

2017 SUNY Potsdam  
Philosophy  
Department Program  
Review

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## **1. Strengths**

The SUNY Potsdam philosophy department has an excellent record of providing thoughtful, rigorous instruction in philosophy. Students and alumni consistently praise the faculty for strong teaching in class and consistent accessibility outside of class.

The philosophy department has, since 2004-05 (as far as the reports go back) been in the top 5 producing departments in terms of FTE. We have persistently performed well above both the school and the college's ratios. Roughly 85% of the department's offerings each semester are in support of General Education or other disciplinary and interdisciplinary programming, a percentage unmatched by any other department in the college. We consistently overenroll almost all of our lower division courses each semester.

The department of philosophy has always distinguished itself by offering exceptional opportunities, curricular and extracurricular, for its students. The Philosophy Forum is one of, if not the most active academically oriented extracurricular group on campus, but requires more than the equivalent of a course load in faculty support each semester. Four of our majors presented papers at conferences last year (that is roughly 1/5 of our majors), one of whom won the award for best presentation in the conference. We have had one of the few students in the humanities to have received a Kilmer award, and currently have students in the Presidential Scholars program and the Philosophy Honors program. We have produced numerous Chancellor's Award winners, including one of this year's winners. Our student/faculty interaction was recognized as exemplary in our last external review, and is consistently praised by all external observers.

## **2. Challenges**

The department has identified three particularly acute challenges to our ability to best fulfill our mission. These challenges concern staffing, workload and budget.

### **2.1 Staffing**

The most significant problems faced by the department stem from serious deficits in staffing. For the past five years, the department has requested that the tenure-track line left vacant by Dr. Little's retirement in 2012 be filled, but that request has so far been refused. Dr. Little's expertise in ethics and political philosophy is crucial to the teaching capabilities and scholarly integrity of the program, and finding a replacement is a major priority for the department. Two of our faculty members are of retirement age and lack of certainty over whether and how those positions will be replaced has had a substantial negative effect on faculty morale. One faculty member has been seriously considering retirement but has been reluctant to do so in large part because of concerns over whether the department will be able to hire a replacement to fill his position.

The 2007 external review of department identified faculty workload as a major concern for the department. At that time, the department had just hired a new faculty member, and the department was about to go from having four tenure-track faculty positions to having five. However, the review team judged that a single additional faculty position would be inadequate to fully address the workload issues experienced by the department and recommended that the administration approve a sixth full-time faculty member.

The years during which the department had five tenure track faculty members saw great growth in the major program, with a peak of thirty-three majors in 2011. However,

the department only had four years of staffing at this level, since after losing Prof. Huss in 2011 and Prof. Little in 2012, the department was only able to replace one position. Thus, for the last five years the department has managed with 2/3 the staffing recommended by the external review team. This has been a severe problem, for a number of reasons. Most prominently, the department has been unable to fully support its majors in terms of course offerings. When Drs Huss and Little retired, the department decided to first hire a replacement for Dr. Huss, so that there would be a faculty member dedicated to teaching the Metaphysics, Theory of Knowledge, Philosophy of Science, Philosophy of Mind and Symbolic Logic courses. This inevitably left a gap in the areas that Dr. Little specialized in, including ethics, political philosophy and feminist philosophy. The department's expectation at the time was that the department would be able to hire a replacement for Dr. Little shortly after replacing Dr. Huss. This, unfortunately, has not happened, leaving the department entirely without a specialist in the area of ethics. This is a huge gap to have in a philosophy department, and a major disadvantage for our students, particularly our majors. Since Dr. Little's retirement, the teaching load in ethics have been shared by Profs. Munroe, Lavine, Curry and Tartaglia, none of whom are specialists in the area.

It is crucial to note the importance of full-time tenure track faculty to the operation of small departments. The department has always recognized the importance of and distinguished itself in service to the college. Our faculty have historically played a very visible role in college curricular matters, the A&S Curriculum Committee and General Education (we have had a representative on the General Education Committee

since 1985) and in college-wide hiring (we have had a representative on every provost and presidential search over the last twenty years but one).

In addition, there is much work to be done to modernize our curriculum in support of emerging areas of inquiry, including but certainly not limited to initiatives in support of the College's admirable aim of fostering diversity and inclusion. As things stand, there are two members of the faculty who are actively engaged in service, only one of whom is tenured. The other two full-time members of the department are well past retirement age, but the administration has thus far been unwilling to guarantee a replacement if they choose to retire, which has effectively discouraged these faculty from retiring. The service burden on the remaining faculty members is intense, and simply does not allow for the kinds of creative and innovative thinking and planning currently required to make our programs vibrant and more attractive to students. It is very important to spread those burdens. We expect our faculty to fully engage in the life of the department, attending weekly Philosophy Forum events and engaging with faculty and students outside of the classroom (as even our most senior faculty continue to do). It has been such dedication to the department which has allowed us to maintain our student-centered culture in spite of minimal staffing, and which keeps those senior faculty from retiring if it means leaving the department even less able to fulfill its basic commitments.

