Annual Assessment Report

Department: Philosophy
Academic Year: 2020–2021
Date of Submission: September 15, 2021
Department Chair: Jim Taylor

I. Response to the previous year PRC's recommendations

Item: Develop a more specific timeline/trajectory for how we will address the PRC's recommendations.	**Response:** At our recent department meeting on Tuesday, September 7th, we agreed to devote time at each of our department meetings for discussing departmental assessment results, issues, and plans. And we will include attention to the PRC's recommendations. Though we don't meet every week, we will make sure to meet at least once a month. And when we do, we will make a record of the conversations we have about assessment matters—including PRC recommendations.
Item: Reflect on how the assessment rubric was integrated into courses with an eye to how the assignment and its evaluation could be better aligned across sections.	**Response:** At our September 7th meeting, we discussed the wording and use of our Virtues PLO rubric in light of how Taylor had used it to evaluate student essays in his spring 2021 Senior Seminar course (see below for that assessment). We agreed that we would make it a practice to put assessment rubrics in our course syllabi from now on and to go over them with our students at the beginning of the course and right before each assignment to which they apply—to make sure that our students understand them and have them in mind when they do the assignments. And we agreed that we would change the wording on the Virtues PLO rubric so that it would be easier to use it across our three sections of Philosophy Senior Seminar (PHI 195), since we use different essay prompts. We will continue to monitor our collective use of our rubrics going forward to see whether further revisions are necessary. Also, our primary assessment focus this year (in addition to our participation in the Reasoning Abstractly GELO assessment led by David Vander Laan) is on our Key Question concerning our evaluation of student essays (see below). So, we will continue to discuss our rubrics as part of that ongoing conversation (which will include our evaluating the same essays for the purpose of inter-grader reliability).

Notes: The above two recommendations are the only ones we received from the PRC last year. But we will continue to keep PRC recommendations from previous years in mind as well.

II A. Program Learning Outcome (PLO) assessment
If your department participated in the ILO assessment you may use this section to report on your student learning in relation to the assessed ILO. The assessment data can be requested from the Dean of Curriculum and Educational Effectiveness.

Program Learning Outcome	Virtues PLO (Students will demonstrate both enthusiasm for rational inquiry and awareness of the limits of rational inquiry.)
Who is in Charge /Involved?	Jim Taylor is in charge, but all three of us (Nelson, Taylor, & Vander Laan) are involved.
Direct Assessment Methods	Taylor gave the ten students in his spring 2021 PHI 195 (Philosophy Senior Seminar) course the following essay prompt: "You have been hired by Richard Swinburne to be his personal philosophical assistant. A critic of his has just published a criticism of one of the arguments he makes in *Is There a God?* (in which he lays out his overall argument for the claim that theism is probable). Swinburne has asked you to write a 1250-word essay in which you (1) state and explain the argument the critic has criticized, (2) state and explain the critic's objection to that argument, and (3) defend the argument (from a Swinburnian Christian standpoint) from the critic's objection. In writing this essay, keep in mind that you are writing for an academic/professional philosophical audience consisting in philosophy professors and students. Accordingly, as you write it, engage with the concepts and language valued in the discipline of philosophy." Taylor used our Philosophy Major Virtues Rubric (see Appendix B) to evaluate the students' performance on their essays relative to the two virtues described in the PLO. And he used the following numbering system to tabulate their scores: Highly Developed—1 Developed—2 Emerging—3 Initial—4

