Executive Summary
Program Review
Department of Philosophy
May 2013

The purpose of the Philosophy Department program review is to:

1. explain the program’s mission and learning outcomes;
2. describe the departmental background and context;
3. describe and motivate a forthcoming curriculum revision;
4. describe student assessment of current and proposed curriculum;
5. describe the evidence of student learning collected in this program review;
6. summarize the findings of an outside reviewer’s assessment of the program’s strengths and challenges; and
7. summarize our departmental goals going forward.

Program Mission and Learning Outcomes

The philosophy department seeks to foster a community of Christian scholars apprenticed to Jesus in the pursuit of theoretical and practical wisdom.

The philosophy degree program will train students to

1. Discuss, explain, and evaluate the key ideas and arguments in the history and main divisions of philosophy;
2. employ the skills of philosophical reading, writing, and argument; and
3. apply insights from the world’s wisdom traditions to their practice of the teachings of Jesus.

Program Background and Departmental Context

The Philosophy program has experienced a significant decline in enrollment since 2005: The total number of majors has decreased by 45% (from 75 to 44 students). On a more positive note, the percentage of women students in the program has increased from 20% in 2005 to 25% today. The program attracts a higher-than-average number of Biola Torrey Honors Program students. Approximately 50% of the students in the major are enrolled in the Torrey program.

The program employs four full-time professors, two administrative staff, and five adjunct instructors. The Philosophy program facilitates the completion of three units of general education credit for Biola students. In addition, it oversees two distinct majors: Philosophy (which has three tracks: humanities, standard, and graduate school), and Humanities/Philosophy. The program also facilitates significant co-curricular activities: The Association of Student Philosophers, a regular program of movie-discussion events, a colloquium program for bringing non-Biola philosophers to campus, a regular devotional-classics reading group, and an open-invitation, noonday-office prayer time.
Forthcoming Revision of Department Curriculum

Partly in response to our declining enrollment and a history in which relatively few of our majors matriculate to graduate programs in philosophy each year, we have substantially revised our department curriculum in an effort to make it more attractive to Biola students who don’t plan on pursuing graduate studies in philosophy.

Philosophy, as it was traditionally conceived, had both a theoretical and a practical side. The theoretical side had to do with attempting to answer certain perennial questions: what is real? what can we know? how should one live? It was primarily an intellectual project. The practical side was about learning to live well, learning to live a full human life, and involved cultivating certain intellectual and spiritual disciplines whose aim was growth in the virtues and skills necessary for living well as a human.

Our department sees deep connections between this practical conception of philosophy and the project of discipleship to Jesus (a core ingredient of Biola’s Christian institutional imperative), who teaches his followers certain disciplines, virtues, and skills for living well as a human under the Rule of God. We are amending our curriculum so as to add several courses aimed at (a) introducing our students to a variety of thinkers and traditions that have grappled with the practical side of philosophy (e.g., Aristotle, the Stoics and Epicureans, Confucianism, Taoism, the early Christian monastics, the writings of M.K. Gandhi), and (b) comparing and contrasting their approaches to wise living with Jesus’s, in hopes of helping our students into a deeper understanding and practice of Jesus’s way of life.

While still offering a rigorous education in traditional philosophy (we will still offer courses in the history of ancient, medieval, and modern philosophy, metaphysics, epistemology, ethics, philosophy of religion, and various special topics courses in contemporary philosophy), our re-designed major will emphasize a side of philosophy mostly neglected in the Western academy, the exploration of which fits nicely with Biola’s religious sensibilities and university learning outcomes, and, we think, will make our major more attractive to a larger population of Biola’s students.

The new curriculum also takes steps to enhance student learning and retention of material studied during coursework, implementing an oral exam regime in which students will be required to take three oral exams covering major topics from all previous Biola philosophy coursework. In implementing this, we have in mind recent research in educational psychology indicating that repeated test taking on a given bit of material dramatically enhances longterm retention of that material. Our hope is that by implementing repeated oral exams on material covered in previous courses, we will enhance our students’ longterm retention of the key ideas studied in coursework.