During the 2013-14 school year, the department was able to hire a specialist in ethics as a sabbatical replacement for Dr. DiGiovanna. The visiting professor, Dr. Rachel Fedock, made substantial contributions to teaching and department life while she was here, participating regularly in Philosophy Forum and a department reading group as well as ably teaching courses in feminist ethics and care ethics that we would not otherwise

have been able to offer our students. This opportunity highlighted the gap in our teaching roster, since even for the brief time that Dr. Fedock was a part of the department, we were able to see noticeable effects on student recruitment to the major, particularly as regards recruitment of women to the major. The department has every intention of hiring a similarly talented scholar as soon as we have the opportunity, and we are confident that having someone in the department with Dr. Fedock's specialization and teaching prowess will have substantial effects on our recruitment of new majors. (See Appendix III for a copy of the advertisement the department posted for the position Dr. Fedock filled. When we are next able to hire a full-time faculty member, we expect to use very similar language in that ad.)

## **2.2 Workload**

All full-time faculty in the department teach four courses each semester. Each faculty member has at least two preps every semester, and several faculty members have three preps essentially every semester. Given the small size of the department, it is necessary for faculty members to teach a wide range of courses. Dr. Curry, for instance, has taught 28 different courses at this institution. Dr. Murphy has taught 12 different courses in his first five years here. Teaching a wide range of courses has many attractions; we are in this profession because we love philosophy, and teaching different classes affords us the opportunity to engage with a wide variety of interesting and stimulating work. However, teaching so many different classes is also hard work, requiring a substantial commitment of time and intellectual energy which might otherwise be directed towards service or scholarship intended for publication. Even large portions of the summer and winter

breaks, which are the only time the 4-4 teaching load affords faculty the opportunity to do original scholarship, are taken up with design and preparation of classes.

In addition to the regular load of contracted classes, faculty also devote significant time to independent study courses and honors theses. In the past six years department faculty have supervised three senior thesis projects, two teaching internships and seven independent tutorials, all without compensation (see Appendix VIII -B for detailed list of tutorials). Though faculty members are never required to do this work, they are frequently willing to do so in order to supplement the relatively limited course offerings our staffing situation allows us to make available on the regular schedule. In most cases, these tutorials require a commitment of time equivalent to teaching a regular course, and they therefore result in there being even less time available for the non-teaching aspects of faculty obligations.

Faculty become eligible for a sabbatical after seven years, at which point they can apply for either a one semester sabbatical at full pay or a two semester sabbatical at half pay. The system is set up so that the two-term sabbaticals pay for the one term sabbaticals. This system has a tendency to put smaller departments at a disadvantage, since they are less able to simply absorb the teaching responsibilities of faculty members on leave. In the last 14 years, the faculty as a whole have taken only five sabbaticals, only one of which was full-year. Professor Curry has not had a sabbatical in 9 years, and Professor Tartaglia has not had one in 14 years. A sabbatical program that made it easier for small departments to cover their teaching obligations when faculty members are away would significantly increase the ability of members of the department to take time away from teaching for research.

### **2.3 Budget limitations**

In addition to preventing the much needed hiring of new faculty, the budget problems at SUNY Potsdam in recent years have made it a challenge to carry out the day to day operations of an academic department. The money allocated to the department for OTPS (Other Than Personnel Services) has fallen by 39% over the last eight years (see Appendix VII - Part C for details). While we have made do with these diminished resources, it is not at all clear that we can continue at this diminished level of funding without eventually running into difficulties providing adequate technological and administrative support to our students.

### **3. Faculty**

The Faculty of the department consists of three full professors, Dr. Joseph DiGiovanna, Dr. Philip Tartaglia and Dr. David Curry, one tenure track assistant professor, Dr. Tim Murphy, one temporary assistant professor with a 3/4 time obligation to the department (as of Fall 2016), Dr. Matt Lavine, and one long-serving adjunct instructor, Mark Munroe.

#### **3.1 Scholarship**

The 2007 External Review report identified the department's lack of emphasis on scholarship as a weak point and recommended a number of measures to increase support for scholarship, including a significant increase in the number of faculty, increases in institutional support and a reduction of service workload, particularly for junior faculty. Unfortunately, none of these forms of increased support have proven possible to enact: the number of faculty has gone down by one rather than raised by two, junior faculty continue to have significant service obligations, junior faculty do not receive sabbaticals

or course reductions for scholarly work and little money is available from the college for travel to conferences or other forms of research. For this reason, the department has maintained the prioritization described in the department bylaws (see Appendix VI). Teaching is the main emphasis of faculty and the main basis for promotion decisions, with service the secondary consideration and scholarship coming in third place.

