

Assessment Findings and Curricular Improvements

Undergraduate Program in the School of Philosophy

Philosophy Concentration in Arts and Sciences

The School of Philosophy assesses learning outcomes in the following ways:

- Grades and evaluation of performance of seniors in the senior comprehensive examinations
- Grades in the year-long senior seminar and evaluation of student performance in the seminars
- Grades and evaluation of student performance in the two-course metaphysics sequence (PHIL 355/356) and the history of philosophy sequence (PHIL 353, 354, 453, 454). Students in the metaphysics sequence are juniors or seniors. Students in the history of philosophy courses are a mix of sophomores, juniors, and seniors, with mostly sophomores and juniors in PHIL 353/354 (History of Ancient Philosophy, History of Medieval Philosophy) and only juniors and seniors in PHIL 453/454 (History of Modern Philosophy, Contemporary Philosophy).

Assessment Findings

This is the first year the School of Philosophy has written a report of this type, assessing educational outcomes according to the present format. The evaluation tools on which we report, however, have been in place for many years. In order to provide additional support for the findings reported below, which compare student performance in three distinct areas (the senior comprehensive exam, the senior seminar, and the two-course sequence in metaphysics), we include results from both 2008 and 2007. The results for 2007 are, for each of the three comparisons we have undertaken, sufficiently similar to offer additional warrant for our findings for 2008.

Senior Comprehensive Examinations

The comprehensive examination in the School of Philosophy is a rigorous and demanding examination, administered over three days, and lasting all morning of each of the three days. The examination assesses the students' formation in philosophy over the whole course of their undergraduate career. It tests both the knowledge students have acquired in the major and their level of skill in a variety of tasks appropriate to the discipline of philosophy. The questions differ in form from questions in coursework. I.e., they are broader and more topical. The exam is graded by all members of the faculty of the School of Philosophy who teach junior and senior philosophy majors.

The first day of the exam tests the students' knowledge of the broad history of philosophy (ancient, medieval, modern and contemporary), and their ability to compare philosophers from different historical periods on chosen issues. The second day tests the students' ability to discuss a philosophical issue systematically. The third day tests students' ability to understand new and unfamiliar philosophical texts.

This year (see Table 1), twenty-three out of 29 philosophy majors passed the exam with a grade of B- to A-

Table 1:

Test Takers	Average Grade	A	A-	B+	B	B-	C+	C	C-
29	2.93	0	4	7	5	7	5	0	1

As Table 1 makes clear, there were no A grades on the comprehensive exam this year. No student failed the examination. The average grade on the examination was 2.93 out of a possible 4.0. The Outcomes Committee is, on balance, pleased with these results. In our judgment, these results reflect attainment of a level of competence in philosophical thinking that is impressive overall, and showed that students were, in general, well prepared by their coursework for the examination.

At a more detailed level (see Table 2), the Committee noted that students performed slightly better on the historical questions (Day 1) than on the systematic questions (Day 2).

Table 2:

Day 1 -- Historical	3.09
Day 2 -- Systematic	2.78
Day 3 -- Textual	3.04

The Committee agreed that this is what one would expect, given that thinking systematically in philosophy is challenging and requires more intellectual maturity than making connections historically in philosophy. Student performance in textual analysis (Day 3) came close to their performance in history of philosophy (Day 1). There were no outstanding patterns of failure or weakness in particular areas.

In general, student grades on the examination followed their performance in courses at the university (see Attachment 1). That is, students with lower GPAs received lower grades on the exam. In addition, grades on the comprehensive were *overall* lower than GPAs, as the chart (1c) shows. Even the best students performed at an A- or B+ level on the comprehensive exam rather than their accustomed level of A (3.75-4.0). This is a pattern we have observed for many years. No figures are available for overall GPA in philosophy courses alone, rather than GPA in all university courses, so it is difficult at the present time to assess the significance of the overall lower comps grades taken in comparison to student GPA.

Senior Seminar

The senior seminar is a year-long course taught by different faculty members each semester of a given year. Professors choose a theme in philosophy that allows them to range over many philosophers and historical periods with the purpose of engaging the students in synthesis of what they have learned in their philosophy education. A final exam and a final paper of substantial length are required each semester. Average grades for the 2008 senior seminar tracked comp grades closely (see Attachment 2). This correspondence with the comprehensive examination underlines the accuracy of this exam, which is our primary evaluation tool. The Committee discussed the goal of the senior seminar at some length. It was agreed that the value of the seminar would be greatly enhanced if we were able to offer two sections of it each semester. At present, the seminar has 25-35 students each semester. Discussion, a key means of achieving the synthetic thinking that is the aim of the seminar, is

difficult in this large a class. We do not currently have sufficient faculty resources to offer two sections of the seminar senior each semester. In spite of this limitation, the Committee believes that the senior seminar helps the students in consolidating their knowledge of philosophy in their last year of college.