	(See Appendix A for a table displaying the individual students' results and a discussion of these results.)
Indirect Assessment Methods	None.
Major Findings	Our benchmark for this PLO is "at least 80% proficient." By "proficient" we mean either highly developed or developed. When the results are considered in terms of average score, our students are collectively proficient in the "Enthusiasm" virtue (average score 2—Developed) and not quite collectively proficient in the "Awareness" virtue (average score 2.5—between Emerging and Developed). But when considered in terms of number and percentage of students, we fall short of our benchmark in both virtue areas: Percentage proficient in Enthusiasm virtue: 70% Percentage proficient in Awareness virtue: 40%
Closing the Loop Activities	We agreed to do the following going forward with respect to our Virtues PLO assessment: (1) Evaluate the first PHI 195 student essay before putting the rubric in the syllabus and another PHI 195 essay after providing the rubric in advance (we assign four essays in this course)—to compare the results; (2) Change the wording on the rubric in various places to make it more usable across sections of PHI 195; and (3) Continue to model these virtues for our students, proactively observe whether the students exhibit them in conversation as well as in their written work, and initiate more conversations with our students to encourage self-evaluation and deliberate cultivation of the virtues.

Collaboration and Communication: In our discussion on September 7th, we talked about whether our benchmark (80% proficient) is arbitrary or should be thought of as a range rather than a threshold. We agreed that even if it is somewhat arbitrary, it is a useful goal and helps to facilitate our conversation and efforts to improve our instruction. We'll keep an eye on it going forward to see if it might be too high. We'll also engage in inter-grader reliability evaluation of the same essays so we can make sure that our individual judgments are in line with those of our colleagues. And we will pay special attention to the virtue that consists in awareness of the limits of rational inquiry since our students didn't manifest that virtue as strongly as they did the enthusiasm for rational inquiry virtue. We also had a really fruitful discussion about how to interpret the language we have used for these two virtues and what language to use in our rubric to facilitate measurement of student improvement in these virtues. We now jointly have a much better idea than we did previously about how to understand and employ the rubric. We will continue to use and discuss this rubric as we discuss our key question about essay grading.

II B. Key Questions

Key Question	Our Key Question #4 is "How can we improve our essay-assessment processes so as to improve inter-grader reliability, communication with students, and the efficiency and effectiveness of our evaluative efforts?"
Who is in Charge/Involved?	All three of us (Nelson, Taylor, and Vander Laan) are involved. As chair, Taylor will initiate, facilitate, and record our discussions.
Direct Assessment Methods	None. We will be addressing this key question by means of ongoing conversations this year and by engaging in inter-grader reliability activities whereby we evaluate the same essays to see how are individual judgments compare.
Indirect Assessment Methods	None.
Major Findings	We are just beginning to address this key question and will report major findings next year.
Recommendations	TBA

Collaboration and Communication: In past department meetings, the three of us have each expressed a desire to improve the process by means of which we grade philosophical essays (which are the primary instrument of evaluation in our discipline). We have not yet taken the time to compare our assessments of the same student essays to check for inter-grader reliability. And we are eager to learn from each other and from other sources about better ways to communicate our assessments to our students. Finally, each of us feels burdened by the amount of time we spend grading essays and also by the lack of confidence we sometimes feel about our evaluative judgments of them.

We will also continue to discuss the other key questions we've been discussing since our last six-year report:
- Key Question #1 (philosophy major and minor recruitment and retention strategies)
- Key Question #2 (the blend of theoretical and practical components in our capstone Senior Seminar course)
- Key Question #3 (broadening the major by working with other academic departments to develop cross-listed courses)

III. Appendices
    A. Prompt, results, and discussion of results
    B. Philosophy Virtues PLO rubric used to evaluate the data

Appendix A
Philosophy Department
Assessment of Virtues PLO
Spring 2021—Philosophy Senior Seminar
Jim Taylor

<u>Philosophy Department Virtues PLO</u>: "Students will demonstrate both enthusiasm for rational inquiry and awareness of the limits of rational inquiry."

<u>Assessment Instrument</u>: I gave the ten students in PHI 195 the following essay prompt:

"You have been hired by Richard Swinburne to be his personal philosophical assistant. A critic of his has just published a criticism of one of the arguments he makes in *Is There a God?* (in which he lays out his overall argument for the claim that theism is probable). Swinburne has asked you to write a 1250-word essay in which you (1) state and explain the argument the critic has criticized, (2) state and explain the critic's objection to that argument, and (3) defend the argument (from a Swinburnian Christian standpoint) from the critic's objection.