Despite this emphasis on teaching, faculty are active in scholarly work. Dr. Curry published a paper on the value of liberal arts education in 2013 and is currently working on a book manuscript on Plato's middle period metaphysics and epistemology. As a result of his award-winning teaching, Dr. Curry recently received an invitation by Hackett Publishing to contribute a chapter to an anthology entitled *Philosophers in the Classroom: Essays on Teaching*, which collects essays by 30 philosophers chosen to contribute based on their excellence in teaching. Dr. Murphy published a paper on how cultural considerations bear on the teaching of logic in 2015 and has published two book reviews since 2015, with an additional review forthcoming in the journal *Teaching Philosophy*. Dr. Lavine published a paper on the social relevance of philosophy in 2014, a book chapter on philosophical anthropology in 2015 and has an article on A.N. Prior forthcoming in the journal *Synthese*. He has also presented at five conferences in the last two years. Dr. DiGiovanna and Dr. Tartaglia have published books earlier in their careers and are both currently committed to ongoing scholarly projects. Dr. Tartaglia has been studying the work of W.V.O. Quine, particularly as relates to the philosophy of science, and Dr. DiGiovanna has been investigating the philosophical arguments of major figures in the American revolution. Both of these research programs have been the basis

of senior seminars, with Dr. DiGiovanna teaching a seminar entitled American Revolution in 2015 and Dr. Tartaglia teaching a seminar on Quine in 2016.

Scholarly work in the department tends to go hand-in-hand with teaching responsibilities. In the past three years, Dr. Curry has revived and redeveloped the Human Nature and Issues in Ethical Theory courses and developed an innovative new Honors Introduction to Philosophy course, built around students re-enacting key parts of Athenian history. Dr. Murphy has developed two new courses, Philosophy of the Liberal Arts and Moral Issues in Mental Health, both of which are aimed at filling needs among non-majors. These courses, which were developed in order to respond to student interests and to provide a greater diversity of philosophical coursework, required substantial new research on the part of the developing faculty, somewhat limiting the resources those faculty had to expend on research in the interest of publication. While this form of scholarly effort does not necessarily contribute to the publication profile of the department, it is crucial to the intellectual vibrancy of the department and to successfully accomplishing our teaching mission.

If there comes a time when the department has the resources to fully address the needs of our students while substantially reducing the teaching and service obligations on individual instructors, we would of course need to seriously consider making publication by faculty a greater priority. Until that time, however, the degree of emphasis faculty place on publication seems to us to be appropriate, given the importance of teaching and the need for faculty service at this institution.

### **3.2 Service**

The philosophy department has a long history of very substantial contribution to college-wide service. Philosophy faculty members currently serve on the General Education Committee, the Arts and Sciences Curriculum Committee, the NEH Faculty Development Committee, the General Education Task Force, the Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Strategic Plan Task Force, the General Education Reform Steering Committee and the Faculty Assembly Goals and Planning Committee. In addition to his duties as Chair of the Philosophy Department, Dr. Curry directs the Classical Studies Minor. Dr. Curry has also served on the last three Presidential Search Committees and the last two Provost Search Committees. Dr. Lavine recently served on the search committee for the Director of Educational Opportunity. Dr. Curry is widely recognized on campus for his leadership in matters of faculty governance, a role that is not fully communicated merely by reviewing his (quite extensive) official service commitments.

### **3.3 Collegiality and Governance**

The department has a set of by-laws, formalized in 2003-4, which defines its organizational structure and features (see Appendix VI for complete by-laws). The vast majority of departmental decisions are made by consensus. On the rare occasion when voting is necessary, a simple majority carries the day, with the Department Chair authorized to determine the issue in the case of a split vote. Dr. Curry has served as Chair for 18 of the last 25 years, including the past 6 years, a fact which he resignedly accepts and the rest of the faculty celebrates.

Since we are a small department with offices in the same hall, communication among faculty is frequent and friendly. The department is welcoming to junior faculty,

with all members of the senior faculty readily available for advice and mentoring. Faculty members speak to each other more or less every day, regularly discussing both teaching strategy and questions of philosophical scholarship. Everyone in the department is happy to take advantage of their colleagues' philosophical expertise. Furthermore, there is a general recognition that the challenges of teaching are ongoing, and that the teaching experience of our colleagues is an important resource to take advantage of in seeking to excel in the classroom. Overall, this high level of collegiality and interaction among the faculty is a major strength of the department.

#### **4. Students and Teaching**

In keeping with the SUNY Potsdam mission, our department regards teaching and student advising to be of paramount importance. We have substantial commitments to our majors and minors, to multiple interdisciplinary programs and to general education at SUNY Potsdam, and we aim to continually monitor our performance and improve wherever possible.

##### **4.1 Assessment**

Since 2010, the department has used a three part learning outcomes assessment plan to evaluate our program (see Appendix V - B) for the most recent update of the full plan). The department uses two direct assessments, an exit exam and a portfolio evaluation, and one indirect assessment, an exit survey.

