

Response to Proposal to Discontinue the Philosophy Major at SUNY Potsdam

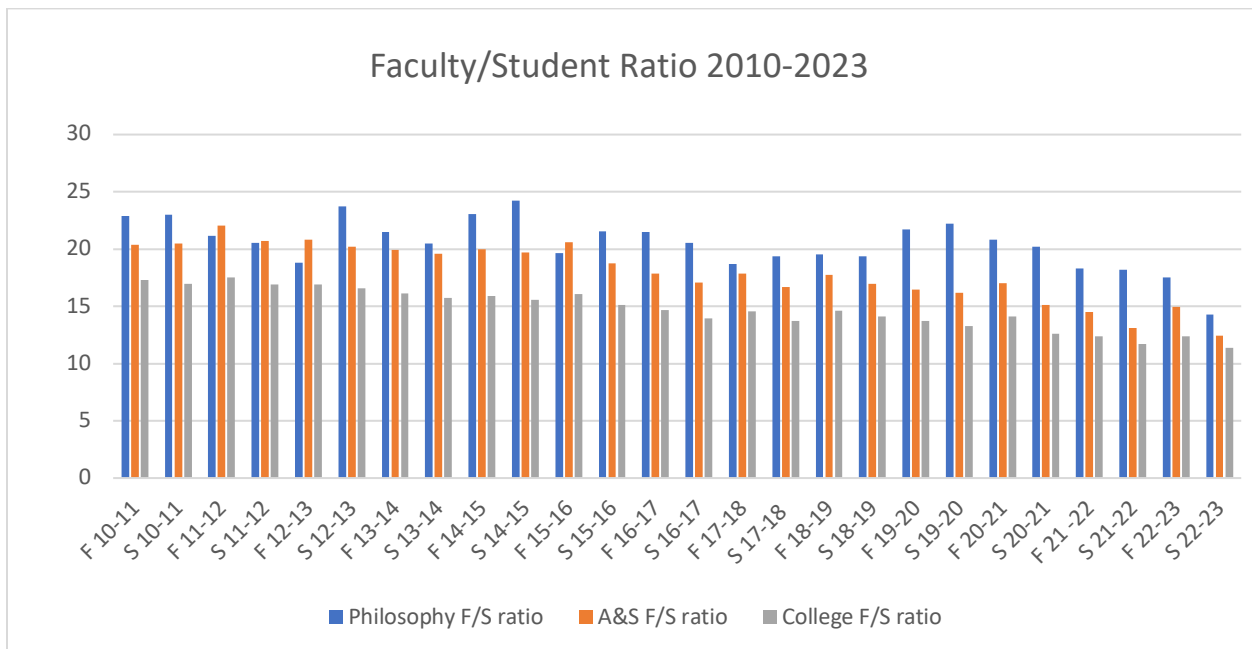
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I. Introduction

In this document I will argue that it would be a mistake for the administration of this college to discontinue the Philosophy major program because to do so would offer no substantial financial benefit to the college and would incur significant costs in terms of the College’s adherence to its mission, competitiveness with other colleges, and service to its student body. Discussions with the Dean and Provost have made clear that the decision to discontinue has not been made on the basis of the academic quality of our programs or teaching, but is, rather, entirely based on the judgement that the financial costs of maintaining the program cannot be justified in a context in which substantial cuts to college spending are essential to the financial viability of the college. For this reason, much of this document will be focused on the financial case for keeping the major, which, in a nutshell, is that all of the courses offered toward the major also serve other campus needs, and given the high fill rates of our courses relative to the rest of the college, offering fewer such courses can only cost money, not save it. In addition to the financial case against discontinuation, we also have serious concerns over the process by which this decision has been made, and this report will describe those concerns as well.

II. Why discontinuation will not save money

The 2022 Realignment Report notes that “the Philosophy student/faculty ratio is consistently among the highest of programs across the College” and “the program is further distinguished by the fact that a majority of its major courses also fulfill crucial functions within the General Education program, thus making the program cost-effective.” The former claim is illustrated in the following chart (see Appendix 1 for more details).



