TO: Dana Johnston

CC: Dr. Daniela Vallega-Neu, Chair of Philosophy

FROM: Dr. Erin McKenna, Director of Undergraduate Studies for Philosophy

DATE: 12/1/18

RE: Assessment of the philosophy major

Before I became Director of Undergraduate Studies in fall of 2016, Dr. Beata Stawarska was DUGS and she created an assessment plan as requested at the time. The request to submit plans was repeated and we re-submitted the same plan. I have made some attempts to put the plan into action, but it seems the plan may be too ambitious.

The plan called for an exit survey of all graduating seniors. We did create a Canvas site back in spring of 2016 to administer surveys and collect materials. This is not something that has proven easy to keep up to date or utilize. Further, we have difficulty getting seniors to send in the short list of things we need for our commencement ceremony (despite my constant reminders) and a survey would take more time and effort. Another element in our plan was to have all seniors submit a writing portfolio consisting of three papers (one from upper division author’s course, one from an upper division Gender/Race/ Class/Culture (GRCC) course, and one other). This plan posed several difficulties—one, not all courses taken to satisfy the GRCC line are upper division classes; two, this plan would not necessarily give us development over time; and three the time and effort to get anything close to full participation by seniors posed the same difficulties as the survey discussed above (it also didn’t seem warranted since we would assess only ten portfolios). If we had a senior capstone class where we could build in the production of this portfolio, this would be an excellent option, but we do not.

This year, I modified the approach to make sure I had material with which to work. I think we can now build on this approach and improve it as we go. I randomly selected 11 majors and emailed them asking that they submit two papers of their choosing. Three students responded and sent papers. While ideally the entire undergraduate committee would have read and assessed these papers (and will do so in future years), this term that proved difficult to do in time to meet the deadlines. So I have read and assessed the papers. Because I had to collect and assess the papers, the desired “blind” review was not possible. None of the students have been students in my classes, however. That assessment follows below.

A final aspect of the submitted assessment plan calls for a survey of alums. The undergraduate committee will work on developing that survey over the next two terms IF I can be assured we have an effective way of delivering such a survey.

The committee will also revisit the idea of an exit survey for seniors and refine the modified approach to collecting papers. For example, ideally, we would ask students to reflect on the papers they submit, but this level of work is likely to further reduce our response rate.

Assessed papers:

Student one is a junior transfer student and the two papers sent include one from a 200 level ethics class at PCC and one from a 300 level history class at UO. The ethics paper is clear and well-organized. It offers a very proceduralist approach to an ethical problem and shows little nuance or a sense of the complexities. Even when considering and responding to possible objections to the view presented, the student continues to operate with a simplified view of the situation and the theories involved. The paper for the history class has a few writing issues, but this seems to be the result of the student struggling to express more nuanced and complex ideas than those found in the ethics paper. It is still clearly organized, but the student is starting to see that there may not be obvious answers to all situations and that inquiry might be more productive than argument. The second paper could serve as its own critique of the first paper. I hope to eventually build in a self-assessment from the students themselves into this process. Had that been place here, I would hope this student would notice this. Overall, it seems that between the PCC class and the completion of the history of philosophy class here at UO, the student was pushed in their thinking and is now growing into a more thoughtful reader and writer.

Student two is a junior who sent three papers—a 200 and 300 level course from winter 2018 and a 300 level course from spring of 2018. All three papers are clear, well organized, and very thoughtful. This is a case where it is hard to judge what the student entered the class already doing and what the experience of the class might have added. The two papers from winter 2018 are both superb. Especially of note is the way the student is able to clearly and carefully present information learned in the class and then use something learned to call into question the very things being learned. The student is able to make a case for complex positions in both papers and demonstrates original insight. The paper from the spring of 2018 is equally good. These papers represent the kind of thinking and writing we’d hope to see developed by a student who chose to complete our honors major and write a “thesis.” These papers do demonstrate that classes required for the major (in this case logic and a course in the history of philosophy sequence), do help students hone their writing and thinking skills in the way we hope. These papers demonstrate more developed thinking than those of the transfer student above.

