

PROGRAM REVIEW: *Philosophy Department at Weber State University (April 19, 2017)*

Introduction:

It was a gloomy and rainy day, but the visit to the Philosophy Department at Weber State University was a wonderful and engaging daylong interaction with the participating faculty, staff and students. We were treated very hospitably. Our interactions were in all cases positive and informative, and frankly, enjoyable.

The overall assessment of the program which we, (Michael Wutz and Michael Popich), have arrived at is a very positive one. Although the Philosophy Department is small in terms of the numbers of majors and minors and in terms of full time faculty, it seems to be a vital and active disciplinary unit of the university. We make some particular remarks about the department, the faculty and students under the standards headings below. However, we have no major negative findings to report and only suggestions about how the department may increase its visibility on campus. The students did voice concern that Philosophy was more invisible on campus than visible. [How to become more visible in a cooperative manner may be, of course, every small Philosophy program's constant worry.]

One positive recommendation that we should state up front is this: based on our discussion with the students and the full time faculty as well, ***we strongly recommend that the Philosophy Department be given a fourth full time faculty member.*** Given their current staffing resources, the department does a remarkable good job of providing a solid undergraduate philosophical education for their majors and minors. However, a fourth full time faculty member for the Philosophy Department would only strengthen the educational program of the department, and address the students' perception that more variety in course offerings is both desirable and pedagogically justified.

The self-study document produced by the full time faculty is a remarkably thorough and useful guide for the future educational direction of the Philosophy Department. The self-study report already contains important suggestions for how to improve on what they are already doing well, and it is duly mindful of the constraints they face, e.g. a relatively small number of majors/minors, a minimum number of full time faculty.

Standard A (*Mission Statement*):

The mission statement of the Philosophy Department is a well thought out survey of the educational aims of the department. The mission statement presents a vision of a well-rounded philosophical education and describes the general, human value of such an education. We would ***recommend*** only that the faculty and students review this mission statement together and consider whether or not they wish to emend it, perhaps in a way to make its implied connection with the University's Mission Statement and its Vision and Values statement more explicit.

Standard B (*Curriculum*):

The curriculum described in the self-study is a solid typical undergraduate philosophy curriculum. The tersely presented chart of the courses offered and the associated learning outcomes for each course is a

exceptionally good representation of what a student should achieve in the way of their intellectual development when they have gone through this curriculum. The curriculum chart presented here also nicely reflects the mission of the Philosophy department. This chart presents the “how” of the “what” in the Mission Statement of the Philosophy Department. The use of the distinction between “knowledge of” and “knowledge how” as a way to characterize learning outcomes is relatively distinctive. A more detailed discussion and illustration of this very insightful way of understanding the epistemic effect of student learning in these various philosophy courses is found in the next section of the self-study. [Perhaps publishing the two together should be considered.]

The frequency of course offerings seems adequate to ensure that students can finish their major in a timely manner.

The frequently voiced concern of students for a fourth full-time faculty member could be justified by considering how this already strong curriculum could be further strengthened by the addition of a fourth full-time faculty member with complimentary expertise in, say, Eastern Philosophical traditions. Such an addition to the faculty would afford philosophy students with an opportunity to develop a more global philosophical outlook and not just a solid western philosophical outlook.

Standard C (*Student learning Outcomes and Assessment*):

This section of the self-study is an exceptional piece of self-evaluation. Our discussions with faculty and students confirmed our reading of this section: the Philosophy faculty have gone to great lengths to assess what they do in terms of student achievement in their philosophy courses and have responded with curricular changes when deemed likely to improve student learning. These assessment tools, especially as described and explained on page 7 of the self-study, were catalyzed by the faculty’s response to a 2011 Program Review that suggested significant improvement in their assessment of the learning outcomes (then) expected of students, both majors and non-majors, who were taking philosophy courses. The Philosophy faculty is to be commended for the way in which they responded so positively to the recommendations of the 2011 Program Review made in respect to this standard. We regard the Philosophy faculty response in respect to this part of a program review to be a model or paradigmatic for other faculty doing program reviews. The changes made in light of the 2011 Program Review recommendations began to be implemented in 2012. The summary of the faculty response to recommendations made in the 2011 Program Review, page 6 of the “Executive Summary” of this self-study, is impressive and should be duly noted by the University administration.