The latter claim is demonstrated by the data below, recording the percentage of recent PHIL sections offered serving General Education and/or other programs.

	Total courses (all 3 credit hour)	Courses fulfilling Gen Ed designator	Courses contributing credit in other programs
Spring 2020	12	12	7
Fall 2020	9	9	6
Spring 2021	13	12	7
Fall 2021	5	5	2
Spring 2022	7	7	4
Fall 2022	6	6	4
Spring 2023	7	7	2
Fall 2023	6	6	3

It is worth noting that few numbers more starkly represent the financial contribution of a program than faculty/student ratio, which is in a very real sense the most direct measure of the financial productivity of teaching faculty we have available. For this reason, our department’s ongoing excellence on this measure is the core of our case against discontinuation. However, both the Realignment report and the Provost’s explanation of the current discontinuation decision suggest that high faculty student ratio alone is insufficient to justify the continued existence of the major. Their reasoning, as I understand it, is that eliminating the major will result in fewer low-enrolling major-focused courses, raising the faculty student ratio of the affected faculty even higher.

If the philosophy department offered a significant number of major-only courses, eliminating the major might offer the possibility of such savings. However, the department has not offered major-restricted courses in recent memory, and in the last few years has substantially decreased the number of courses aimed primarily at majors.¹ As can be seen from the chart above, all of our regularly offered courses meet General Education designators, and we regularly offer courses that contribute credit to other programs. In recent years we have adjusted our teaching schedules and developed new courses in order to make all of our offerings attractive to students both inside and outside the department. The result is that a SUNY Potsdam student can complete the major without needing to take a single course that doesn’t also serve other constituencies and fulfill non-philosophy graduation requirements. For illustration, consider the following description of a typical philosophy major’s completed degree program.

	Major Requirement	Pathways designator	Fulfills program requirement for	Appeal to non-majors
PHIL 105: Human Nature	elective	TF	Disability Studies	attractive to students in first year seeking to meet Pathways requirements

¹ This trend preceded last year’s realignment discussions, and the Dean’s recommendations for removal of provisional status accelerated that trend by introducing “stacked” classes (see Section III-A below for more).

PHIL 110: Logic and Critical Thinking	logic requirement	TF		attractive to students in first year seeking to meet Pathways requirements
PHIL 120: Ethical Reasoning	ethics requirement	TF	Criminal Justice, Social Justice	attractive to students in first year seeking to meet Pathways requirements
PHIL 359: Philosophy of Religion	upper-level elective	TF		attractive to a wide range of students as evidenced by a long history of high enrollment
PHIL 331: Moral Issues in Mental Health	upper-level elective	TF	Disability Studies	attractive to Psychology and Sociology students
PHIL 333: Philosophy of Justice	upper level elective	TF	Criminal Justice	popular distribution requirement for Criminal Justice
PHIL 322: Ancient Philosophy	history requirement	to be submitted for TF ²	Classical Studies	attractive to History and Literature students
PHIL 323: Modern Philosophy	history requirement	to be submitted for TF		attractive to History and Literature students
PHIL 380: Philosophy of Mind	other fundamental requirement	TF		attractive to Psychology students
PHIL 475: Seminar	required course	CM and CT		as of Fall 2022, only offered as a “stacked” course

This schedule is representative of a typical major, but is by no means the only path to a major, as there are a number of upper-level courses not listed here, including Existentialism and Phenomenology, Philosophy

² Though originally the department’s plan was to submit PHIL 322 and PHIL 323 as TH courses, changes to SUNY-wide general education history requirements will require that they be TF, which is at least as good a fit with the content of the courses.

of Law, and Environmental Ethics, which regularly attract nonmajors and have historically filled to 25+ students.