Student three is also a junior who sent three papers—one from 2016, one from 2017, and one from 2018—to demonstrate her own development (thereby demonstrating some level of self-assessment which went beyond what I’d requested). The first two papers are from 300 level classes (social and political philosophy and feminist philosophy). Both papers are thoughtful, clever, and demonstrate a deep reading of the texts for the class. The main difference between the two papers is that the later paper shows more nuance in the positions taken. The author is clearly passionate about the topics they are writing about and uses the texts from class effectively to make a case for their position. However, in the first paper the case is pretty one-sided while in the second paper the student is better able to assess what their argument can claim and support. There is less over-reach in the second paper, but without any loss of passion or commitment. This is exactly the kind of awareness we hope to help students develop. The most recent paper is from a 400 level class—philosophy of language—and is a very different kind of paper. I was pleased to see the careful and clear organization and precision with terms that this kind of paper calls for. This paper demonstrates the ability to work carefully and creatively within a confined theoretical framework. These three papers, taken as a whole, do indeed showcase the development in the student’s thinking and writing as they progress through the major.

Assessment:

Looking at the entire set of papers, they provide evidence that we are meeting our goals;

Our learning objectives include:

1. *Delineate the history of Western philosophy and differentiate the main schools of thought, key authors, debates, terms, and methods, that emerged in the history of philosophy*. These papers showed a familiarity with several key thinkers. Marx, Hegel and Socrates in particular. The used term and methods of argument appropriately.
2. *Demonstrate critical thinking, reading, and writing skills through the use of a broad range of research methods, including collaborative projects and scholarly essays that deal with primary and secondary sources in the literature and are written in an academic format*. All of these essays effectively used primary and secondary sources. All were written well.
3. *Present and assess views that differ from one’s own, particularly perspective relative to gender, race, class, and culture, including non-Western philosophical perspectives, within an inclusive classroom environment*. All of the papers addressed opposing viewpoints in one way or another. Several showed growth in this area over the course of the papers. Several papers explicitly took up issues of gender, race, class, and culture. One included the perspective of Native American feminist ethics. We need other methods to assess the inclusivity of the classrooms, but in terms of the material covered in the classes we are meeting this objective.
4. *Compare, contrast, and critique representative authors from various philosophical traditions and historical periods*. This was not set as an explicit task for all the papers in this sample, but several of the papers did do this.
5. *Engage in philosophical inquiry that examines a broad range of topics such as human nature, the self and the community, political authority, morality, knowledge and reality, the arts, literature, film, the internet…*. The small sample of papers did cover issues related to morality, knowledge, self and community, film, and reality.
6. *Define and explain the various sub-disciplines within the field of philosophy, such as ethics, metaphysics, epistemology, aesthetics, philosophy of language, philosophical psychology, philosophy of law, environmental philosophy, social and political philosophy, and others, such as they are approached within various philosophical fields of focus: Continental European, American and Latin American, Asian, feminist, critical race theory, and analytic*. These papers provide evidence that our majors are familiar with the sub-disciplines of ethics, metaphysics, epistemology, philosophy of language, social and political philosophy, and environmental philosophy. In this sample they used the resources of the Continental, feminist, and analytic traditions.

The weakest area among these objectives concerns number three. While we generally meet the main point of this objective very strongly, there is room for improvement regarding “including non-Western philosophical perspectives.” Most of our classes do include something outside of the Western philosophical canon, but many classes are classes on some aspect of the Western tradition. The only classes we have that are specifically on a non-Western perspective are Native American philosophy and Asian philosophy. Currently, we have no faculty who are qualified to teach the Asian philosophy class (that person left and has not been replaced) and the one person who is qualified to teach the Native American philosophy class is busy with administrative duties so it is not being taught very often. This is a weakness in our major.