Metaphysics sequence and history of philosophy sequence

The Committee discussed the achievement of the students in certain core philosophy courses: the history of philosophy sequence (4 courses) and the metaphysics sequence (2 courses). Since this is the first year we have tried to quantify overall performance of students, the Committee addressed only the metaphysics sequence. Metaphysics I and II (PHIL 355/356) is a systematic philosophy sequence taught by the same professor every year, who as a general rule maintains substantially the same course content. Students graduating this year took the sequence either in junior or senior year. The curve of student grades in comparison to GPA for the metaphysics sequence did not conform to the pattern of the comprehensive exam and senior seminar (see Attachment 3). There were more students who exceeded their GPA in the metaphysics sequence than in the senior seminar or comprehensive exam. In regard to this contrast, it was noted by the Committee that talented students react well to the challenge of abstract thinking in this sequence. It is not unusual for students in the philosophy major to be even more enthusiastic about this most elevated branch of philosophy, metaphysics, than they are about more practical areas of philosophy. A few weaker students, on the other hand, find it difficult to cope with the theoretical character of the subject matter and score lower than in the later evaluative measures, senior seminar and the comprehensive exam. Overall, the Committee is very pleased with the integration of the metaphysics sequence into the philosophy major. This sequence trains students in a clear and concise way to think systematically in philosophy.

NSSE Comparison Data

Data from the NSSE survey of students for 2007 support the proposition that the School of Philosophy is achieving its goals in the undergraduate major (see attachment 4). Philosophy students scored significantly higher than all peer comparison groups in analysis of ideas. While there were no other statistically significant findings, there was a strong trend for Philosophy students to outperform the NSSE average and Carnegie peer institutions in 18 of 28 other measures of student engagement in general education goals. Our students matched or exceeded other departments at our own institution, as well the national averages, in a number of categories that are closely tied to the goals set by the School of Philosophy for assessment of undergraduate education in philosophy. For instance, philosophy students, to a greater extent than other students in all comparison groups, judged that their coursework assisted them in

- analysis and synthesis of ideas
- thinking critically
- “making judgments about the value of information, arguments or methods”

Philosophy students also scored highest in

- numbers of books assigned
- numbers of books “read on your own”
- papers required (between 5 and 19 pages)

In addition, philosophy students at CUA led all other comparison groups in reporting that during the present school year, they

