

Review of the Philosophy Department of SUNY Potsdam  
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**OVERALL**

Major Strengths

1. Faculty teaching and student engagement are outstanding.
2. Faculty service to the university community, including to interdisciplinary programs, general education, and governance, provides effective leadership and support for curricular excellence.
3. Department participation in the assessment process, with a list of learning outcomes and established ways of measuring students' achievement of these outcomes, provides documentation of student learning.

Major Concerns

While a fifth faculty member is scheduled to join the philosophy department in the fall of 2007, this addition may be expected to only partially alleviate two problems:

1. Excessive individual faculty workloads
2. Inadequate frequency of sections of courses needed for the Philosophy and Philosophy Honors majors

In our judgment, both problems will persist, but to a lesser degree if the department remains on a 4-4 course load, and to the same degree as present if the department is able to go to a 3-3 course load. Moving to a 3-3 load would be desirable, but it will still be impossible to offer the Philosophy Honors major without uncompensated overloads for, at the very least, the Honors Research I and II courses.

3. There is also apparently unmet demand for courses from other programs:
  - Criminal Justice wants an applied ethics course.
  - The Business Department probably needs more frequent offerings of Philosophy 329 – Business Ethics.
  - Environmental Studies probably needs more frequent offerings of Environmental Ethics.
  - Women's and Gender Studies, Dance, and Psychology probably need more frequent offerings of Feminist Ethics, Aesthetics, and Philosophy of Mind.
  - Asian and continental philosophy would contribute to a desirable global emphasis.

- English and Art students probably need more frequent offerings of Continental philosophy.

4. Furthermore, while the morale of the department is high, their devotion of so much time and energy to teaching introductory and general education courses for so many years has apparently habituated at least a few of the faculty to the marginalization of their specialized interests and expertise. They have seldom been able to teach in their own areas of expertise, much less contribute to the scholarly literature in those areas. It is doubtful that the addition of a fifth member will significantly alleviate this marginalization, due to the department's continued high level of support for general education.

5. Departmental and administration support for and expectations of scholarly achievement by candidates for renewal, promotion, and continuing appointment are lower than current expectations in the university and in the discipline. The departmental bylaws governing promotion and retention mention teaching and service as desiderata, but not scholarly activity. It is time to raise expectations for scholarly activity.

#### Challenges in Immediate Future

1. The department needs to meet student needs for courses without uncompensated overloads, even given the fifth faculty member.

2. The department needs to raise support for and expectations of scholarly activity, by revising its bylaws to include research expectations and by communicating those expectations clearly and unambiguously to faculty. Higher expectations for scholarly activity should be accompanied by a reduced teaching load. While the department may wish to consider the service commitments of its senior faculty, it will surely want to insure that new faculty members are free from excessive service obligations that might impede their scholarly development.

#### Challenges in the Next Five to Ten Years

The department may need to adapt to one or more retirements and the probable hiring of new faculty. Such adaptation would involve mentoring and integrating new faculty into a departmental culture which includes expectations of scholarly activity, as well as coordinated efforts to reform the curriculum so as to better reflect the state of the discipline.

#### How Activities of the Philosophy Department Contribute to the Overall Goals of the Institution

1. The department's service to general education is extensive, especially with respect to the PI and FC courses.

2. Its service to interdisciplinary programs is also extensive and crucial, specifically Women's and Gender Studies, Environmental Studies, Criminal Justice, Classical Studies, Linguistics, as well as FIGs and Honors.

3. Its service to governance has shaped the general education program, helped to guide Arts and Science governance, and contributed to the Faculty Senate, UUP leadership, and ad hoc committees such as search committees for Presidents and Provosts.

#### How Teaching and Research Foci Compare with Other Similar Units at Comparable Institutions

The faculty are more strongly focused on teaching than at Oswego, and generally less focused on research than at Oswego or St. Lawrence. While a strong focus on teaching is appropriate for the kind of institution Potsdam is, the department focus on research is still relatively light.

#### Distinctive Identity

The Philosophy Department is unusual in its success in fostering the intellectual engagement of its students, and distinctive in its service to the wider college community.

### **FACULTY**

#### Overall Quality

The teaching effectiveness of this faculty is outstanding. They are, on the whole, apparently excellent teachers, both by reputation and by testimony of the students. Other faculty in the university could no doubt benefit from observing how they teach, or from hearing the faculty members talk about their teaching strategies and approaches.

The teaching load, composed of mostly introductory and general education courses, has both squeezed their time for research and severely limited their ability to teach in their areas of expertise. Consequently, their scholarly activity has suffered loss of focus and loss of productivity.

The department's focus on offering traditional analytic philosophy courses, necessitated by short staffing, deprives students of exposure to non-analytic approaches which connect philosophy to contemporary theory in literary studies and the arts, to non-Western approaches to philosophical problems, and to other interdisciplinary connections.