In summary, the philosophy faculty have, for at least the last thirteen years, filled classes at a substantially higher rate than the rest of the college, have continued to do so in the face of drastic staffing cuts, and are able to maintain these exemplary fill rates and still offer the major, no matter how low the overall number of majors is. Number of majors is simply not a relevant metric of financial value in this case, even on the (unrealistic) assumption that elimination of the major will have no adverse effects on overall college enrollment.

III. Concerns over the discontinuation process

There are at least three seriously concerning aspects of the process that has resulted in the decision to discontinue the philosophy major:

- A This decision directly contradicts the official recommendations, made by Dean Galbraith and approved by Provost Bergeron, as a result of the 2022 realignment process.
- B This process diverges from the Administrator-Initiated Program Deactivation policy in a number of significant ways.
- C This decision has been made without regard to the primary assessment mechanism for major programs, since the Program Review that was to be carried out this year was cancelled at the last minute.

A. Realignment

In the Spring of 2022, after initially presenting a draft realignment plan that assigned my department to provisional status on the basis of total number of majors, OIC Neisser announced that no program would be deactivated solely on the basis of major numbers, and directed departments on provisional status to work with their Deans to formulate realignment plans outlining goals that needed to be met to be removed from provisional status. In cooperation with Dean's office, the Philosophy department assembled a plan of action with clear goals for curricular additions and revisions, as well as recruitment projects. After reviewing the plan we submitted, Dean Galbraith, on June 15, 2022, wrote the following:

It is my formal recommendation that the Philosophy program be removed from provisional status once the curricular work outlined in the alignment plan and a merger has been accomplished.

This recommendation was approved shortly afterward by Provost Bergeron, and the department set to work on the goals described in the plan. As of December 2022, all of the curricular work outlined in the plan was completed, and the department had been working productively with INDS faculty since the summer. Provost Hersker conceded on February 20, 2022 that the department "has, indeed, fulfilled the requirements that were negotiated with Dean Galbraith and approved by Provost Bergeron based on the 2022-2022 academic realignment exercise."

It is important to note here that the completed curricular work directly addressed the concerns discussed in Section I regarding the need for low-enrolled major courses. The department committed to offering Seminar as a stacked course, so that the major no longer requires a low enrolling summative seminar (the seminar has been offered as a stacked option every semester since). Dr. Curry developed a new Animal Minds course, designed from the ground up as an interdisciplinary course serving psychology and biology majors, along with philosophy. Dr. Murphy developed a Philosophy of Justice course to serve as both an upper-level elective for Philosophy majors and an elective for Criminal Justice majors. All of these

changes have allowed the program to substantially decrease the already low number of courses primarily filled by majors or minors.

In the Academic Affairs Realignment Report, the only item listed under the section “Financial Recovery” is “Elimination of low-enrolled courses specific to the program (this reduces the cost of adjuncts for other areas).” The Philosophy Realignment plan endorsed by the Dean and Provost directly addressed this goal, resulting in a major program that, for reasons described in Section I, is financially advantageous to the college regardless of its number of majors.

B Administrator-Initiated Deactivation

The current deactivation process diverges from the stated policy in the following ways:

- 1 No systematic rubric has been applied in making decisions on discontinuation, contrary to the policy’s recommendation that “the “Academic Affairs Program Prioritization Evaluation Criteria” rubric be used in this process, and that the mission of the College and all relevant strategic plans be considered in these deliberations.”
- 2 The degree to which our program contributes to General Education does not seem to have been factored into the decision.
- 3 The degree to which our program contributes to other programs on campus does not seem to have been factored into the decision.
- 3 Peer comparisons do not seem to have been factored into the decision. A philosophy major is offered at the following SUNY schools: Albany, Binghamton, Brockport, Buffalo State, University at Buffalo, Fredonia, Geneseo, New Paltz, Oneonta, Oswego, Stony Brook, Old Westbury (Philosophy and Religion), Purchase (Philosophy and Critical Thought), and Cortland (Social Philosophy). This is clear indication of the fact that the Philosophy major is widely regarded as a standard and expected offering at four-year colleges across SUNY, but no indication of how this figured into the decision to discontinue has been given.
- 4 The contribution of the major to the college mission does not seem to have factored into the decision. The philosophy major has long been recognized as a core component of a liberal arts education, and the discontinuation of the major therefore seems to ignore to the college’s commitment to the liberal arts and sciences as an academic foundation for all students.³
- 5 No reasons have been given for why the administration has initiated the discontinuation, rather than deactivation, of the program.