Standard D (*Academic Advising*):

Discussions with students during our lengthy session with them during our visit elicited nothing but positive accounts of the advising, both formal and informal, offered by the Philosophy Department (and by the University as well). No changes are recommended for the advising process used in the Philosophy Department at Weber State University.

Standard E (Faculty):

The self-study section describing the full time faculty shows a faculty which is dedicated to both teaching and professional activity in equal measure and commitment. Given their teaching loads and the evidence of their self-study's report of their ongoing, self-initiated professional development activities, Dr. Mary Beth Willard, Dr. Robert Fudge and Dr. Richard Greene cannot be commended too highly, in our opinion, for their performance as faculty members of Weber State University. Nothing in our conversations with the aforementioned full time faculty leads us to say otherwise.

The self-study report on the faculty is all respects admirable. Once again, we have to note especially that the extent of professional activity on the part of the faculty is especially commendable, given teaching commitments and commitments to professional organizations. [The latter sort of commitments are nicely summarized in section G of the self-study.] Student appreciation of the full time Philosophy faculty, as well as adjuncts, notably Rachel Robison, is very positive. The philosophy students, majors and minors that we met, recognize the excellence of the Weber state Philosophy faculty as teachers and as scholars, as well as mentors. The students, however, did voice their opinion that another full time Philosophy faculty person would make for an even better learning experience (as young philosophers in training).

Standard F (Program Support):

Staff, students and faculty all expressed a positive view of the various support services available to the Department. Other than vigilance with respect to new and improving access to scholarly materials, no recommendations or comments otherwise are warranted by our conversations and reading of the self-study.

Standard G (Relationship with External Communities):

The record of relationships with external communities on the part of the full time faculty, as reported schematically in this section of the self-study, is commendable. One of the communities which is noted in the summary is the Richard Richards Institute for Ethics. Both reviewers, Dr. Wutz and Dr. Popich, wondered whether or not the Philosophy faculty could use this connection to greater advantage in making the Philosophy Program more visible to a wider range of students. We gathered from our conversation about this Institute that there was an initiative to get a half-time faculty person, presumably in Philosophy, to serve as chair of the board for the Institute. We strongly encourage this initiative be pursued. [Ethics across the curriculum anyone?]

Concluding Remarks:

As is obvious from our foregoing discussion, we, the reviewers, find that the Philosophy Department of Weber State University, are doing a remarkable job of defining and fulfilling their mission as philosophy faculty. We expect them to continue to innovate on and change what they now do when circumstances warrant. The full time faculty are very committed to giving their students in philosophy courses, both majors and non-majors alike, the best possible philosophical education they, the faculty, can provide.

We conclude with **two recommendations**.

One, we recommend that the Philosophy Department be considered for and given a fourth full time faculty person. This would benefit both the students' learning opportunities and the current full time faculty's need to teach the required courses in curriculum on what is now a more restricted schedule of course offerings.

Second, we recommend that the faculty explore more possibilities for offering team-taught, interdisciplinary courses, which would engage with the faculty of other selected programs such as Psychology, Economics, Neuroscience, Art and Political Science, and so on. Such courses could be cross-listed with the other discipline as electives. These courses would expose more students to Philosophy and possibly serve as incentives for students not yet connected to Philosophy through previous course work to consider Philosophy as a second major or a minor. [A fourth full-time faculty member makes this strategy even more feasible than it would be with just the three current full time faculty. Perhaps Philosophy adjuncts could also be employed in this vein. Such interdisciplinary courses might also stimulate the development of additional "minor" tracks in Philosophy.

Submitted by:

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