The exit exam presents students with two passages taken either from classic philosophical works or from contemporary media and requires them to evaluate the main argument of each passage. The Departmental Assessment Committee then evaluates the arguments according to the following criteria:

- a) The ability to understand the logical structure of an argument
- b) the ability to evaluate the content of an argument's premises and the strength of its inferences, and
- c) the ability to express in writing the student's understanding and evaluation of an argument

Since 2010, 31 out of 42 graduating seniors have taken the assessment exam. It should be noted that this exam is offered at the very end of the semester, usually during or immediately after finals week, and taking the exam is completely voluntary on the part of the students. Given how busy and preoccupied students tend to be in their very last week of college, it speaks to the loyalty our majors have to the department that participation is as high as 74%. Of these 31 students, 68% have been judged by the Departmental Assessment Committee to have exceeded expectations and 32% have been found to have met expectations (see Appendix V - Chart 1). Although the large proportion of students taking the exam is encouraging, the sample is self-selecting and so the results might be a bit higher than they would be with 100% participation, as it seems plausible to suppose that weaker students might be more likely to elect to skip the exam.

The portfolio evaluation is built into PHIL 475: Senior Seminar, which is a requirement of the major. A minimum of 40% of the final grade in PHIL 475 is based on in class presentations and an extensive paper is required to be part of the basis of the remaining 60% of the class grade. Student performance is evaluated according to the following criteria:

- a) Did the writer address all of the significant portions of the assigned material in their oral and written work?

- b) Did the writer reflect accurately any outside material to which she referred?
- c) Did the writer exhibit originality of thought and exercise her critical skills?
- d) Did the writer construct clear, grammatically correct paragraphs?
- e) Did the writer make sure that she did not include needless and irrelevant information?
- f) Did the writer demonstrate an awareness of viewpoints contrary to her own?
- g) Does the essay have adequate aesthetic quality (e.g., presence of acceptable literary style)
- h) Did the writer use examples, arguments and provide evidence for her position?

Of the 30 students who completed the seminar between 2010 and 2015, 79% exceeded expectations, 17% met expectations and 4% approached but did not fully meet expectations. No students in the seminar were found to have completely failed to meet expectations.

As an indirect assessment, graduating majors are asked to complete an exit survey. This survey is usually administered along with the exit exam, so the considerations about participation discussed above apply to it as well. 32 of 42 graduating seniors completed the survey. It asks the following questions, which students are to answer with a number between 1 and 5, with 1 meaning “Most Agree” and 5 meaning “Least Agree.”

- 1) Do you believe that you are adequately prepared to identify and evaluate the main arguments of a philosophical essay which you have not previously confronted?
- 2) Do you believe that you are adequately prepared to compose an acceptable persuasive essay?
- 3) Do you believe that you have a knowledge of some of the principal texts and currents in both the history of Western Philosophy and philosophy in the 20th century?
- 4) Do you believe that your philosophical education has helped to nurture your ability to form reasoned discriminations and judgements?

Responses from the 32 students who have completed this survey since 2010 have been encouraging (see Appendix V-A for detailed assessment results). All of the students surveyed responded with a (1) or (2) to the first question. 31 out of 32 students responded with (1) or (2) to the second question. 28 out of 32 students responded with a (1) or a (2) to the third question. For the final question, 23 out of 29 students answered with a (1) and the remaining three answered with (2). In sum, these responses demonstrate a very high level of satisfaction among our majors with the philosophical education they have received from our program.

In addition to the four quantified questions above, the survey asks for feedback about strengths and weaknesses in course offerings, the effectiveness of instruction, assessment and advising from philosophy faculty, the accessibility and approachability of philosophy faculty outside of class, the quality of the facilities provided by the philosophy department to students, the role of Philosophy Forum in support of majors,

and overall feeling about the strengths and weaknesses of the department. The survey results (available in Appendix V-B-C) suggest a general satisfaction with the program and a high esteem for the faculty. Many of the students comment that the faculty are student-focused and enthusiastic about teaching philosophy. The value of the community created among philosophy students and faculty at Potsdam is a recurring theme.

The most common expressions of dissatisfaction with the program have to do with the limited range of courses available. A number of students suggest that the addition of courses in areas outside of analytic philosophy would have been welcome, with Asian and Continental philosophy mentioned a number of times. Several students also note that the department's offerings in ethics are relatively limited. We hope to be able to address these concerns with our next hire. A few students complain that nonmajors in upper level classes detract from the quality of class discussion. While this may be addressable to some extent through the use of course restrictions requiring more prior coursework, restricting courses to majors only is probably not a realistic option in a department as small as ours.

Overall, our assessments suggest that our students are enthusiastic about philosophy in general and about our department in particular. The main areas of dissatisfaction on the part of students are in line with the department's own assessment of its main weaknesses; namely, that the faculty are somewhat overstretched, and we have very serious gaps in our coverage of important academic specializations.