The new curriculum also enhances our present regime for training students in writing and argumentative skills, by requiring all students to take a newly implemented introduction to philosophical argument and writing course before most of their philosophy coursework.
And finally, the new curriculum requires all students to write a senior thesis before graduating, in an attempt to help them pull together and hone the various philosophical skills acquired during coursework. (As things stand, quite a few of our students were on a “liberal arts”-track philosophy major, which did not require a senior thesis. The new curriculum does away with that track.)

**Student Assessment of Current and Proposed Curricula**

The Biola CLEAR office commissioned a focus group study and in-depth, one-on-one interviews with students and faculty to study student and faculty perception of our current and proposed curricula.

The results of the focus groups and interviews are summarized here:

**Commendations:**

- The Undergraduate Philosophy Department has successfully imparted intellectual content and skills in the lives of the student.
- The program has also helped the students to learn and think well. They are also taught to deal with the material in an unbiased way.
- The unity among the faculty and the Christ-like character of the faculty as perceived by the students are noteworthy. Such faculties are the gems that build up an institution for a greater cause.
- The department’s rigorous nature of the program has well prepared students for graduate school or any other endeavor.
- The advising that the department is going to provide to the students regarding registration to the new curriculum will be very helpful.
- The new curriculum being geared towards practical wisdom is very positive changes that will definitely help students apply philosophical concepts to life’s problems.

**Recommendations:**

- There seems to be a difference of opinion between faculty and student about the new curriculum. Although the faculty is very positive about this, the students are nervous about it. Therefore, it will be very helpful to give an orientation to the students in order to have a better grasp of the new curriculum.
- Students are concerned about the merging of some courses in this new curriculum. It is recommended that faculty assure students that course content will not be compromised as a result of the merger.
- As the department introduces the new curriculum emphasizing the practical aspect of wisdom, it might also need to be cautious to retain the academic rigor.
- Students feel that the new curriculum is rightly motivated, but they desired more classes in analytic philosophy from a Western perspective instead of an Eastern one. Perhaps this could be discussed since one of the departments’ objectives speaks of gaining an acquaintance with the intellectual tradition of the West.
• Both the student and the faculty have expressed the need to hire more faculty. Therefore, as suggested by the participants, ways such as making an excellent adjunct professor as fulltime, making use of Talbot philosophy faculty, cross list class or others can also meet this need even without hiring a new faculty.

• “Community” seems to be lacking or is not as vibrant as before based on the data collection. Therefore, introducing more extra co-curricular activity within the department may help in reviving the sense of community that existed before between the student and faculty as well as among the faculty themselves.

• There seems to be a tension between lecture and discussion. Therefore, taking certain steps to determine whether the students already have or lack information to discuss about a particular subject-matter would help the teacher to either lean the class more on discussion or on lecture.

• There has also been a concern about a rampant drop in the majors over the past years and trying to identify the cause and working on it would help in turning the things around.

• Since faculty and students voiced concerns regarding the need for more instruction in writing, it might be advisable to offer more writing courses to enhance student skills.

Evidence of Student Learning Collected for this Self-Study

For this self-study, we collected assignments for two courses: PHIL 450: Senior Thesis and PHIL 435: Advanced Studies in Philosophical Topics. PHIL 450 is our capstone course assessing mastery of the skills indicated in our first and second program learning outcomes; PHIL 435 is an advanced seminar in philosophy, which, this semester, covered material in classical Chinese philosophy and was a test-run for PHIL 330: Studies in Wisdom Traditions, and PHIL 331: Practical Wisdom Lab II, both of which will be part of our new curriculum and will together assess mastery of the skills indicated in our third program learning outcome. To remind, our program learning outcomes are as follows:

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<th>The philosophy degree program will train students to</th>
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The assignments collected for PHIL 450: Senior Thesis were the theses written for the course: substantial, 20-page research papers in which students were expected to read deeply into the literature on a given philosophical problem, then interact substantively with that literature in writing whilst developing original arguments on the problem. Thereby, students had the opportunity to display and hone their skills at discussing, explaining, and evaluating key ideas and argument in the history or main divisions of philosophy, and to deploy the skills of philosophical reading, writing, and argument.
Our method of assessing their acquisition of these skills was to grade their theses with a detailed rubric, assessing

**Exposition:** Whether the ideas of the authors they interacted with were clearly and accurately expounded.

**Argument:**

- **Thesis:** Whether their paper’s thesis was clearly articulated.
- **Arguments:** Whether their paper’s arguments were clear and cogent, and whether controversial claims in need of argumentative support were given such support.
- **Counter-arguments:** Whether the paper considered both obvious and unobvious counter-examples, and/or opposing positions, and provided original and thoughtful responses.

**Style/Mechanics:**

- **Grammar/spelling:** Whether the writing was strong with respect to grammar and mechanics.
- **Clarity:** Whether the paper’s prose styling was clear and concise, and whether its flow of argument was easily followable and well-structured.

Each category was graded on a four point scale:

- 4.0 - Notably strong
- 3.0 - Satisfactory
- 2.0 - Weak
- 1.0 - Notably weak

The averages for the class, across the above categories, were as follows:

- **Exposition:** 3.36
- **Argument:**
  - Thesis: 3.79
  - Arguments: 3.0
  - Counter-Arguments: 3.14
- **Style:**
  - Grammar/Spelling: 3.0
  - Clarity: 3.57

What this suggests is that: our students have attained a slightly better than satisfactory mastery of the skill of expounding others’ arguments; they are quite skilled at clearly articulating a thesis; they attained only satisfactory mastery of the skill of crafting clear and cogent original arguments; and, though they were quite skilled at writing clearly, they were
only satisfactory at crafting grammatical and mechanical prose. Below I'll say something about plans to address deficits in these skills in our new curriculum.

The assignments collected for PHIL 435: Classical Chinese Philosophy were final papers for the course in which students were asked to reflect on several questions about the relationship between one or more of the Chinese wisdom traditions considered in the course and the Christian wisdom tradition (thinking here of a wisdom tradition as a body of teaching on how to live the good life). The goal of the paper was to get the students to think and write about ways in which insights from the Classical Chinese wisdom traditions can be appropriated into one’s practice as a Jesus follower. These essays were graded for grammar, mechanics, style, and thoughtfulness, and received an average grade of B+. We hadn’t yet developed a formal rubric for this assignment, though, so we weren’t able to perform the sort of detailed analyses of student skills mastery we were able to perform for our PHIL 450 (Senior Thesis) course.

**Outside Reviewer Findings**

The reviewer’s specific recommendations are quoted here:

**Program Strengths**

The strongest element of the Biola University philosophy program is the faculty. In their relationships with each other, the four full-time undergraduate faculty members have built a cohesive community of mutual love and respect. They have also adopted a consensus model of decision-making, which each of them thinks contributes to the health of their interactions and to the quality of their academic program. These four philosophers have recently developed a new philosophy major, which has been approved by the administration and which they will begin to implement next fall semester. This innovative major curriculum is another strength of the philosophy program. It was motivated by the faculty’s discernment of their students’ needs, and with its new focus on practical wisdom and philosophical skills, it promises to make the philosophy major more enriching for existing majors and more welcoming to prospective majors. The philosophy faculty members are deeply concerned about their students’ intellectual, social, and spiritual formation, and they demonstrate this concern to their students both inside and outside the classroom. Their students deeply appreciate their professors’ provision of a challenging philosophy program for them, facilitation of events intended to foster a strong Christian intellectual community among them, and expression of genuine care for them. Moreover, the adjuncts who teach general education courses for the philosophy department feel supported, trusted, and empowered by the department. Finally, the department values the ongoing support of the administration and the administration prizes the contribution of the philosophy department to the achievement of the university’s educational mission.

