

Assessment Findings and Curricular Improvements
Master's Program in Philosophy
Doctoral Program in Philosophy
School of Philosophy

Assessment measures

Among the measures used by the School of Philosophy to assess learning outcomes in its graduate programs, the present document makes use especially of the following considerations:

- Progression through programs
- Performance and pass rates, M.A. oral exams
- Pass rates and grade distributions, Ph.D. comprehensive exams
- Pass rates, foreign language reading competency exams
- Job placement

Types of assessment

The document's findings are grouped under two headings: progress assessments and proficiency assessments. Progress assessments concern how many students complete their academic programs and how quickly they do so. Proficiency assessments concern the quality of the work accomplished by students in the M.A. and Ph.D. programs.

I. PROGRESS ASSESSMENTS

For the last fifteen years or so, the School of Philosophy has maintained a file, updated annually, in which student progress through its M.A. and Ph.D. programs is listed by "class" (i.e., year that a given student begins his studies). That file has provided the basis for the summary tabulation of progress, by degree, provided herein.¹

Three limitations on the data appearing in the School's progress file are reflected in the present document.

1. The file does not include students enrolled in the "Basselin program," a combined B.A./M.A. program for a select group of seminarians. It is appropriate that progression of Basselin students toward completion of the M.A. degree be included neither in the School's file nor herein because the terms of their program do not entirely conform to that of the regular M.A. program in philosophy.
2. Neither the file, nor this document, includes those students—not very numerous—who begin graduate studies in the School and leave relatively soon, after taking only a few courses.
3. It should also be noted that from the School's progress file it was not entirely clear, for a small number of students, whether, after completing the M.A. degree, they had gone on to attempt the Ph.D. and subsequently withdrew, or whether they had intended all along to pursue only the M.A. The authors of this document have attempted to settle such questions as best they could within the time available.

The School of Philosophy "Goals and Assessment" statement for M.A. students does not currently specify deadlines or targets for completion of the M.A. degree, but in the summer of 2007, the faculty approved an informal target of two years from the start of the program. The following table (Table 1) summarizes M.A. progress for students who have entered the program since 2000. The Table breaks the data down by entering class, indicates how many students have completed the degree within two years, how many completed it later than that, how many are still working on it, and how many have withdrawn from the program.

¹ A copy of this file is available from the office of the Dean of the School of Philosophy.

Table 1: M.A. Program Degree Progress.

Class	Number in class	Degree w/in 2 years	Completed in more than 2 years	In Progress	Withdrawn	Completion rate to date	% still in progress
2000	14	2	11	1	2	79%	7%
2001	14	1	10	1	3	71%	7%
2002	15	1	14	0	1	93%	0%
2003	16	7	15	0	1	94%	0%
2004	15	5	7	3	5	47%	20%
2005	23	6	11	7	5	48%	30%
2006	13	1	1	9	3	8%	69%

In the School of Philosophy’s “Goals and Assessments” statement for the Ph.D. program, a time period is specified for each stage of the doctoral program. A doctoral student should (a) achieve candidacy within three years from the start of the program; (b) have his or her dissertation proposal approved within five years from the start of the program; (c) have all requirements but the dissertation completed within seven years from the start of the program; (d) have the dissertation approved and defended within eight years from the start of the program. The next table (Table 2) breaks the data down by entering class and indicates how many students have reached the various milestones and whether they did so on time or late. Progress assessments for the Ph.D. program begin with the academic year 2000-01, the first entering class whose students ought to have graduated by the time of this report.

Table 2: Doctoral Program Degree Progress

Class	Size	Candidacy			Proposal			ABD			Defended		
		on time	late	no	on time	late	no	on time	late	no	on time	late	no
1994	21	4	9	8	8	4	9	7	4	10	3	5	13
1995	10	3	4	3	4	1	5	4	1	5	4	1	5
1996	10	2	3	5	0	4	6	2	2	6	0	0	0
1997	10	4	1	4	3	2	4	4	1	4	2	2	6
1998	15	10	5	0	5	6	4	10	1	4	3	3	9
1999	11	4	6	1	3	5	3	5	2	4	2	0	9
2000	12	3	4	5	2	3	7	4	1	7	2	0	10

The next table charts the rate at which students admitted to the doctoral program have to date either completed the degree, or withdrawn from the program.