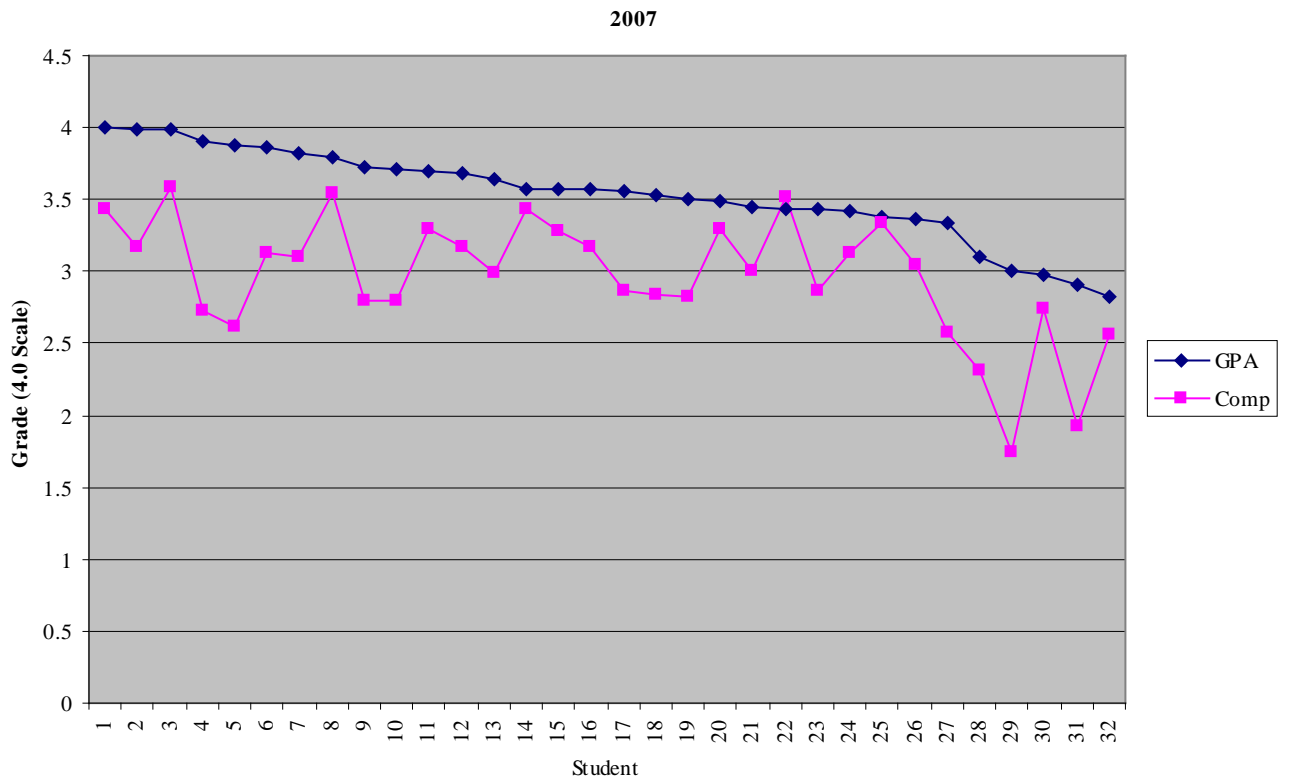
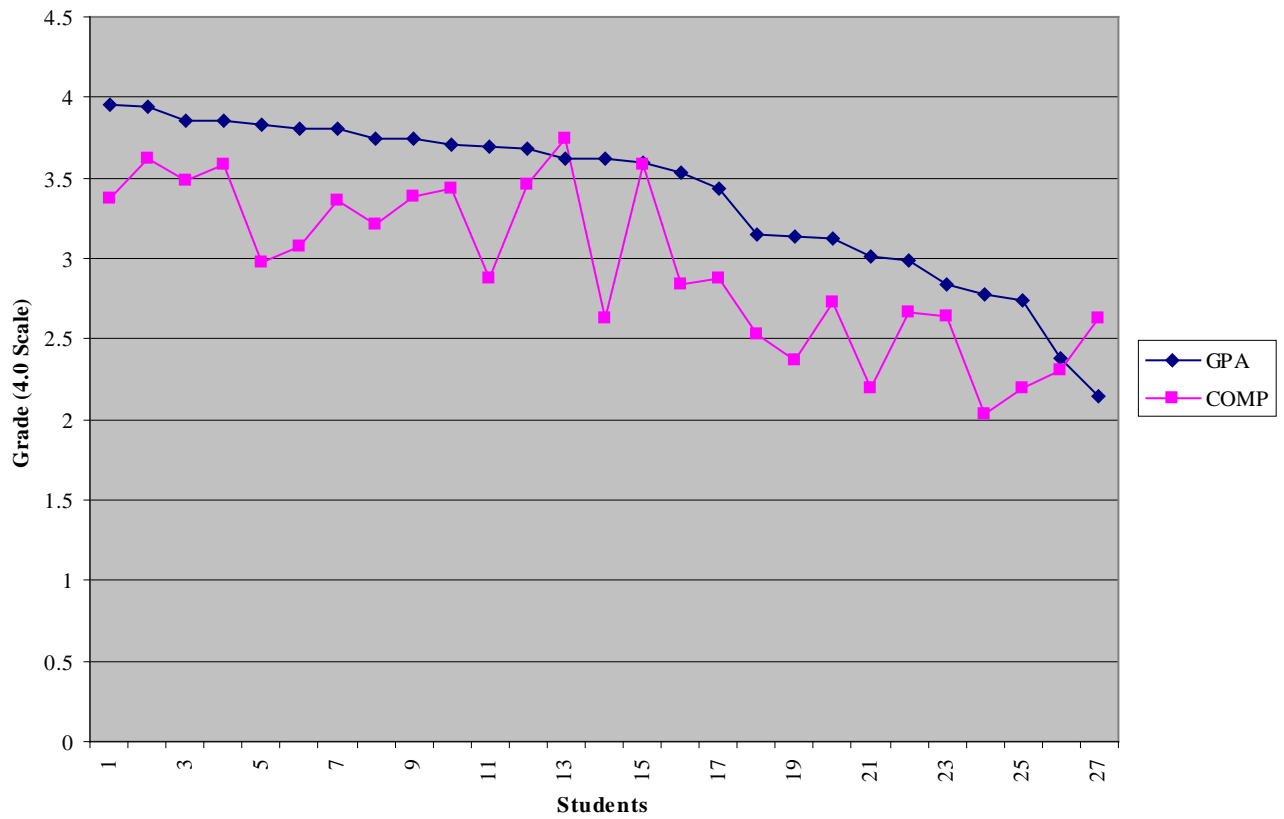
- "had serious conversations with students of a different race or ethnicity than your own"
- "had serious conversations with students who are very different from you in terms of their religious beliefs, political opinions, or personal values"

In connection with these last results, it is perhaps relevant that one segment of philosophy majors at Catholic University come from a pre-seminary program for Redemptoris Mater seminary, which draws students from around the world, in particular Europe and Latin America. In addition, the Committee noted that the outcomes given in these last bullet items support the proposition that a solid training in the Catholic intellectual tradition, far from being a narrow education, in fact equips students well to engage in inter-religious and intercultural dialogue.

