

Annual Key Assessment Findings and Curricular Improvements
School of Philosophy
Undergraduate Program in Philosophy (B.A./Ph.B.)
 October 31, 2016

Key Assessment Findings

The principal assessment measure for the B.A./Ph.B. degree in philosophy is the Senior Comprehensive Examination.

The School of Philosophy has devised a set of “rubrics” (attached) in which many of the elements of a successful performance on the examination are summarized, and a tally (also attached) has been made of overall student performance on the examination according to those terms. The grading scale that has always been used in grading the examinations renders a more fine-grained picture of student performance, however. Consequently, the following report is based upon the grades students have actually earned (see the attached grade summary, which also sets out overall grades, and grades broken out by question area, in graphical form)

This year, 38 philosophy majors took the examination (see Table 1). Of these, 36 passed with a grade of B– or better. 2 students earned a C+ overall, and no one earned a C or lower. No student failed the examination. As Table 1 also makes clear, there were no straight A grades on the comprehensive exam, but 4 students scored in the A–range. The average performance on the examination was 3.09 this year, which is lower than last year’s unusually high average of 3.23 (2014: 2.97).

Table 1: Average grade on Senior Comprehensive Examination by School

| | Number of Students | Average Grade | A | A– | B+ | B | B– | C+ | C | C– |
|----------|--------------------|---------------|---|----|----|----|----|----|---|----|
| A&S | 10 | 3.12 | 0 | 0 | 6 | 1 | 3 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| School | 28 | 3.08 | 0 | 4 | 7 | 11 | 4 | 2 | 0 | 0 |
| Combined | 38 | 3.09 | 0 | 4 | 13 | 12 | 7 | 2 | 0 | 0 |

The Outcomes Committee is pleased with these results. They show that our majors were generally well prepared by their coursework for what is in truth a fairly rigorous, and a genuinely comprehensive, examination, one that tests students’ knowledge of the broad history of philosophy (ancient, medieval, modern and contemporary), their ability to compare philosophers from different historical periods on chosen issues, their capacity to discuss a

philosophical issue systematically, and their facility in interpreting new and unfamiliar philosophical texts.¹

The School of Philosophy has majors both in the School, and through the School of Arts and Sciences. While the course and distribution requirements are by and large quite similar, philosophy majors in the School of Philosophy are required to take two additional courses in philosophy to complete the major, namely, 14 courses instead of the 12 required for their peers in the School of Arts and Sciences. This may account somewhat for differences in grades by School enrollment evident in Table 1 (more pronounced this year). These differences are consistent over all three parts of the examination, as is clear from Table 2, in which the raw scores by day of the comprehensive examination are aggregated, as follows:

Table 2: Average Senior Comprehensive Examination Raw Scores by Day and School

| | | |
|------------------------|----------|------|
| Day 1—Historical | A&S | 3.08 |
| | School | 2.97 |
| | Combined | 3.00 |
| Day 2—Systematic | A&S | 3.14 |
| | School | 3.06 |
| | Combined | 3.08 |
| Day 3—Textual Analysis | A&S | 3.17 |
| | School | 3.30 |
| | Combined | 3.26 |

As Table 2 also makes clear, philosophy majors performed better on the third part of the examination, which requires textual analysis, than they did on the historical comparison and systematic parts. These results correspond mostly with the result of past years. Overall the differences were not so pronounced, however, as to lead the Committee to draw any conclusions, other than that there were no outstanding patterns of failure, in any particular areas tested.

Consistent with last year's results, grades on the examination tended to follow student performance in courses at the university. That is, students with lower cumulative GPAs tended to receive lower grades on the examination. In addition, the average grades on the comprehensive exam were *overall* somewhat lower than cumulative GPAs and GPAs in philosophy courses only, as can be expected from a rigorous comprehensive exam.

¹ The examination assesses the students' formation in philosophy over the whole course of their undergraduate career, by testing both the knowledge they have acquired in the major and their level of skill in the tasks specified. Its questions differ in form, accordingly, from questions in coursework, being broader and more topical in character. The examination is graded by all members of the faculty of the School of Philosophy who teach junior and senior philosophy majors.

Curricular Improvements

Once again, the findings from the School of Philosophy's annual undergraduate program assessment were not such as to suggest that systematic curricular changes or improvements were needed. This is not to deny that the faculty are making curricular changes, and in particular, curricular improvements, as a matter of course. For while the range of course requirements and electives has been quite stable for some years, the faculty who teach these courses are constantly reviewing their approach to them, and introduce changes to the required readings in them, for example, as a matter of course.

In order to prepare majors better to the various forms of writing required for the Senior Comprehensive Exam, the School created a Junior Seminar with a strong writing component, which was implemented in the Fall semester of 2014. The graduating class of 2016 is the first to have taken the Junior Seminar. It is too early to assess the impact of the Junior Seminar on students' performance on the senior comprehensive exams, as more than one year's results are needed to allow for a meaningful comparison with the results of previous years.