Table 3: Doctoral Program Completion Rate

Year	In progress	% still in progress	Completed	% completed	Withdrawn	% withdrew
1994	1	5%	8	38%	12	57%
1995	0	0%	5	50%	5	50%
1996	3	30%	0	0%	7	70%
1997	1	10%	4	40%	5	50%
1998	8	53%	6	40%	1	7%
1999	6	55%	2	18%	3	27%
2000	4	33%	2	17%	6	50%

Because the numbers of students in question here is relatively small, it is difficult to draw any firm conclusions regarding either the percentages of students who actually complete the degree or the rate at which those who do complete the program manage to finish it. One pertinent benchmark in this regard is a 2006 study published by the National Science Foundation, by Thomas B. Hoffer and Vincent Welch, Jr.. In that study the authors report that in 2003, the most recent year for which they had data, the median time to degree for research doctorates in the humanities was 11.3 years.² Considering that this study does not factor into its account the numbers of students who begin a doctoral program but eventually withdraw, it may well be that the rate of progress in the School’s program is not out of line. Thus, for example, of those students who entered the program in 1995 and did not withdraw, 100% completed the degree within the median time reported by the NSF study.

II. PROFICIENCY ASSESSMENTS

The following tables summarize several distinct proficiency assessments.

The fourth table is for is for the M.A. oral exams: at the time of writing we are able to provide only aggregate data for a period of approximately seven years, indicating how many exams were taken; how many times the exam was passed, failed, and failed for a second or third (and final) time; and how many exams were passed with honors and at what level. The M.A. “Goals and Assessment” document calls for reporting on the exact scores that students received. Only pass/fail and honors have been recorded up until now, however, so this mode of reporting will have to wait for the future.

Table 4: M.A. oral exam

Total	Total fail	Total second fail	Total third fail	Cum Laude honors	Magna honors	Summa honors	Pass rate	Honors rate
127	7	2	0	24	3	1	94%	22%

The M.A. orals have a very high pass rate—94%—and a fairly low honors rate—22%. It seems that the vast majority of our students can handle the M.A. oral exam, but that only a minority are able to do so in an exemplary manner. It is worth noting that a good number of students who pursue the M.A. degree have no ambitions to go on to the doctorate, which would partly explain why this exam is often passed in an adequate and not an exemplary fashion.

Tables 5 and 6 are for graduate language exams; they divide up the data by academic year and then indicate, for each language, how many students took the exam and how well they did. Table 5 covers a period during which the only two grades recorded were pass or fail.

Table 5: Language exam performance I

Year	French		German		Greek		Latin		Total Exams	Total pass	Pass rate
	Pass	Fail	Pass	Fail	Pass	Fail	Pass	Fail			
2000-01	11	6	8	7	0	3	0	0	35	19	54%
2001-02	10	8	6	5	0	2	4	2	37	20	54%
2002-03	18	4	12	14	1	0	5	4	58	36	62%
Fall2003	9	0	3	5	0	0	4	1	22	16	73%

² “Time to Degree of U.S. Research Doctorate Recipients,” *Info Brief*, National Science Foundation Directorate for Social, Behavioral, and Economic Sciences, March 2006

Table 6 (see Appendix 1) covers a period during which there were three grades recorded: pass, M.A. pass, or fail.³ The M.A. and Doctoral “Goals and Assessment” documents call for reporting on how many times students have to take these exams in order to pass them, but such information has not been kept in the past. This mode of reporting will have to wait for the future.

As the preceding two tables indicate, the pass rate for the language exams is approximately 2/3. Although virtually all students eventually pass the exams on subsequent attempts—there is no case in memory of anyone having failed after a third attempt—this is an area that could use improvement. Still, it is not clear what can be done until students receive the funding that will allow them to spend adequate time on language study.

The seventh table (Appendix 1) concerns the doctoral reading list exams. It divides up the data by academic year and then indicates, for each reading list exam, how many students took the exam and what the grade distribution was. The Doctoral “Goals and Assessment” document calls for reporting on how many times students have to take these exams in order to pass them, but such information has not been kept in the past. This mode of reporting will have to wait for the future.

The reading list exams have a very low failure rate. The vast majority of our students are able to handle these wide-ranging exams, despite the long reading lists that they cover. Not many attain grades in the A-range, however: 17%. Partly this is due to the unusual way in which grades for this exam is calculated.⁴ There may be other reasons that bear considering, however.

The last table charts job placement for those who have completed the Ph.D. It contains the following information: Calendar year of graduation (hence degrees awarded in January, May, and October appear in the same year, even though October degrees only show up in the following year's commencement program); number of Ph.D. graduates; percentage who have obtained an ongoing academic position. Footnotes to the last number provide brief statements of the activities of those who have not secured an ongoing academic position.