#### **4.2 General Education and Interdisciplinary Programs**

The philosophy department has a long history of supporting the general education program. Roughly 85% of the department's offerings each semester are in support of

General Education or other disciplinary and interdisciplinary programming, a percentage unmatched by any other department in the college. In the late 1980's, Dr. DiGiovanna was instrumental in structuring the program epistemologically around areas or modes of inquiry. At least one member of the department has been a member of the General Education Committee since the program's inception in 1989. Dr. Curry, in particular, has a long history of service to the general education program. He has been a member of the General Education Committee for all but 2 of the last 25 years. He served as chair of that committee from 1996-98, served on multiple General Education subcommittees and two search committees for new General Education directors. He is currently serving on the General Education Task Force and the General Education Reform Steering Committee, in addition to the General Education Committee.

The vast majority of courses offered by the philosophy department meet the Philosophical Inquiry (PI) general education requirement. All sections of PHIL 110: Introduction to Logic, PHIL 105: Human Nature and PHIL 102: Philosophy of the Liberal Arts, as well as a substantial number of sections of PHIL 100: Introduction to Philosophy and PHIL 120: Introduction to Ethics meet both the PI and the First Year Critical Thinking (FC) requirements.

In 2014, the department revived the Human Nature course and added a newly developed course, Philosophy of the Liberal Arts, in order to diversify our offerings at the 100 level. With these two classes added to our Introduction to Philosophy, Introduction to Logic and Introduction to Ethics, we have multiple sections of five different introductory courses available to students every year. We strongly believe that

philosophy is valuable to all of the college's students, and are proud of the fact that a substantial portion of the students at Potsdam have the opportunity to study philosophy.

Teaching introductory level general education does of course present difficulties not necessarily present in courses aimed at majors. Students in our 100-level courses vary significantly in terms in terms of ability, academic preparedness and work habits, so teaching those classes in a way that does justice to the material and appropriately serves the best students, while at the same time being accessible to an overall majority of the students, is a challenge that requires significant care and effort on the part of our faculty.

In addition to the department's substantial PI and FC offerings, we also offer two courses meeting the Western Civilization designator, PHIL 322 and PHIL 323, both of which are taught on a regular rotation, as well as upper-level classes meeting the writing and speaking intensive requirements.

The department also contributes significantly to interdisciplinarity throughout the college, supporting programming in Environmental Studies, Criminal Justice, Women's and Gender Studies and Linguistics, in addition to playing an active role in Learning Communities and the Honors program. We regularly cross-list courses with Politics, Psychology and English. Several courses we offer on a regular basis, including PHIL 330: Environmental Ethics, PHIL 355: Philosophy of Language, PHIL 332: Philosophy of Law and PHIL 333: Philosophy of Justice are electives for other programs.

Of particular note is the role of the department in the Classical Studies Minor. Dr. Curry worked with Dr. Downing from Art History and Dr. Stannish from History to design the major. He has been a member of the Classical Studies Minor Program Committee since 2003 and director of the minor since 2010. PHIL 322: Ancient

Philosophy is a requirement of the program and PHIL 387: Selected Philosophers and PHIL 475: Seminar serve as electives when dealing with relevant topics.

In addition to the courses that officially contribute to other programs, the department also regularly offers a number of upper level courses designed to appeal to non-majors. In 2014 the department introduced a new course on ethical issues in psychiatry, PHIL 331: Moral Issues in Mental Health, which has proven to be popular with Psychology and Sociology students. PHIL 380: Philosophy of Mind and PHIL 350: Philosophy of Science have historically appealed to students in the social and physical sciences, and PHIL 346: Existentialism and Phenomenology and PHIL 359: Philosophy of Religion have consistently enrolled substantial numbers of interested non-majors.

#### **4.3 FTE and Faculty/Student Ratios**

The Philosophy Department has consistently been near the top of the list of departments in terms of the generation of FTE. The department has averaged a 21.934 student/faculty FTE ratio over the course of the last ten semesters, which places Philosophy 5th out of the 26 programs counted (See Appendix VII - B for complete ranking). FTE generated by the department has exceeded the amount contracted every year for the last thirteen years by an average of 20% (See Appendix VII - A for a term by term breakdown).

Notably, this high rate of FTE production remained the norm throughout the period during which the department had five full-time faculty members, suggesting that a fifth tenure track line is perfectly consistent with a cautiously pragmatic approach to campus finances.

#### **4.4 Major and Minor Programs**

The department offers a major, a minor and an honors major (See Appendix VIII-A for details). Starting in 2010, the department added a Seminar requirement to the major. The faculty share responsibility for teaching this course each spring semester on a rotating basis. The topic each semester is chosen by the faculty member based on his expertise and on informal surveys of majors about their interests. The seminar focuses on in-class presentations by students, on the model of a graduate seminar. It meets the Speaking Intensive requirement and serves as the portfolio assessment in our department assessment plan. Since the topic of the seminar changes each year, it also somewhat helps increase the variety of philosophical topics our students are able to study, as well as allowing for classes that focus more intensely on particular areas of philosophy than possible in more survey-oriented courses.