Curricular Improvements

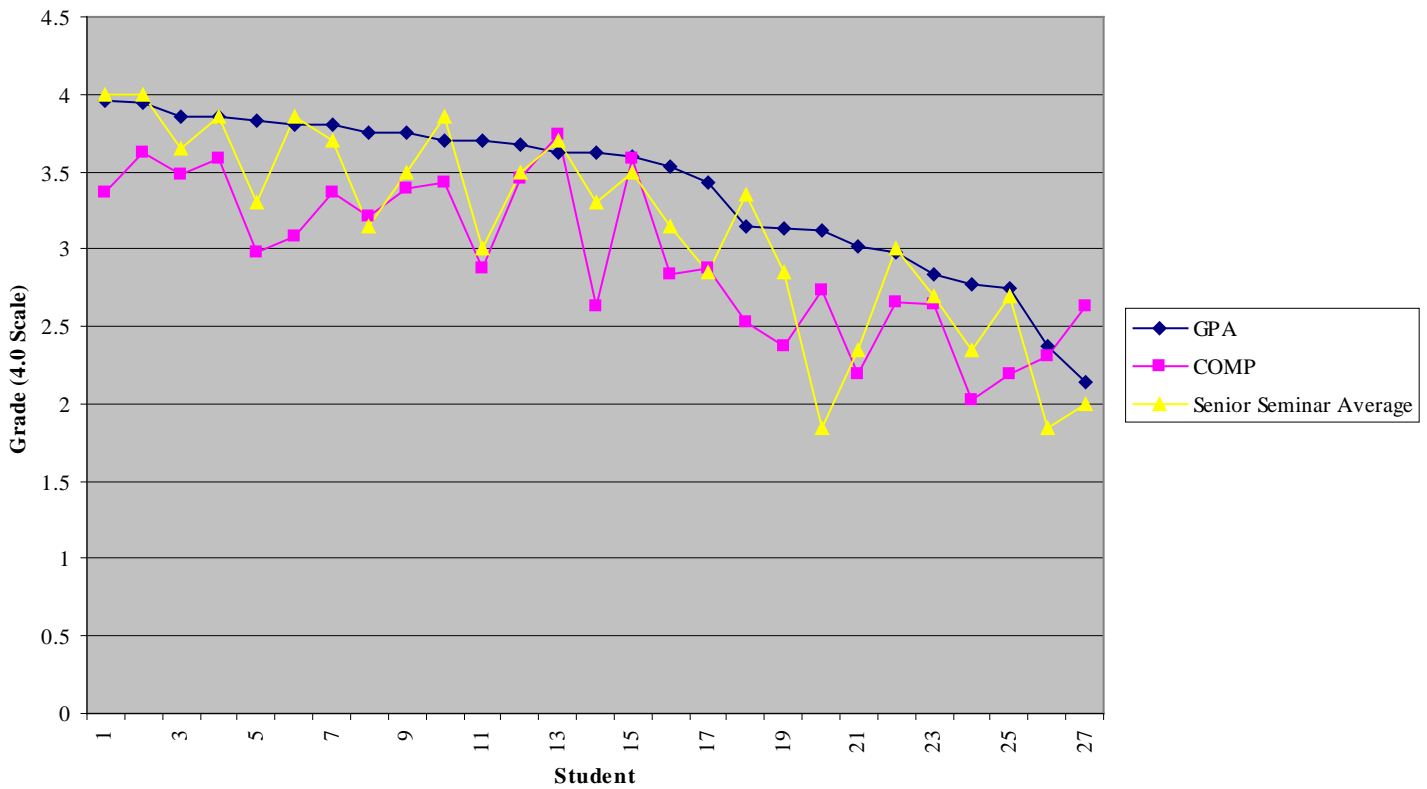
Three years ago, the Curriculum Committee moved to require History of Ancient Philosophy (PHIL 353) of all majors. Previously, the faculty had accepted Classical Mind (PHIL 201), a general introductory course for all students, as a substitute for PHIL 353. This change was made in order to prepare philosophy majors better for later developments in philosophy that draw upon pre-Socratic philosophy, Neoplatonism, and Stoicism. The Curriculum Committee is presently assessing all course offerings to determine general requirements of what should be covered in each class. The Outcomes Assessment Committee is discussing how the senior seminar can be of most value to the students as a capstone educational experience (see section on senior seminar above). As already noted, if the faculty resources were available, it would be the recommendation of the Committee that there be two sections of the senior seminar offered each semester.