Table 8: Placement

Year Ph.D. degree awarded	Number of graduates	% who secured an ongoing academic position
2007	5	60 ⁵
2006	5	40 ⁶
2005	4	50 ⁷
2004	4	50 ⁸
2003	6	67 ⁹
2002	3	100

³ The M.A. pass is a pass at a level that is acceptable for the M.A. degree only; students wishing to go on for the doctorate must retake the exam if they receive only an M.A. pass.

⁴ In a nutshell, all fractions are rounded down.

⁵ 2007: One in temporary job, one unknown.

⁶ 2006: One teaching part-time, one working for a religious community, one unknown.

⁷ 2005: One in temp college position, one working as development director for a small liberal arts college.

⁸ 2004: Two in temp college positions.

⁹ 2003: One unknown, one working for Brazilian government.

2001	5	80 ¹⁰
2000	7	57 ¹¹

A few notes on the above. First, by an “ongoing” academic position is meant either a tenure-track position or a regular, non-fixed-term position in a non-tenure-granting institution of higher learning such as a seminary. (A significant number of our graduates end up with positions in non-tenure-granting institutions.) Second, if a graduate leaves an ongoing position for a non-ongoing position (a rare but not impossible scenario), the percentage for that graduation year is not been reduced. Third, the table does not reveal how long it took the graduates to get ongoing jobs; in some cases they had them before graduation, in other cases they started out in non-ongoing positions and moved later to ongoing positions. Fourth, in some cases we were unable to find out what sort of position the graduate had; such students are treated as if they did not get one, which means that the chart gives a pessimistic view of our placement results. Finally, it is worth noting that in more than a few cases, graduates are not in academic positions but have found perfectly satisfactory work and thus are not “failures” in any reasonable sense of the word.

Placement results are very hard to analyze. There hasn’t been a seller’s market for Ph.D.-holders in philosophy in a very long time. In the period analyzed, over half of our graduates got an ongoing teaching position in philosophy. On the other hand, over one-fourth of those who did not are working outside of the field of college teaching. According to the chair of the School’s Graduate Placement Committee, however, graduates who do not secure an ongoing position are often where they are by deliberate choice. By the same token, some of those who are still in temporary positions are unwilling to do what is required to get an ongoing position—e.g., move to almost anywhere.

In sum, our placement record appears to be respectable. Yet it is difficult at this point to say whether efforts on our part could improve it, and what those efforts might be. This is a topic that should be addressed in future reports.

¹⁰ 2001: One in temp college job.

¹¹ 2000: Two in temp jobs, one teaching high school for her religious order.

Appendix 1

Table 6: Language exam performance II

Year	French			German			Greek			Latin			Total Exams	Total Pass	Pass Rate	Total Pass & MA Pass	Pass Rate
	Pass	MA Pass	Fail	Pass	Ma Pass	Fail	Pass	MA Pass	Fail	Pass	MA Pass	Fail					
Sp 04 – Su 04	7	1	2	11	4	6	2	0	0	4	1	1	39	24	62%	30	77%
2004-05	11	2	3	6	3	2	0	0	0	1	2	3	33	18	55%	25	76%
2005-06	14	2	6	12	6	2	0	0	0	10	2	2	56	36	64%	46	82%
2006-07	10	4	2	7	2	4	0	0	0	10	0	3	42	27	64%	33	79%
2007-08	16	2	0	7	5	6	0	0	0	7	0	6	49	30	61%	37	76%

Table 7: Doctoral Reading List Exams

Year	List I						List II						List III						Total	% fail	%A range	%B range
	F	B -	B	B +	A-	A	F	B-	B	B+	A-	A	F	B-	B	B+	A-	A				
2000-01	0	0	0	4	1	0	1	3	4	0	1	0	0	0	2	1	2	0	19	5%	74%	21%
2001-02	1	0	1	5	0	0	1	4	0	3	1	0	1	0	0	1	1	0	19	16%	74%	11%
2002-03	0	0	0	5	1	0	0	1	1	3	0	0	0	0	0	2	0	0	13	0%	92%	8%
2003-04	0	0	4	5	0	0	1	1	1	2	1	0	0	0	1	2	3	0	21	5%	76%	19%
2004-05	1	0	1	3	1	0	1	0	2	0	0	0	1	1	1	0	0	0	12	25%	67%	8%
2005-06	0	1	6	2	1	1	0	0	2	0	2	0	0	1	5	4	3	0	28	0%	75%	25%
2006-07	1	1	6	3	1	0	0	1	4	5	3	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	25	4%	80%	16%