**Concerns**

My primary concern about the Biola University philosophy program is that its talented and committed faculty members do not have sufficient resources to accomplish their mission on
the basis of their admirable and highly promising new major program. At present the four full-time faculty members are each required to teach four courses every semester (or to engage in an equivalent amount of work if they have taken on administrative tasks in addition to their teaching responsibilities). Moreover, the department receives administrative assistance from only one-and-a-half support staff, who also work for a much larger English department. Evidence of the negative consequences of these human resource limitations, which I discuss in more detail below, includes a declining number of philosophy majors, a decreasing level of attendance at co-curricular philosophy events, a diminishment in the vitality of the overall community experience among faculty and students, gaps in the philosophy curricular offerings, and a lower than ideal frequency of some course offerings (every other year instead of every year). Though there are no doubt other factors that have contributed to these outcomes, from my perspective as external reviewer it seems clear to me that given the excellence of the Biola philosophy faculty and curriculum, these negative circumstances are largely a consequence of the constraints placed on the faculty’s time and energy.

Recommendations

In light of these concerns, I recommend first that the university administration continue to support the department as they have in the past – especially while the department transitions to their new major program. I also recommend that the philosophy department be provided with extra resources and assistance in the form of one full-time administrative assistant devoted entirely to the needs of the philosophy department and at least one additional full-time, tenure-track faculty line (with an eye to hiring a person who could compensate for existing curricular deficiencies and who would be in a good position to encourage more gender balance among philosophy majors). In my conversations with administrators, faculty, and students I encountered support for each of these recommendations from virtually everyone in each of those categories. I also recommend that the faculty members’ teaching loads be reduced so that they would have more time for recruiting and retaining majors, planning and hosting community-building co-curricular experiences, and cultivating a lively Christian philosophical community characterized by a high level of spiritual, social, and intellectual engagement. These important mission-based goals can be realized only with the requisite amount of time and energy. Even more, their ongoing attainment requires a culture of unhurried, unstructured time for genuine communication, community, and communion. In order for the members of the philosophy department to be able to achieve these important goals – in order for them to be able carry to out their mission fully – they need assistance in the form of extra administrative help, additional faculty, and more time outside the classroom.

Department Goals

Based on the reviewer’s findings and our assessment of our PHIL 450 capstone projects, the department has identified several goals it will pursue to improve student learning:
1. We will work toward hiring a full-time administrative assistant, who can give him or herself more fully to cultivating departmental community life, advertising, and other departmental administrative needs.

2. We will work toward hiring an additional full-time faculty member to reduce our reliance on adjunct and contract GE-level teaching and to address our departmental reviewer’s concern that we presently lack personnel with expertise in Continental and Social Political philosophy.

3. We will be closing watching whether our PHIL 220: Introduction to Philosophical Argument and Writing course improves student writing skills, and will make incremental improvements to the course as necessary. A result of our assessment of our 2013 senior thesis course, summarized above, suggests that we could be doing a better job at teaching our students the skills of crafting clear, concise, and grammatical prose, crafting clear and cogent original arguments, and accurately expositing others’ writing. Our plan is to address this through our new PHIL 220 course.

4. We will be working to strengthen esprit de corps in our department, which has felt to many of us, both students and faculty, to be in decline in recent years. In years past, we had a vibrant community life, but for reasons that aren’t entirely clear to us, this has been in decline. We hope that our new curriculum and the labs required by the curriculum, many of which will involve meals together, will help cultivate spiritual and intellectual friendships among students and faculty, and a shared sense of adventure as we explore the classical wisdom traditions and think together about how to incorporate their insights into our practice as Jesus followers.

5. Our new curriculum goes into effect this fall 2013, so one of our goals will be to monitor its strengths and weaknesses, and make incremental adjustments in the coming years as necessary.

6. We will be making more robust use of detailed rubrics, as per our PHIL 450 course this year, and using them to track acquisition of skills indicated in our PLOs by keeping records of rubric scores in a departmental database.