In writing this essay, keep in mind that you are writing for an academic/professional philosophical audience consisting in philosophy professors and students. Accordingly, as you write it, engage with the concepts and language valued in the discipline of philosophy."

I used the attached Philosophy Major Virtue Rubric to evaluate the students' performance on their essays relative to the two virtues described in the PLO. And I used the following numbering system to tabulate their scores:

Highly Developed—1
Developed—2
Emerging—3
Initial—4

Here is a table displaying the individual students' results:

Student #	Enthusiasm for RI score	Awareness of RI limits score
1	2	3
2	3	3
3	3	2
4	3	2
5	1	1
6	1	3
7	2	3
8	2	3
9	2	4
10	1	1

| Average | 2 | 2.5 |

Here are numbers and percentages of students in each rubric category by virtue:

Enthusiasm for RI score
Highly Developed: 3 (30%)
Developed: 4 (40%)
Emerging: 3 (30%)
Initial: 0 (0%)

Awareness of RI limits score
Highly Developed: 2 (20%)
Developed: 2 (20%)
Emerging: 5 (50%)
Initial: 1 (10%)

Our benchmark for this PLO is "at least 80% proficient." By "proficient" we mean either highly developed or developed.

When the results are considered in terms of average score, our students are collectively proficient in the "Enthusiasm" virtue (average score 2—Developed) and not quite collectively proficient in the "Awareness" virtue (average score 2.5—between Emerging and Developed).

But when considered in terms of number and percentage of students, we fall short of our benchmark in both virtue areas:

Percentage proficient in Enthusiasm virtue: 70%
Percentage proficient in Awareness virtue: 40%

Comments

1. We have changed the labels on our rubric from "Excellent," "Good," "Fair," and "Poor" to "Highly Developed," "Developed," "Emerging," and "Initial."

2. Though I provided my students with explicit instructions on their fourth essay to show evidence of their exercise of these two virtues, I decided after they had submitted those essays that the fourth essay did not lend itself to evaluation on the basis of our virtues PLO rubric (because it was a letter with philosophical content to fellow Christians rather than an argumentative and analytic philosophical essay written to fellow philosophers). So, the essay I chose to evaluate was essay #1, which was an essay of the latter sort.[1] The students may have gotten higher scores if they had the virtues and rubric in mind as they wrote this essay. On the other hand, evaluating their performance on this essay relative to the two virtues without providing this information in advance gave me an opportunity to see the extent to which these two virtues are already "built in" to their intellectual characters so as to be habitual and automatic without the need for prompting. In the future, it might be good evaluate two student essays—one written without advance knowledge that it would be assessed in terms of their exercise of these virtues and another written with such advance knowledge—and compare the results.

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[1] In the meeting at which we discussed this assessment, my colleagues convinced me that I could have used the rubric successfully to evaluate the other essay.

3. Our department discussed the rubric's wording in light of my experience of using it. Here are some questions we discussed:

   - <u>Enthusiasm Virtue</u>. Does the rubric provide a basis for evaluating the extent of a student's *enthusiasm* for rational inquiry or rather the degree to which a student *takes the assignment seriously* and the level of *philosophical ability* demonstrated by the student? If the latter, are seriousness and philosophical ability evidences of enthusiasm? If not, do we need to revise the rubric so that we are measuring degree of enthusiasm? Or do we instead need to revise the language of the virtue PLO itself to focus on something other than enthusiasm? (We decided that both the language of the rubric and of the PLO are fine as currently worded.)