The department has resisted the trend towards every-expanding major requirements that has affected many other departments at SUNY Potsdam, so the standard major can be completed with 30 credit hours and the minor with 18 credit hours. This allows students to complete the degree with a second major, or several minors, in four years. Most of our students are double majors, with many students adding the major in the latter half of their college career.

In addition to the regular major, the honors major is available as an option to students who intend to pursue graduate studies in philosophy. This program is selective and highly rigorous. Students must apply at least three semesters before graduation and they need to have a 3.5 cumulative GPA in philosophy and a 3.25 overall GPA to be eligible. They need a minimum grade of 3.0 in philosophy courses in order for those

classes to count toward the major. It is perhaps notable here that our current Honors major currently has a 4.0 overall GPA, is scheduled to graduate in the Spring and has applied to a number of philosophy graduate programs. There are 10 required courses for the honors major, which requires 36 overall hours of philosophy coursework. Honors majors are also required to write a senior thesis and defend that thesis in an oral presentation. The increased requirements of this major are intended to prepare students for graduate study, and our record of placement of Honors majors in graduate programs is excellent.

The department has consistently attracted very talented students to the major. We have had one of the few students in the humanities to have received a Kilmer award, have students in the Presidential Scholars program and the Philosophy Honors program. We have produced numerous Chancellor's Award winners, and one of this year's Chancellor's Award candidates is a philosophy major. In the spring of 2016, four of our students had papers accepted to the Oneonta Undergraduate Philosophy conference, one of whom won the award for best presentation in the conference. The average GPA of our majors over the past eight years is 3.2, the average transfer GPA is 3.1, total SAT is 1140 and incoming high school average is 88 (See Appendix I, Table 1). In a comparison of academic attributes of nine other humanities and social science majors in the fall of 2016, philosophy majors have the highest average GPA, the highest SAT scores, both math and verbal, highest persistence in the major and highest high school average. (See Appendix I Table 2) This sort of snapshot comparison is of course limited in what it can tell us generally about how philosophy majors compare with other majors at SUNY Potsdam,

but it does support our subjective impression that we attract and retain many high achieving students.

The academic ability of our majors allows us to maintain high standards for our upper-level courses in terms of the difficulty of the content and the rigor with which it is covered. Our upper-level courses, particularly at the 400-level, require a great deal from our students, both in terms of workload and in terms of the degree to which they are expected to contribute to class. Those students who have gone on to graduate study consistently report that their coursework at Potsdam provided good preparation for their future studies.

The requirements of our major program are designed to accommodate the limitations in what we are able to offer while still supporting the general education program, as well as the fact that many of our majors declare relatively late in their college careers (See Appendix VIII -A for a description of our major program). There is little in the way of official restrictions on the order in which students proceed through department courses, so advising plays an important role in insuring that students are academically prepared for coursework as they decide which courses they'll take. As might be expected, our 100-level courses are all designed to be accessible to students with no prior experience in philosophy. Our 400-level classes tend to be aimed at majors, minors and other students who have had prior experience with philosophy. Our 300-level courses have the most variation in terms of intended audience, and tend to enroll substantial numbers of non-majors.

The major program is largely built on traditional fields in analytic philosophy. This is in part a reflection of the specializations and interests of the faculty in the

department and in part the result of an effort to insure that students will graduate from the program with a knowledge base and skill set in line with the standards of the discipline. This does not mean, however, that we are uninterested in offering courses outside of the “core” topics covered in our program. When we are next able to hire a tenure-track faculty member, we will be looking for a candidate that, in addition to providing expertise in ethics and political philosophy, will be able to teach courses in feminist philosophy, Asian philosophy, Environmental studies and/or Africana studies. With our current staffing, however, it is all we can do to provide the core subject matter that will be expected by any graduate program in philosophy (and we can’t really do that, when it comes to ethics and political philosophy).

SUNY Potsdam students are able to take up to four courses from any one of the other Associated Colleges (Clarkson University, St. Lawrence University and SUNY Canton). Neither Clarkson nor SUNY Canton have philosophy departments, Clarkson has only one full-time philosophy professor and SUNY Canton has no philosophers, so the main opportunities for students to take classes at other institutions come from St. Lawrence University. Unfortunately, logistical difficulties over scheduling and transportation often prevent students from taking advantage of this opportunity. Since Clarkson does not have a philosophy program, the department has attracted a number of very talented students from there over the years. In 2015 a student graduated from Clarkson having done enough course work in philosophy to have earned our major. This student did an honors thesis under the supervision of Dr. Curry and went on to be accepted to graduate school in philosophy at SUNY Buffalo.

