

Department of Philosophy, Religion, and Classical Studies

Report on 2019 Assessment

The Philosophy Major

At present the only major offered by the department is the BA in Philosophy. The philosophy major combines a thorough study of philosophies that have shaped Western civilization with rigorous training in the analysis of argument. Philosophy majors learn how to analyze and critique arguments, argue effectively for philosophical opinions, make reasoned decisions about ethical issues, actively engage in the debates that have shaped the history of Western thought, and develop reasoned philosophical views of their own on a range of central philosophical issues. Students may opt to complete the major with a specialization in Law and Philosophy or a specialization in Ethics. Like the traditional major, these specializations require the completion of ten courses in philosophy in conformity with basic major requirements.¹ However, students who wish to pursue one of these concentrations are required to select specified courses as options and a senior project or thesis particularly related to the concentration.

Learning Outcomes

The Department subscribes to the Middle States Learning Outcomes and the Learning Goals of the School of Humanities and Social Sciences at TCNJ for all of its programs. In addition, the Department has adopted, with LOAC's approval, the following learning outcomes for the major in philosophy. These outcomes are related to specific areas in philosophy.

Students who successfully complete the philosophy major will be able to do the following in each of the areas specified.

(LO 1a) Ethics: Explain central concepts, terms, distinctions, questions, arguments, and theories in ethics.

(LO 1b) Epistemology: Explain central concepts, terms, distinctions, questions, arguments, and theories in epistemology.

¹ If students opt to do the senior thesis for their capstone, the major requires eleven courses as the senior thesis requires two course units (PHL 495 and PHL 496) for completion.

(LO 1c) Metaphysics: Explain central concepts, terms, distinctions, questions, arguments, and theories in metaphysics.

(LO 2) Logic: Understand and explain the distinction between valid and invalid arguments, be able (where appropriate) to translate segments of a natural language into symbolic form and construct proofs. For upper-level students, the objective is to remind students of, and support students in their efforts to apply, techniques and concepts from logic for purposes of evaluating and constructing arguments.

(LO 3) History of philosophy: Explain central questions, arguments, theories, and movements in the history of philosophy, including (as appropriate) ancient, modern, and 20th century philosophy.

(LO 4) Philosophical analysis and critique: Identify, interpret, and develop a sustained critique of arguments, theories, and positions in philosophical works; articulate multiple points of view on philosophical questions demonstrating an understanding of their respective virtues, deficiencies, and implications; and argue clearly and cogently, both orally and in writing, for positions and against alternatives.

(LO 5) Original work: Formulate and defend their own philosophical positions clearly and cogently while demonstrating a firm grasp of opposing positions and objections.

(LO 6) Philosophical research: Undertake philosophical research at a sophisticated level through the careful and in-depth use of primary and (as appropriate) secondary texts

(LO 7) Philosophy and related areas: Demonstrate knowledge of how work in philosophy has proceeded in one or more of the following areas: aesthetics, environmental ethics, philosophy of language, philosophy of law, philosophy of mind, bioethics, medical ethics, political philosophy, philosophy of science, and philosophy of religion.

Assessment Methods: 2017-2019

In April of 2017 the Learning Outcomes Assessment Committee (LOAC) of the School of Humanities and Social Sciences at TCNJ approved the Department's proposal for a new assessment plan. This plan employs both direct and indirect measures for assessing the learning of philosophy majors. The direct measure uses the paper students write for the senior capstone course (Senior Project, Senior Thesis,

Honors Senior Thesis). This course is required course for completion of the philosophy major. The senior capstone is independent work guided by an advisor with whom the student works closely on a mutually agreed upon topic. The goal of the senior capstone is to give students the opportunity to unify skills and knowledge they have previously gained in the major. Approximately 10 -15 majors each year complete the capstone.

The 2017 plan provides that each academic year supervisors of senior capstones submit the completed papers they receive to our Program Coordinator (currently Cecilia Colbeth). After recording pertinent information, the Program Coordinator removes identifying information (name, instructor, etc.) and makes two copies of the blinded paper. These copies are assigned randomly and as evenly as possible to at least two full-time faculty members other than the capstone's supervisor. Depending on the number of capstones completed in a given year, each full-time faculty member in the Department assesses 2-3 papers a year. Assessors are instructed to rate each paper with respect to the Department's nine learning outcomes using the following four rubrics: "Exceeds Expectations" (Coded 3); "Meet Expectations" (Coded 2); "Below Expectations"(Coded 1); and "Not Applicable" (Un-coded). They report their results to the Program Coordinator, who then tabulates the results and sends that tabulation to our department chair for dissemination to all full-time faculty members. The department's 2018 assessment study showed more discrepancies than expected among the choice of "Not Applicable" for multiple learning outcomes. To correct this problem the department has now modified its methodology in the following way. The supervisor for each senior capstone designates which learning outcomes, in addition to the four (LO2, LO4, LO5, and LO6) required of all senior capstones, are to be assessed. The assessors report their scores for the designated outcomes to the Program Coordinator.

The remaining measures are indirect. Each year seniors are asked to complete a short survey on their perceived progress in meeting the nine learning outcomes and other elements of their experience in the department, such as advising and personal growth. In addition, graduates are asked from time to time to assess the usefulness of their education in the department to personal and professional growth.

Assessment 2019.

In May of 2019 fourteen capstone papers were submitted for assessment. Each of the department's seven full-time faculty was given two papers to assess, so that every paper could be assessed twice.