#### Future Needs

Retirements loom, but hiring faculty is not likely to present severe difficulties as long as the replacements are funded, as there is a buyer's market in philosophy faculty, a situation which is likely to persist indefinitely. However, defining the desired expertise correctly will be necessary to control the direction of growth of the program.

#### Instructional Effectiveness

The dozen or so students we have met love the activity of philosophy and love the learning environment that the philosophy department has created. They are openly appreciative of the faculty members' varied instructional styles. They show a high

degree of engagement in philosophical discussion, confidence in expressing their ideas and questions, and the comradeship of a community of scholars, an ideal often espoused but seldom achieved. What they have accomplished is truly extraordinary, and it is even more remarkable that a department whose resources have been stretched so thin has been able to achieve such a wonderfully vibrant intellectual community.

#### Part-time Faculty

There is one adjunct professor, who is a permanent ABD at Syracuse University, but his workload has been cut, proportionately reducing the benefit of having a fifth person.

#### Faculty Morale

This faculty has the esprit de corps which results from adapting to, and transcending, a prolonged workload crisis.

### **UNDERGRADUATE PROGRAM**

#### Character and Quality

The courses included in the undergraduate major are similar in content to those in the curricula at other institutions with which the team is familiar. At 30 credit hours, it is suitable as either a first or second major. At 18 credit hours, the minor is within disciplinary norms.

But there is a difference between the content of the major and its structure. The content of this major is pretty standard, but its structure is unusually flexible. The reason is the workload crisis. Staffing limitations have shaped the structure of the major and caused it to be so flexible that there is essentially no required core of courses that all majors must take.

According to the faculty, they consciously built in such flexibility because they weren't certain they could offer a core of courses consistently, given the overall demands on them. So the structure of the major, which consists of a series of options, allows students to get through in many different ways. But the optimal degree of flexibility in the major may or may not be the same as that which is imposed primarily by workload considerations.

Ironically, the workload crisis has been so severe for the existing faculty that it has actually proven impossible to offer some of the alternatives allowed by this very flexible major, so there is - in a way - a *de facto* core of courses that everyone must take! Additional staffing would allow the department to choose a degree of flexibility consistent with pedagogical considerations rather than predominantly workload constraints.

Although the courses offered in the regular philosophy major are pretty standard for an undergraduate institution, the department also offers an Honors Philosophy Major designed to meet the educational needs of students planning to go to graduate school. It includes 36 credit hours and a thesis project. Supporting this Honors major requires uncompensated overloads on the part of faculty, both for independent studies to help

students complete the additional courses required for the Honors major and for supervision of thesis research.

An obvious suggestion for the latter problem would be to provide some compensation to faculty for this uncompensated work on behalf of high-achieving students aiming at graduate study. Another possibility would be to strengthen the regular major sufficiently to provide all majors with sufficient grounding to qualify for graduate school. A combined strategy might involve both strengthening the philosophy major core requirements to provide the essentials for graduate study, thereby making it possible to stop offering the Honors Major, while continuing to offer a thesis option for those students who are definitely on their way to graduate school. Clearly it is very difficult for a tiny department to do extensive service to general education and thoroughly prepare all of its majors for graduate study in a very demanding discipline. The current Honors major in philosophy is one solution to this problem. Simply doing away with the Honors major, which would eliminate the only currently viable option for students who wish to pursue graduate study in philosophy, without providing adequate resources to strengthen the major across the board, would restore the *status quo ante* which called for the Honors major in the first place.

#### Non-majors

It is commendable that non-majors fill most of the seats in the philosophy courses, which are geared toward meeting the general or liberal education goals of the university.

#### Service Courses to the College

The low number of philosophy majors is not an adequate measure of the unusual educational impact of the philosophy department on the general education of the students.

#### Student Feelings about Department and Courses

One of the most salient and excellent features of the philosophy program is the remarkably high level of engagement of the students in philosophical dialogue. Students appear quite comfortable approaching, talking to, and arguing with the faculty, and they report loving their philosophy classes. One senses a community of scholars among the students themselves, as a subset of a larger community of scholars which includes both faculty and students. What explains this unusual success?

One contributing factor appears to be the availability of the Commons Room for both informal discussions and the somewhat more formal Forum events. Another, and even more important factor, is the faculty's largely uncompensated support for student dialogue and engagement with philosophy outside the classroom. The students seem to know each other quite well, including at the intellectual level of knowing each other's philosophical interests and even being able to predict each other's positions in ongoing debates they have with each other.