Attachment 1: Cumulative GPA and Comprehensive Score Comparison 2008

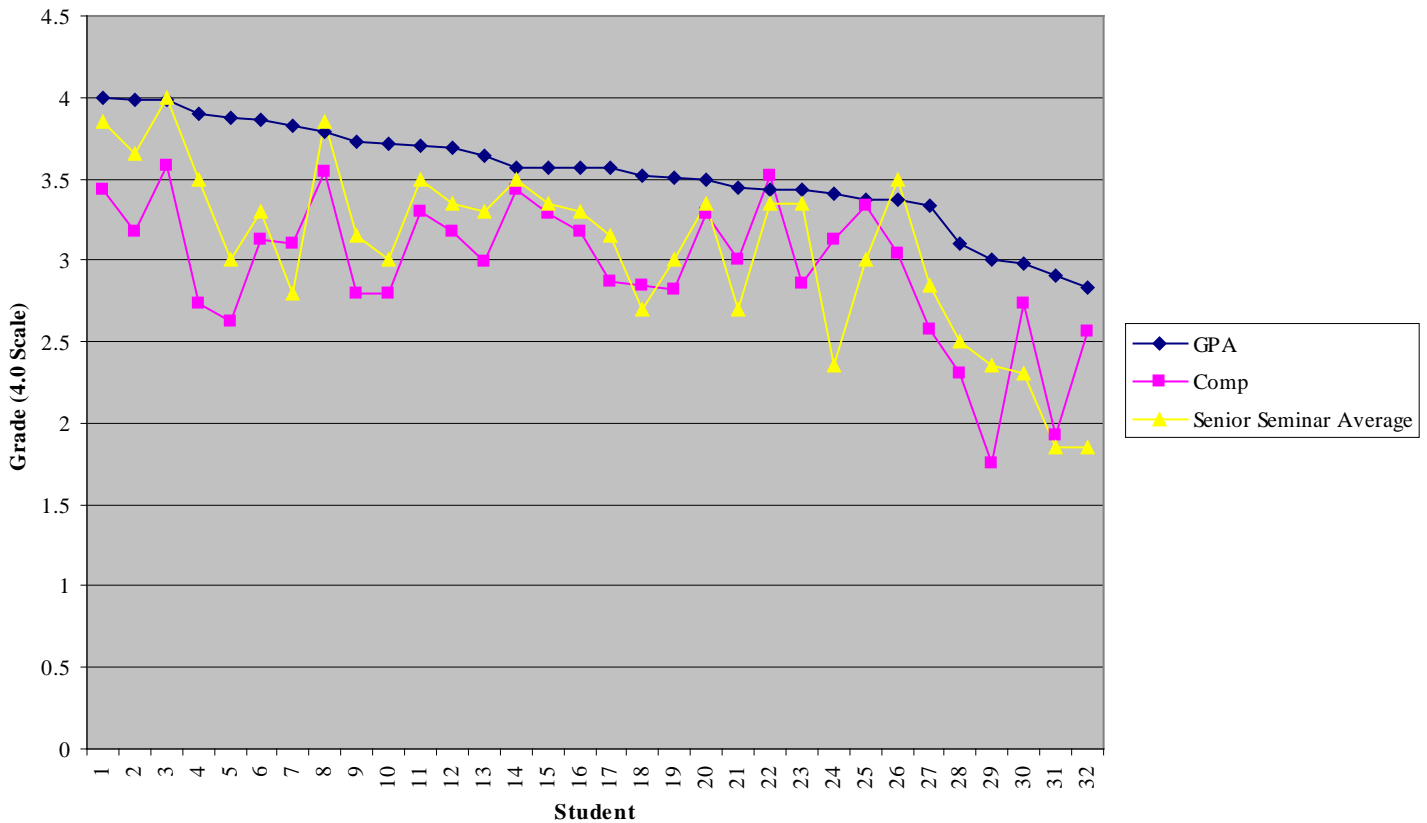


Attachment 2: Cumulative GPA, Comprehensive Score, and Senior Seminar Comparison

2008

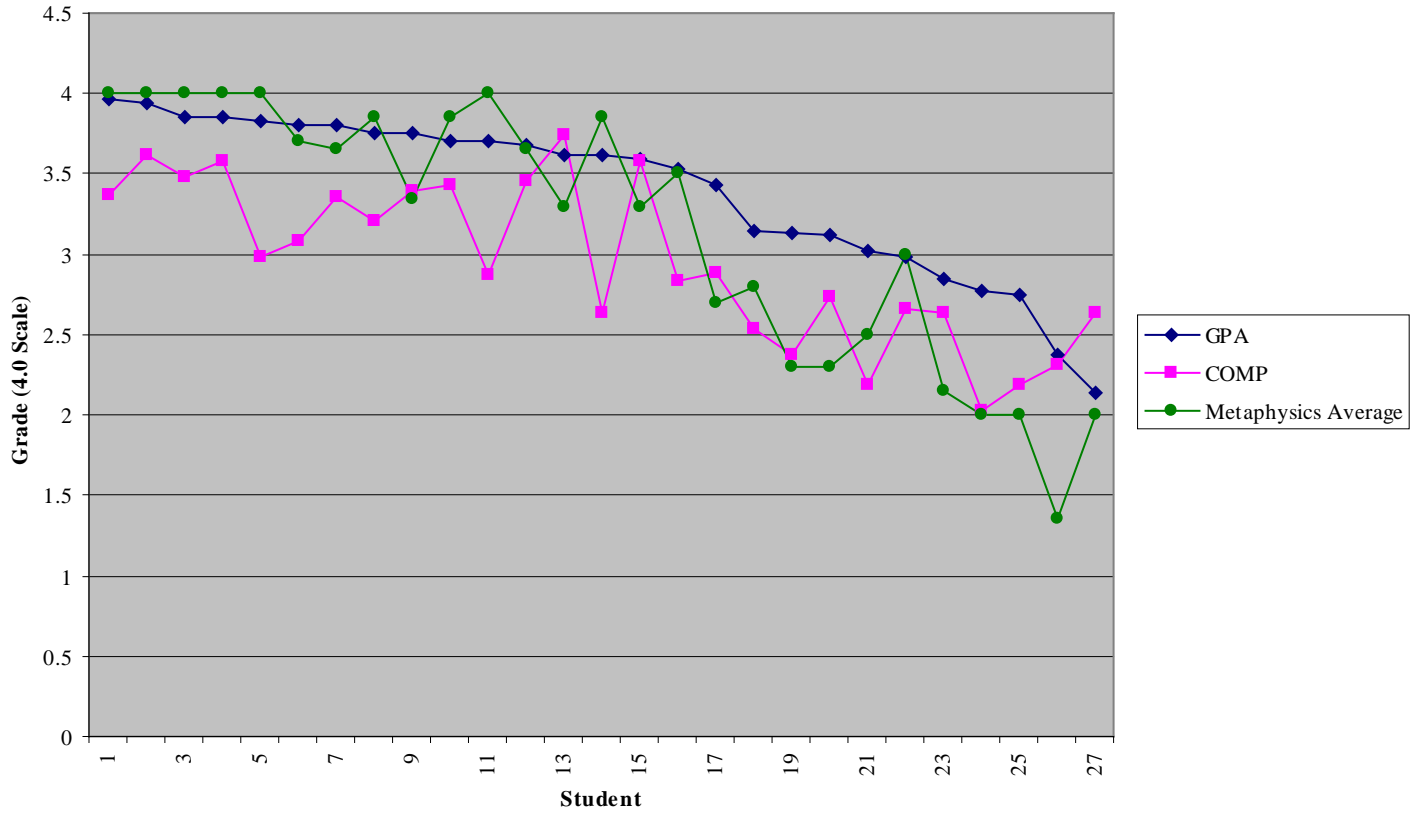


2007

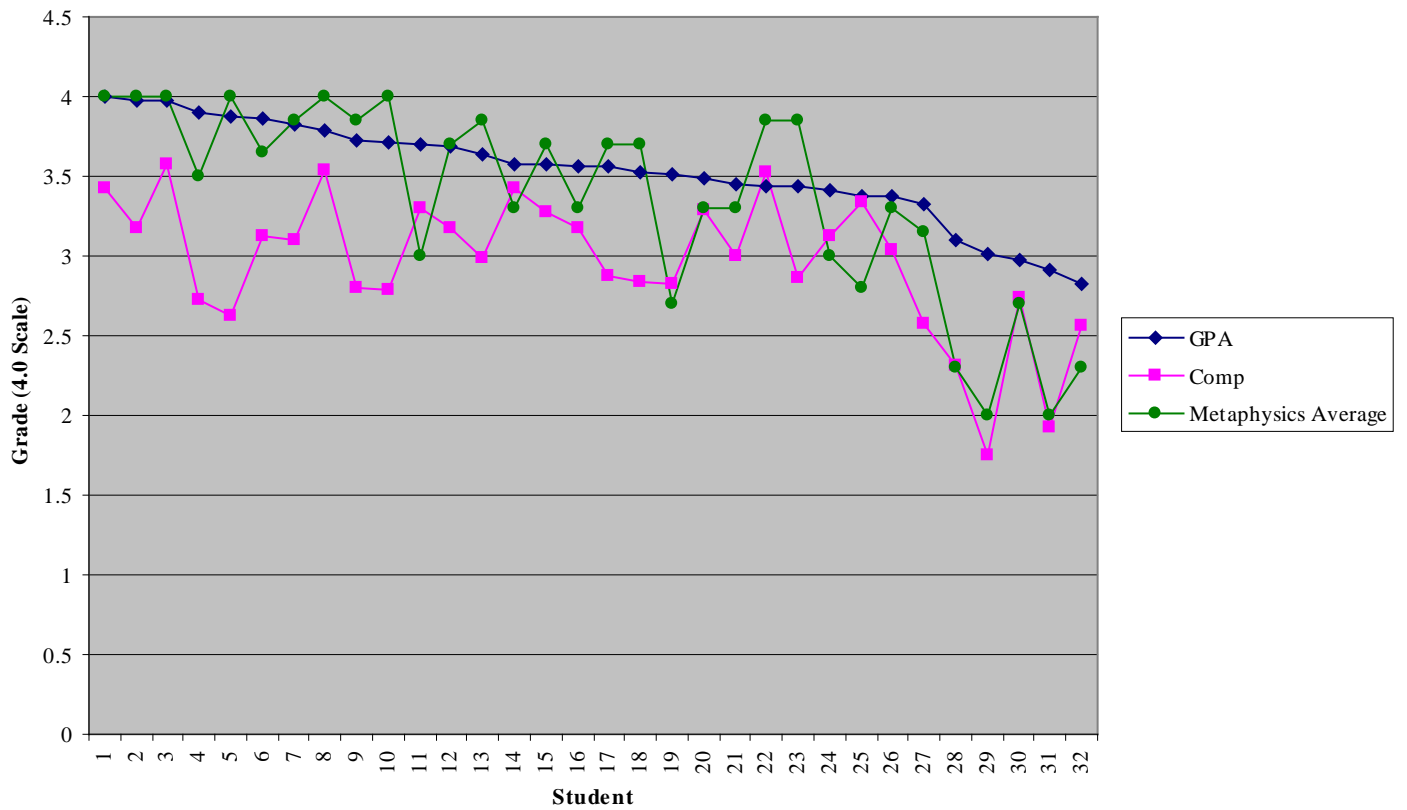


Attachment 3: Cumulative GPA, Comprehensive Score, and Metaphysics Comparison

2008



2007



Attachment 4

Standard 12: General Education : The institution's curricula are designed so that students acquire and demonstrate college-level proficiency in general education and essential skills, including at least oral and written communication, scientific and quantitative reasoning, critical analysis and reasoning, and technological competency.

2007 National Survey of Student Engagement Mean Comparisons: Selected Catholic University General Education Goals School of Philosophy: Seniors

Graduates will demonstrate proficiency in oral and written communication, including the argumentative essays, research papers, presentations, and creative and collaborative work employing a variety of media.	School of Philosophy	School of Philosophy compared with:								
		Catholic University			Carnegie Peers			NSSE 2007		
		Mean ^a	Mean ^a	Sig ^b	Effect Size ^c	Mean ^a	Sig ^b	Effect Size ^c	Mean ^a	Sig ^b
<i>During the current school year, about how much reading and writing have you done? 1=none, 2=1-4, 3=5-10, 4=11-20, 5=more than 20</i>										
Number of assigned textbooks, books, or book-length packs of course readings	3.46	3.35	.00	.10	3.08	.00	.38	3.13	.00	.33