All of the deviations from the official policy disfavor the Philosophy program, as their cumulative effect is to consign the Philosophy major to permanent extinction on the basis of a single one of the collection of metrics the policy requires the administration to consider.

C Program Review

The last time the Philosophy program underwent external review was 2017. The reviewers’ report was uniformly positive, noting that they “were impressed with the quality of the curriculum, the faculty, and the students,” and that the faculty members’ “level of dedication to the students, the discipline, and to the college, is exceptional.” The report goes on to say that the faculty “have created an environment for their

³ <https://www.potsdam.edu/about/mission>

teacher-student interactions during the Philosophy Forum we witnessed (and as reported by the students themselves to us) was a joy to behold!” The report concludes by recommending increased funding for the department, and in particular for an additional tenure-track line (in order to increase the department to five full-time faculty, from the then-current four).

That this glowing report was the last occasion for formal review of the program, and that the major is slated to be discontinued without any new assessment by expert external reviewers, is deeply concerning, particularly in light of the fact that Middle States assessors specifically cited lack of assessment-based decision making as a problem for this campus. The fact that the campus assessment plan calls for the program to undergo external review this year, and that review was cancelled over the summer, is even more concerning.

It can certainly be argued that too much has changed at SUNY Potsdam in the last few years for a program review from 2017 to have much weight. It may well be that an external review of the department in its current state would concur with the recommendation that the major be discontinued. The only way to know that, however, is for the scheduled review to be conducted. Any decisions about deactivation or discontinuance before that happens are unjustifiable.

IV. Concerns over student recruitment

All of the messaging in defense of these discontinuation decisions has assumed, without evidence or argument, that the negative effects these cuts will have on enrollment will be limited to those prospective students who have already decided to major in one of the discontinued areas. No data have been provided to support this assumption, and it seems implausible on its face. The proposed cuts are overwhelmingly likely to result in significantly diminished enrollment in coming years, for a number of reasons:

- 1 Students who are undecided about their major will prefer colleges that offer them more potential choices.
- 2 Many students who are sure they want to major in something that hasn't been discontinued will view cuts to core liberal arts disciplines as an indication that SUNY Potsdam is deteriorating into a lesser institution that does not offer a full liberal arts education.
- 3 Many students who are sure they want to major in something that hasn't been discontinued will want to have the option to follow their interests into other academic areas, even if they don't intend to major in them. Such students will infer (correctly) that a college that doesn't offer a major in a subject will not offer as wide a range of courses in such subjects.
- 4 Many students looking at comprehensive institutions are attracted by the possibility of double majoring.

A. Concerns over mission and reputation

Eighteen academic professional associations⁴ recently cosigned a letter urging SUNY Potsdam to reconsider the recent discontinuation decisions, noting that dedication to the liberal arts entails a

⁴ American Academy of Religion
American Association for Italian Studies
American Folklore Society
American Historical Association
American Philosophical Association

responsibility to “educate a thoughtful, engaged, and critical citizenry who can tackle the challenges facing society today and in the future,” and that “economists who study higher education agree that a substantial part of the valuable return on this educational investment derives from the intellectual flexibility students gain precisely from liberal arts training.”