Their public philosophical discussions and events, under the title of the Forum, are

sponsored by the student philosophy club and honor society. Students also individually present papers at undergraduate philosophy conferences. Such activities are to be expected in an established community of scholars; what is remarkable is that such a community of scholars exists in the SUNY-Potsdam Philosophy Department. Any changes made to the curriculum or scholarly expectations should avoid undermining this signal achievement.

#### Assessment of Learning Outcomes

The current assessment process does measure clearly stated learning outcomes. But it does not appear to measure content mastery enough and doesn't measure dispositional outcomes at all.

Content mastery is implied by the third of three major learning outcomes listed by the department, but given the flexibility of course requirements in the current philosophy major, identifying a core canon of philosophers, ideas, or problems with which every student must demonstrate familiarity might make more consistent comparisons possible.

The department's assessment process should be expanded to include assessment of dispositional outcomes. The department is remarkably successful in inspiring in students a love of learning and habits of philosophical reflection and dialogue. Effectively assessing the success of the Forum activities would bring attention to an unusual strength, and could potentially result in sharing of successful strategies with other faculty, other philosophy departments, and other institutions.

The department has used the results of assessment to modify its offerings. For example, a survey of alumni who have attended graduate school in philosophy has indicated that the logic offerings of the major should be strengthened, and faculty members have, as a result, focused more on argument identification, analysis, and evaluation across their course offerings. The department's survey of graduating seniors has revealed that the students would like more breadth of philosophy offerings, and so the department has tried to offer existential philosophy on a regular basis, but would like also to be able to hire someone who could offer more continental philosophy and/or non-Western philosophy such as Asian philosophy.

#### **GRADUATE PROGRAM (not relevant)**

#### **RESOURCES AND FACILITIES**

##### Spaces

Despite the faculty's expressed need for more space for the Philosophy Department, the team was unable to identify any serious problems with the current arrangement, except that the new faculty member will displace the adjunct, who will need office space. There is also a general shortage of classrooms of the right size for the classes of 45-50 students, and the Philosophy Department's computer lab is quite cramped. There is some inconvenience associated with coordinating the multiple uses of the Commons Room. On the other hand, the Commons Room has been an outstanding resource from

the perspective of fostering student engagement, as the success of the philosophy club Forum events demonstrates.

#### Library Holdings

There is a difference of opinion between the Philosophy Department and the Library regarding the adequacy of holdings supporting student research in philosophy. The Department is of the opinion that the holdings are very inadequate, but the Library pleads the rationality of the allocation of scarce resources along the lines of actual use. Since paper journal usage remains low, and electronic journal access is exploding, subscriptions to paper versions of leading journals have been allowed to lapse. The Library recently purchased the POEISIS database, but both the review team and the library are wondering whether the Philosopher's Index might be an even more urgent need. It is also apparent that the Library needs more money.

#### Secretarial Support

With the recent improvement in secretarial support, the Philosophy Department is well taken care of.

#### Interdepartmental and College Support for Research

College support for research is inadequate, compared to support at the outside team members' home institutions. Potsdam is quite remote, and it is expensive to get to and from conferences, so more support for faculty who are trying to keep up with developments in, or contribute to, their fields is in order. In addition to funds for travel, workload reduction and reassigned time for scholarly activity are essential.

### **GENERAL CONCLUSIONS**

#### Departmental Distribution of Resources

The Department uses its resources primarily on its main mission, which is to educate and advise the students, and secondarily on college service and governance. Individual research has suffered. This skewing away from research has been necessitated by inadequate staffing in the past. It is time to bring more balance to the allocation of the department's resources.

The proposed three-course per semester workload would help to relieve the residual workload crisis for individual faculty and provide them with more time for research, but the popularity of philosophy courses among students could easily lead to a recurrence. As the number of sections offered would be reduced, there would be a temptation to increase the caps to satisfy student demand.

#### Comparison with Counterparts

The SUNY Potsdam Philosophy Department compares favorably with its counterparts. It is unique in its actual establishment of a community of scholars among the students, for which it should get much more recognition as a model for other departments and universities to emulate.

#### Important Steps

We recommend that the Administration:

- fund a sixth faculty member, to improve the breadth of offerings beyond the current traditional analytic focus, including perhaps non-Western, and/or Continental European and/or feminist and/or applied ethics, depending on how the department wishes to prioritize the needs and interests of the other programs and the students;
- compensate faculty for Honors major independent studies and thesis supervision, as appropriate;
- fund acquisition of the Philosopher's Index database by the Library; and
- provide adequate office space for faculty.

We recommend that the Philosophy Department:

- revise its bylaws to include higher expectations for the scholarly activity of faculty;
- consider revising its learning outcomes to identify a core canon of philosophers with whose ideas students are expected to demonstrate familiarity;
- revise its learning outcomes to identify the dispositions to philosophical dialogue and argumentation which the Forum activities exemplify; and
- revise its assessment instruments as indicated.