Number of books read on your own (not assigned) for personal enjoyment or academic enrichment	2.44	2.24	.00	.21	2.17	.00	.28	2.17	.00	.27
Number of written papers or reports of 20 pages or more	1.54	1.73	.00	-.26	1.59	.00	-.07	1.62	.00	-.10
Number of written papers or reports between 5 and 19 pages	3.29	2.99	.00	.29	2.49	.00	.85	2.55	.00	.78
Number of written papers or reports of fewer than 5 pages	3.04	3.20	.00	-.13	2.93	.00	.09	2.96	.00	.07
<i>To what extent has your experience at this institution contributed to your knowledge, skills, and personal development in the following areas? 1=very little, 2=some, 3=quite a bit, 4=very much</i>										
Writing clearly and effectively	3.51	3.04	.00	.54	3.03	.00	.55	3.06	.00	.52
Speaking clearly and effectively	3.16	2.94	.00	.25	2.92	.00	.26	2.95	.00	.23
Graduates will show facility in critical thinking and reasoned analysis.	School of Philosophy	School of Philosophy compared with:								
		Catholic University			Carnegie Peers			NSSE 2007		
		Mean ^a	Mean ^a	Sig ^b	Effect Size ^c	Mean ^a	Sig ^b	Effect Size ^c	Mean ^a	Sig ^b
<i>During the current school year, how much has your coursework emphasized the following mental activities? 1=very little, 2=some, 3=quite a bit, 4=very much</i>										
Memorizing facts, ideas, or methods from your courses and readings so you can repeat them in pretty much the same form	2.73	2.66	.00	.07	2.78	.00	-.05	2.75	.00	-.02