To be committed to the liberal arts and sciences is to be committed to the idea that a rigorous investigation of the social and natural world, engaged in according to the disciplinary standards of the established fields of the arts and sciences, is essential to the mission of the college as a whole. This commitment is not vague or equivocal. It is not dependent on market value or financial expediency. It relies on a particular picture of the value of the life of the mind, a picture which commits us to the idea that knowledge has intrinsic value, and that the development of the intellectual virtues plays a key role in the pursuit of a good and fulfilling life. To assume that prospective students will be indifferent to whether or not SUNY Potsdam is able to offer a liberal arts education to a standard recognizable to the wider academic community is to dismiss a serious threat to both the college’s reputation and its ability to attract new students.

B. Concerns over depth and flexibility of offerings

In addition to the considerable numbers of students who start college at Potsdam without a declared major (it has been frequently noted in the past that "Exploratory" students in the first year outnumber any single major), very large numbers of students can be expected to change majors at least once during their college career. According to the Department of Education, about 30% of undergraduates change majors at least once; 10% more than once.⁵ To assume that prospective students will be unconcerned about their range of options for possible majors just because they declare a particular major on entering college is to adopt a theory of student motivation that is not supported by the available evidence. There is every reason to believe that students are attracted to colleges that offer rich opportunities for both changing their major and for completing double majors. This latter possibility deserves further discussion, given the recent, sudden shift in administrative attitudes about double majors.

Like many departments at SUNY Potsdam, we have always encouraged double majors. I typically encourage students who express an interest in the Philosophy major by noting that most of our majors are double majors, that studying philosophy can enrich their understanding of their first major, and that at 30 credit hours, the philosophy major can be completed alongside another major in the course of a standard four year tenure in college. This attitude toward double majoring is by no means unique to Philosophy. Until recently it was taken as given that the ability to double-major was a benefit to students that we ought to facilitate to as great a degree as possible (during my years as member of the Arts and Sciences Curriculum Committee, a frequently raised concern with new and revised programs has been the number

American Political Science Association
American Society for Environmental History
American Society for Theatre Research
Association for Slavic, East European, and Eurasian Studies
Association for Theatre in Higher Education
College Art Association
German Studies Association
Linguistic Society of America
Modern Language Association
North American Conference on British Studies
Organization of American Historians
Society for Cinema and Media Studies
Society for Ethnomusicology

⁵ <https://nces.ed.gov/pubs2018/2018434.pdf>

of required credit hours, as it was understood that individual majors should not be so course-heavy as to preclude the realistic possibility of double majoring.)

This year, this long-held view of double majors has come under fire from the administration of this college. We are told that double majors don't count toward our program's enrollment, unless our major happens to be the first one declared. The administration's new position is that double majoring is to be considered a sort of exploitation of the college by our students. As the Dean of Arts and Sciences explained it in recent chairs meeting, students with double majors get "too good of a deal" because they get twice the degree while paying the same tuition as those with a single major.

I would suggest, first of all, that something has gone deeply wrong when faculty are encouraged to worry that their students are getting too good of deal from the college. I would argue, secondly, that adopting such a mercenary attitude toward our students has the potential to profoundly negatively effect enrollment. Prospective students are not likely to be attracted to an institution that prefers that they learn less rather than more.

V. Conclusion

The decision to discontinue the Philosophy major cannot be justified on grounds of financial exigency. Discontinuing the major will not save money in the short term, because the major does not require any low-enrolled specialist courses. It will not save money in the long term, because eliminating philosophy instruction from the college entirely means eliminating one of the most productive departments in the college. Service courses taught by Philosophy faculty with high student/faculty ratios will instead be taught by faculty with lower student/faculty ratios.

In both the long and the short term, loss of Philosophy at the college will hurt recruitment, because Philosophy is universally regarded as one of the core liberal arts disciplines, and a college that fails to offer a complete complement of the core liberal arts and science disciplines will be regarded as a second-class institution.

That the administration has arrived at the decision to discontinue Philosophy despite this lack of financial justification is indication that this decision has been the result of a flawed process, executed without transparency or accountability, and in violation of the college's own policy on discontinuation. It is not too late to avoid the damage that discontinuation will cause, and we urge you to take the opportunity you have to reverse the decision to discontinue the Philosophy major.