   - <u>Enthusiasm Virtue</u>. As it is currently worded, the rubric invites the evaluator to consider whether or not the student "takes the argument in the prompt seriously and evaluates it fairly and insightfully." However, the prompt I used for the essay assignment I gave to my students does not include an argument. Rather, in the prompt I invited my students to choose one of Swinburne's arguments, construct a critic's argument against it, and formulate an argument in defense of Swinburne's argument against the critic's argument. In light of this difference, perhaps we should reword the rubric as follows: "The student takes the arguments the student considers and/or constructs seriously . . . etc." (We decided to remove reference to "the prompt" and replace it with language referring to the arguments the student discusses.

   - <u>Awareness Virtue</u>. When the rubric focuses on student attention to whether "a particular analysis is inadequate," would a student's criticism of an opponent's analysis as being inadequate count as relevant or instead does the virtue have only to do with the limits of rational inquiry *in general* rather than the limits of a particular philosopher's rational inquiry (which may not be a reflection of what is kind or degree of rational inquiry is possible relative to the analysis in question). (We decided that the rubric should apply to both of these sorts of cases.)

4. After our previous virtues PLO assessment in 2014, we decided that we needed to make a greater effort to (1) model these virtues for our students and (2) observe whether our students exhibited them during conversation with them and not just in our reading of their written work. I think it would be good to supplement these ongoing efforts with more explicit conversations with our students about these virtues. What do the students think the virtues amount to in general? What examples can they give of instances of them as they observe themselves, their classmates, their professors, and the philosophers whose works they read? What specific steps can they take to cultivate and strengthen these virtues in their lives? And what tactful ways can they think of to encourage their peers (and professors) to cultivate and strengthen them?

Philosophy Major Virtue Rubric

	Highly Developed	Developed	Emerging	Initial
Enthusiasm for rational enquiry	The student takes the argument in the prompt seriously and evaluates it fairly and insightfully. The student gives a full, complex or sustained argument for their own position. The student does not miss any opportunities to apply relevant philosophical theories, principles or arguments, and applies them in sophisticated ways	The student takes the argument in the prompt seriously and evaluates it fairly. The student gives a satisfactory argument for their own position. The student takes up some opportunities to apply relevant philosophical theories, principles or arguments and does so well.	The student does not take the argument in the prompt seriously or else does not evaluate it fairly or insightfully. The student gives an argument for their own position, but it is weak or incomplete in places. The student takes up some obvious opportunities to apply relevant philosophical theories, principles or arguments, but does so in a way that is sometimes quick or shallow or mechanical.	The student does not understand the prompt or engage with it. The student gives no arguments or gives only shallow, inaccurate or confused ones. The student misses even obvious opportunities to apply relevant philosophical theories, principles or arguments.
Awareness of limits of rational enquiry	In addressing the prompt, the student makes a strong, complete and insightful case as to whether: some topic resists analysis or a particular analysis is inadequate; or on some topic, logical argumentation breaks down or yields weak, insignificant or incomplete outcomes; or some important aspects of reality are not adequately accounted for by standard theories; or their own views may be fallible, partial or unfounded.	In addressing the prompt, the student makes a case as to whether: some topic resists analysis or a particular analysis is inadequate; or on some topic, logical argumentation breaks down or yields weak, insignificant or incomplete outcomes; or some important aspects of reality are not adequately accounted for by standard theories; or their own views may be fallible, partial or unfounded.	In addressing the prompt, the student discusses the idea that: some topic resists analysis or a particular analysis is inadequate; or on some topic, logical argumentation breaks down or yields weak, insignificant or incomplete outcomes; or some important aspects of reality are not adequately accounted for by standard theories; or their own views may be fallible, partial or unfounded, but they do not make a strong, complete or insightful case to this effect.	In addressing the prompt, the student shows no awareness that: some topic resists analysis or a particular analysis is inadequate; or on some topic, logical argumentation breaks down or yields weak, insignificant or incomplete outcomes; or some important aspects of reality are not adequately accounted for by standard theories; or their own views may be fallible, partial or unfounded.