Analyzing the basic elements of an idea, experience, or theory, such as examining a particular case or situation in depth and considering its components	3.61	3.36	.00	.34	3.22	*	.52	3.23	*	.51
Synthesizing and organizing ideas, information, or experiences into new, more complex interpretations and relationships	3.20	3.20	.00	.00	3.01	.00	.23	3.03	.00	.20
Making judgments about the value of information, arguments, or methods, such as examining how others gathered and interpreted data and assessing the soundness of their conclusions	3.25	3.11	.00	.16	2.94	.00	.36	2.96	.00	.33
Applying theories or concepts to practical problems or in new situations	3.27	3.33	.00	-.07	3.18	.00	.11	3.18	.00	.11
<i>In your experience at your institution during the current school year, about how often have you done each of the following? 1=never, 2=sometimes, 3=often, 4=very often</i>										
Put together ideas or concepts from different courses when completing assignments or during class discussions	3.23	2.97	.00	.30	2.91	.00	.40	2.90	.00	.40
<i>To what extent has your experience at this institution contributed to your knowledge, skills, and personal development in the following areas? 1=very little, 2=some, 3=quite a bit, 4=very much</i>										
Thinking critically and analytically	3.65	3.33	.00	.43	3.32	.00	.43	3.33	.00	.42
Analyzing quantitative problems	2.82	2.70	.00	.12	3.05	.00	-.27	3.04	.00	-.25
Learning effectively on your own	3.12	2.97	.00	.17	2.99	.00	.15	3.00	.00	.14
Solving complex real-world problems	2.42	2.53	.00	-.11	2.75	.00	-.34	2.74	.00	-.33