## **4.5 Recruiting**

Few students arrive at SUNY Potsdam intending to major in philosophy. In part this is simply a result of the fact that, in the absence of a philosophy curriculum in high school, students do not have a chance to discover an interest in philosophy prior to college. In addition, the pervasive (though false) belief that philosophy majors struggle in the job market after graduation also impedes our recruitment of majors. The department has actively engaged in efforts to correct this misperception in a number of ways. A faculty representative attends each of the three Academic and Student Services Fairs offered every semester in order to speak to prospective students about the major. The department participates every year in the Major Affair, with multiple faculty and students available to describe our major to the first and second year students in attendance. At least once a year the department does a presentation on “Why Study Philosophy” in Philosophy Forum. At all of these events, we provide data on the quite promising career paths of philosophy majors, as well as discuss the intellectual and personal benefits of pursuing undergraduate studies in our area. Forum also regularly invites alumni to give talks on their career paths and the advantages that the philosophy major has afforded them. In recent years, alumni have visited Forum to discuss career paths which have included banking, journalism, health policy consulting, electronic forensic discovery, law and government administration. Seeing that SUNY Potsdam students with philosophy degrees have gone on to have satisfying (and sometimes quite lucrative) careers is reassuring to students who are otherwise inundated with misinformation about the supposed economic disadvantages of liberal arts degrees.

The fact that a substantial portion of our teaching load consists of general education courses also helps us attract students, but, unfortunately, students often take our courses too late in their college career to add a major, even when they find they've developed a significant interest in the discipline. This is in part a result of the fact that the department is frequently unable to meet the full demand for PI courses, which means that many students aren't able to take philosophy courses in their first few semesters. We've begun offering first-year only sections of introductory courses in order to try to somewhat address this problem.

Despite the various challenges involved in recruiting students to philosophy, both in general and at this institution, the number of majors in the department has generally been equivalent to or higher than at similar institutions (See Appendix I-Table 3 for the numbers for the past nine years). Our overall number of majors peaked at 33 in 2011, then dropped to a low of 8 two years later. We've since built up those numbers to 17 this year. It is worth noting that the high point of 33 majors reflected the end of the period of time in which we had a cohort of students who were able to benefit from a more fully staffed department, since in the years immediately prior to 2011 we had five full-time, tenure-track faculty. There is every reason to believe that this correlation reflects a causal connection: when we have more faculty, we benefit from a more diverse mix of personalities and teaching styles, as well as a wider array of classes, and this contributes to our ability to attract students.

#### **4.6 Philosophy Forum**

The campus philosophy club, the Philosophy Forum, has been a campus institution for the last 27 years and is a substantial contributor to the vitality of the

program. The Forum is student run and funded through the Student Government Association as a campus student organization, which requires that student officers devote substantial time every semester to participating in student government. Meetings are held weekly, usually for two or more hours. In the past thirteen semesters, the Forum has hosted nineteen student presentations, eighteen lectures by SUNY Potsdam faculty and forty lectures by speakers from other institutions, ten of whom were alumni of our major program (see Appendix IV for detailed schedules). The Forum also sponsors yearly trips to undergraduate philosophy conferences, most frequently the Oneonta Undergraduate Conference, which is held every spring at SUNY Oneonta. Although the Forum is student led, faculty members are closely involved with the organization's programming. The two faculty co-advisors attend every meeting and other members of the teaching faculty attend regularly. Since all meetings are open to the public, the Forum provides a valuable service to the academic community by offering regular, substantive talks by a wide range of scholars. It has consistently been the case over the years that a sizable portion of students who participate most regularly in Philosophy Forum are non-majors and many students who are majors and minors first discovered their interest in philosophy through their participation in the Forum.

#### **4.7 Diversity**

The proportion of non-white students in our program tends to vary considerably, as might be expected given the relatively small number of overall majors. The philosophy department's racial/ethnic demographics are roughly in line with both the discipline as a whole and with other humanities disciplines here at Potsdam. (See Appendix I Table 3 and Chart 2 for racial and ethnic demographics among philosophy

majors since 2009, Appendix I Table 4 for a comparison of the demographics of philosophy majors in 2016 with that of eight other majors at SUNY Potsdam that year and Appendix II for demographic information about philosophy majors nationwide). Currently, 35% of our majors identify as something other than white. Although this is just beginning to show up in the data on our majors, we have reason to believe, based on the increasing diversity we are seeing in advanced elective courses and at Philosophy Forum, that our major demographics are in the process of a meaningful shift towards increased racial and ethnic diversity. We are optimistic about continuing to be able to attract diverse students and believe that our major demographics will continue to reflect changes in the demographics of the college as a whole.

Although it has varied fairly considerably, the proportion of students majoring in philosophy who are female has tended in the past eight years to be slightly lower than the national average, which the APA estimates to be at approximately 30%. The discipline has historically had difficulties attracting women and minorities into its professional ranks, for a variety of reasons. Our department has always done an admirable job of creating a welcoming environment for women and students of color. Notably, 2014's three initiates into Phi Sigma Tau, the International Honor Society in Philosophy, were all women; in 2015 two of six were women, one a woman of color, and in 2016 one of the four was a woman – these percentages are all significantly higher than the national averages. In addition, women have earned the department's largest scholarship, the Berriman Scholarship, every one of the three years it has been offered so far.