Assessors were given rating sheets and asked to rate the four papers they had received with respect to each of the applicable learning outcomes. They had three options: “Exceeds Expectations” (coded with a value of 3); “Meets Expectations” (coded with a value of 2); “Below Expectations (coded with a value of 1).

Since every paper was rated twice, it would have been possible for a particular option (3, 2, or 1) to be assigned to a particular learning outcome many as 28 times or as few as zero times. Our results are presented in the chart below. The numerator in each cell represents the number of times a particular rating was assigned to a particular learning outcome. The denominator represents the number of times that our assessors judged a learning outcome to be applicable to the papers they read: again, a range of 0-28.

Learning Outcome	Exceeds Expectations (Value 3)	Meets Expectations (Value 2)	Below Expectations (Value 1)	Applicable Papers/Total Papers	Average Rating
LO1a Ethics	1/6 (17%)	4/6 (67%)	1/6 (17%)	6/14	2
LO1b Epistemology	3/6 (50%)	0/6 (0%)	3/6 (50%)	6/14	2
LO1c Metaphysics	0/4 (0%)	0/4 (0%)	4/4 (100%)	4/14	1
LO2 Logic	8/28 (29%)	19/28 (68%)	1/28 (4%)	14/14	2.25
LO3 History of Philosophy	2/2 (100%)	0/2 (0%)	0/2 (0%)	2/14	3
LO4 Philosophical Analysis and Critique	10/28 (36%)	11/28 (39%)	7/28 (25%)	14/14	2.1
LO5 Original Work	7/28 (25%)	18/28 (64%)	3/28 (11%)	28/28	2.07
LO6 Philosophical Research	9/28 (32%)	14/28 (50%)	5/28 (18%)	28/28	2.32
LO7 Philosophy and Related Areas	10/24 (42%)	13/24 (54%)	1/24 (4%)	24/28	2.4

These ratings were consistent with the normal curves we anticipated.

The Results of the Senior Survey

Prior to commencement the department sent a Qualtrics survey to all of its graduating seniors asking them to assess their perceived progress in meeting the nine learning outcomes (broken out into eleven questions) and to comment on other elements of their experience in the department, such as advising

and personal growth. Seven out of fourteen graduating students responded to the survey. Part A of the survey had eleven questions. Each of these questions asked the student: “How well have you learned how to _____?” (with the blank was filled by one of the learning goals are part thereof). In the table below “very well” is assigned a value of 3, “fairly well” a value of 2, “somewhat” a value of 1, and “not well” a value of 0.

Learning Outcomes	Very Well (Value 4)	Fairly Well (Value 3)	Somewhat (Value 2)	Not Well (Value 1)	Not At All (Value 0)	Average
1. LO1a Ethics	5	1	1	0	0	3.57
2. LO1b Epistemology	3	0	3	1	0	2.57
3. LO1c Metaphysics	2	3	2	0	0	3.29
4. LO2a Logic validity & symbolic form	1	5	1	0	0	3
5. LO2b Logic Evaluating Arguments	6	1	0	0	0	3.86
6. LO3 History of Philosophy	5	2	0	0	0	3.71
7. LO4a Philosophical Critique	3	4	0	0	0	3.43
8. LO4b Multiple Viewpoints	4	3	0	0	0	4.0
9. LO5 Original Work	2	5	0	0	0	3.29
10. LO6 Philosophical Research	4	3	0	0	0	3.57
11. LO7 Philosophy & Related Areas	5	2	0	0	0	3.71

There was one comment regarding question #1: “I’ve really enjoyed my ethics classes here, from Dr. Le Morvan’s Contemporary Moral Issues to Bioethics and others.” There were two comments

regarding question #2: “Haven’t taken much in the way of epistemology.” “I have never taken an epistemology course.” There were two comments regarding question #3: “Did not take metaphysics.” “Metaphysics with Dr. Preti was great for this.” There was one comment regarding question #4: “My logic professor was not great. Thankfully, he’s gone. Can mostly work with logically valid arguments in English, but not symbolically at the same level.” There were no comments regarding questions #5, #6, and #8. The only comment regarding question #7 was: “Oxford was incredibly helpful for this, as I had to critique the work of others and formulate my own ideas.” There was one comment regarding question #9 (Original Work): “This one will always be hard, and requires practice. I think that’s most likely the case for everyone though—it seems like the central pursuit of philosophical writing.” There were no comments regarding questions #10 and #11.

The survey asks two additional questions. The first is: “Please assess the effectiveness of the academic advising you have received as a philosophy major at TCNJ.” The answer options were: Very Effective; Fairly Effective; Somewhat Effective Not Very Effective; Ineffective. Four of the seven students who responded answered: “Very Effective.” Two answered: “Fairly Effective.” And one answered: “Not very effective.” The only comment was: “Absolutely amazing.”

The second question was: “To what extent has your education as a philosophy major at TCNJ contributed to your personal growth?” The answer options were: A Great Deal; Substantially; Somewhat; Not Too Much; Very Little. Six of the seven who responded answered: “A Great Deal.” One answered: “Substantially.” There was one written comment in response to this question: “Had I known what I would learn from philosophy I would have selected it as my first major.”

There is clearly a need to find more effective ways of getting our graduating seniors to respond to the survey. When only seven students out of fourteen students participate, the average response scores are not reliable indicators. It might be wise to supplement our written survey with a focus group in which follow-up questions can be asked. We should also send a survey to graduates from previous years asking them to assess the usefulness of their education in the department to personal and professional growth.