School of Philosophy compared with:

Graduates will demonstrate an understanding of scientific and quantitative reasoning.	School of Philosophy	School of Philosophy compared with:								
		Catholic University			Carnegie Peers			NSSE 2007		
		Mean ^a	Mean ^a	Sig ^b	Effect Size ^c	Mean ^a	Sig ^b	Effect Size ^c	Mean ^a	Sig ^b
<i>To what extent has your experience at this institution contributed to your knowledge, skills, and personal development in the following areas? 1=very little, 2=some, 3=quite a bit, 4=very much</i>										
Thinking critically and analytically	3.65	3.33	.00	.43	3.32	.00	.43	3.33	.00	.42
Analyzing quantitative problems	2.82	2.70	.00	.12	3.05	.00	-.27	3.04	.00	-.25

School of Philosophy compared with:

Graduates will demonstrate an ability to find information effectively using appropriate resources and technologies, critically assess the validity and relevance of information, and utilize it in ethical and legal ways.	School of Philosophy	School of Philosophy compared with:								
		Catholic University			Carnegie Peers			NSSE 2007		
		Mean ^a	Mean ^a	Sig ^b	Effect Size ^c	Mean ^a	Sig ^b	Effect Size ^c	Mean ^a	Sig ^b
<i>In your experience at your institution during the current school year, about how often have you done each of the following? 1=never, 2=sometimes, 3=often, 4=very often</i>										
Worked on a paper or project that required integrating ideas or information from various sources	3.22	3.41	.00	-.26	3.26	.00	-.06	3.29	.00	-.10
Included diverse perspectives (different races, religions, genders, political beliefs, etc.) in class discussions or writing assignments	2.57	2.70	.00	-.14	2.74	.00	-.19	2.80	.00	-.25
<i>During the current school year, how much has your coursework emphasized the following mental activities? 1=very little, 2=some, 3=quite a bit, 4=very much</i>										
Making judgments about the value of information, arguments, or methods, such as examining how others gathered and interpreted data and assessing the soundness of their conclusions	3.25	3.11	.00	.16	2.94	.00	.36	2.96	.00	.33
<i>To what extent has your experience at this institution contributed to your knowledge, skills, and personal development in the following areas? 1=very little, 2=some, 3=quite a bit, 4=very much</i>										
Learning effectively on your own	3.12	2.97	.00	.17	2.99	.00	.15	3.00	.00	.14

School of Philosophy compared with:

Graduates will demonstrate knowledge of and respect for different cultures and religions.	School of Philosophy	School of Philosophy compared with:								
		Catholic University			Carnegie Peers			NSSE 2007		
		Mean ^a	Mean ^a	Sig ^b	Effect Size ^c	Mean ^a	Sig ^b	Effect Size ^c	Mean ^a	Sig ^b
<i>In your experience at your institution during the current school year, about how often have you done each of the following? 1=never, 2=sometimes, 3=often, 4=very often</i>										
Included diverse perspectives (different races, religions, genders, political beliefs, etc.) in class discussions or writing assignments	2.57	2.70	.00	-.14	2.74	.00	-.19	2.80	.00	-.25
Had serious conversations with students of a different race or ethnicity than your own	2.99	2.70	.00	.27	2.68	.00	.32	2.66	.00	.34
Had serious conversations with students who are very different from you in terms of their religious beliefs, political opinions, or personal values	2.98	2.88	.00	.11	2.71	.00	.28	2.71	.00	.28
<i>During the current school year, about how often have you done each of the following? 1=never, 2=sometimes, 3=often, 4=very often</i>										
Tried to better understand someone else's views by imagining how an issue looks from his or her perspective	2.63	2.85	.00	-.25	2.81	.00	-.21	2.82	.00	-.22
<i>To what extent does your institution emphasize each of the following? 1=very little, 2=some, 3=quite a bit, 4=very much</i>										
Encouraging contact among students from different economic, social, and racial or ethnic backgrounds	2.16	1.97	.00	.20	2.41	.00	-.25	2.44	.00	-.29
<i>To what extent has your experience at this institution contributed to your knowledge, skills, and personal development in the following areas? 1=very little, 2=some, 3=quite a bit, 4=very much</i>										
Understanding people of other racial and ethnic backgrounds	2.32	2.20	.00	.12	2.54	.00	-.23	2.59	.00	-.28