However, the importance of diverse role models is not lost on the department. With Dr. Little's retirement we lost our sole female faculty member. The sub-fields of

ethics and social-political philosophy (as well as feminist, non-western philosophy and philosophy of race) have a much larger proportion of women and faculty of color, which leads us to be optimistic about finding a first-rate candidate for any open position, were we able to hire at the tenure-track level.

As a department we are committed to the ideal of philosophy as a discipline available to all students, regardless of race, gender or ethnicity. Members of the department serve on the DIAC (Diversity In Action Committee) Steering Committee, the DIAC Subcommittee on Diversity Programming and Student Training and the DIAC Subcommittee on Professional Development and Curriculum. Our department regularly offers courses that emphasize issues relating to diversity, including Human Nature, Moral Issues in Mental Health, Introduction to Logic and Philosophy of the Liberal Arts. The Philosophy Forum regularly hosts talks and discussion on areas relevant to diversity, including recent talks by Prof. Ting Yih of New Jersey City University & CUNY on Asian moral theories as they relate to philosophy of ecology, Dr. Gaylynn Welch of SUNY Potsdam on the history of the women's suffrage movement and President Esterberg of SUNY Potsdam on identity and the history of the gay rights movement. The Forum also co-sponsored a talk by Dr. J.W. Wiley, Director of the Center for Diversity, Pluralism, and Inclusion at SUNY Plattsburgh entitled "Leadership Moments and Their Relationship to Diversity & Social Justice," and conducted a follow-up discussion the following week on the topic of "Why Value Diversity?" (See Appendix IV for more information).

## **5. Facilities, Equipment and Support**

The philosophy department shares a secretary, Sandra Larock, with the Modern Languages Department. Sandy is a huge asset to the department. In addition to very competently carrying out the main requirements of her job, she contributes to student and faculty life in a number of additional ways. She provides clerical aid to faculty members that is well beyond what her job description requires of her, she deals with persistently problematic computer and office technology and she has proven to be an expert at wringing as much value as possible out of our office budget through savvy purchasing. She is also a welcoming presence for students, always happy to help them navigate the bureaucratic obstacles that are inevitable in higher education.

Philosophers are fortunate in that we tend to have relatively little need for specialized equipment, so the challenges we've faced in recent years with regard to technology and technical support are largely just those that are shared by departments across the campus. The stability of Moodle has been the biggest single problem, with multiple instances of the system failing completely and substantial data being lost. This is of course a widely recognized, university-wide problem, and we are hopeful that these issues are in the process of being resolved.

Other areas of concern for our department in the area of technology include consistent problems with our printer and copier, the limited number of available smart classrooms and the frequency of technical difficulties with equipment in smart classrooms. The copying machine outside of Carson 215 is so prone to jamming that most faculty simply don't use it, and the printer in Morey 210, while typically usable, is slow and unstable. Ms. Larock has proven to be extremely proficient at troubleshooting

problems with this equipment, but the drain on her time is burdensome given her other administrative responsibilities.

Increasingly, faculty in our department have adopted methods of presenting their courses that require smart classrooms, and technical difficulties with the equipment in those classes significantly interfere with our ability to teach. We hope to see an increasing number of classrooms converted to smart classrooms, as well as improvements to the equipment in existing smart classrooms. One of our faculty members has somewhat limited mobility and therefore needs to use the nearby classrooms in Carson Hall. So far the college has been able to meet this need, but upcoming renovation plans in Kellas Hall are likely to further erode usable classroom space next year, and we are somewhat concerned about the continued availability of appropriate classroom space.

The department has two rooms available for student use outside of class. Our lounge in Morey 202 was renovated in 2012 under the direction of Ms. Larock and now provides a comfortable, pleasant environment for students to congregate outside of class and for Philosophy Forum. It is also typically used as a classroom for upper level courses with relatively small class sizes. Our computer room in Morey 210 houses faculty mailboxes and the department printer, as well as three computers, which are left available for student use. This room sees more or less constant use during school hours and is a much appreciated resource for our students.

## **6. Conclusions**

The Department of Philosophy at SUNY Potsdam has a proud history of excellent service to our majors and minors, to the non-major populace of the university and to the institution as a whole. Particular strengths of our department include:

- Faculty that are dedicated to teaching.
- A talented and involved student body.
- A substantial institutional commitment to general education and interdisciplinary programming.
- Exemplary involvement in College-wide service and faculty governance.
- A devotion to students in and out of class.

The challenges we face include:

- Insufficient staffing at the tenure-track level, resulting in serious deficiencies in our curricular offerings.
- Severe budget constraints
- Limited institutional support for scholarship

We are hopeful that as the problems with campus finances get resolved, some of these problems will be addressed. However, our inability to win approval for a new tenure-track hire is worrying, since budgetary pressures do not obviously explain why we haven't received a new line, given our high FTE production with five faculty members. Going forward, we plan to continue to lobby for increased support for the department, particularly as regards new tenure-track faculty, and strive to maintain the department's substantial strengths.