to do scholarship. The main concern we note is that because faculty teaching workload and extra service commitments are so time-consuming, there is little opportunity for faculty to do research. Even if current faculty are satisfied with this arrangement, it is not sustainable. At some point the department will want to hire new faculty who will be eager to contribute to a department that prides itself on excellent teaching and serving students. But ideally the new hire will also come with an eagerness to continue an active research program, and this should be encouraged. For now we advise the department to think imaginatively about how to build a culture of scholarship into the department while not penalizing those who are currently prioritizing their teaching and service.

To this end the college as a whole should think about increasing its travel funding possibilities. Faculty travel for scholarly reasons seems to require considerable out-of-pocket expenditures. In addition, we recommend some form of a course release for younger faculty who are on tenure-track, to allow some additional time for research.

IV. Students

Our impression of the students, based on the Philosophy Forum and on our discussion with many of them the following day, is that they are bright, articulate, and happy with the faculty, the departmental climate, and with the curriculum. All of them participated in our discussion, and all of them displayed philosophical sophistication – particularly the ones we observed as presenters at the Forum.

While the department is especially skilled at bringing along the “high achievers,” they are interested and concerned about how best to serve those underprepared students who populate their lower division general education courses. The faculty go out of their way in this setting also, tailoring their expectations about reading and writing assignments in order to introduce these students to a culture of academic excellence and professionalism. One concern voiced by some members of the department seems to be a lack of clarity about the college’s tutoring services; who qualifies financially for what kind of tutoring. Without this kind of information readily available to faculty, students cannot be guided to get the help they need to succeed in their particular classes.

V. Administration

Our conversations with the Associate Dean were brief and clear. The Department seems to have a good working relationship with the administration. The administration seems to understand the importance of a strong philosophy department for the mission of the College. It is also aware of the staffing issues, and of the need to come to some agreement on how to plan for any future retirements.

VI. Facilities, equipment, and technology

The philosophy department is fairly cost effective relative to other departments. But in our conversations with faculty and administrators, a number of concerns emerged that directly impact the teaching and learning environment. Some faculty in the philosophy department are frustrated about the few number of smart classrooms available to teach in, as well as about the unreliable technology of those classrooms to which they have access. Apparently, there is a slow response time by CTS when problems do arise. We have learned that this is a system-wide problem that the college is now trying to address by adding academic support staff for technology in the classroom.

Nonetheless, the everyday needs of the department are not being met. For example, the department is still making do with a copier that regularly fails to work even though they have requested a new one. The printing costs charged to the department are unusually high, making it cheaper to actually print documents at an off-campus site. We are told as well that the commons room needs a new 12-foot table since the Philosophy Forum is held in this room and is regularly attended by large groups of students and faculty from across campus; not just by the philosophy department. In addition, a crucial improvement to the physical space of the department is to use an underutilized room adjacent to the department office (217b) as an office for one of three adjunct or temporary staff who are now all sharing one small office.

VI. Library Resources

Based on a cursory review, it is our impression that library materials and research tools are adequate for the needs of student and faculty research. The availability of online resources and of the inter-library loan system seems to be sufficient for the research purposes of faculty and students in the department. The library also subscribes to JSTOR and Philosopher's Index.

VII. Recommendations

We recommend that the Administration:

- Encourage the Coordinator of Academic Assessment and Institutional Research to supply feedback to the philosophy departments about assessment results;

- Facilitate the department's diversity goals by hiring an additional philosophy faculty member from an underrepresented category;
- Address workload issues in the department by offering a course release to organize and implement the Philosophy Forum on a regular basis;
- Address workload issues by filling the now existing tenure-track line with a joint appointment together with Political Science, Gender and Women's Studies, or History;
- Make available to faculty explicit guidelines about student support service qualifications for tutoring underprepared students;
- Enhance the teaching and learning physical space of the department by purchasing a 12-foot table for the lounge;
- Consider expanding the office space available to Adjunct and Part-time faculty into the underutilized office (217b);
- Enhance the daily operations of the department by purchasing a new copier, and by increasing funds for printing.

We recommend that the Philosophy Department:

- Discuss among the faculty how to create a more explicit culture of scholarship for current faculty and those who will be newly hired;
- Consider introducing an Applied Learning practicum into the curriculum in order to group students' extra-curricular activities together as part of the 4-4 faculty teaching load, rotating among faculty;
- Make more explicit how assessment results impact and shape changes in the major or minor curriculums, philosophical content of courses, or the pedagogy of courses.