

Academic Plan
Department of Philosophy and Religion
University of North Carolina at Pembroke
2005

1. Introduction

The Department of Philosophy and Religion has six full time faculty members, two in philosophy and four in religion. We have averaged five graduates per year since 1998 and currently have a steadily growing list of approximately thirty declared majors. We have relied heavily on adjunct professors, using either four or five each semester. Of the twenty-eight sections taught this semester, adjuncts are responsible for four. With Professor Merrill Miller's impending phased retirement, adjuncts will shoulder more of the load until we can get a replacement.

2. Process

The department made the initial assessment and formulated a general plan for the process at a department meeting last academic year. Much of the initial phase of the work was done in informal conversations. A list of ideas was drawn up and circulated for discussion. The first draft was circulated and at a final meeting the final draft was completed. The department chairman consulted with members of comparable departments at other universities. He also attended the meeting of the Association for Philosophy of Education eighteen months prior to submitting this updated version of the Academic plan, at which the question of school accountability was addressed.

The procedure and the format of this document are modified versions of what has been done in the past to formulate Departmental Academic Plans. This was done for the sake of continuity. The main difference between this and earlier plans is the emphasis placed on verification with respect to meeting our objectives. The categories we use to organize this document have a precedent in the previous plan submitted by our department. Instead of the three-part breakdown suggested in the Introduction to the guidelines for the *Campus Academic Plan 2004-2009* (July 2003), we will organize the document by using nine headings.

3. Assumptions

The University will continue to give strong emphasis to teaching while encouraging and supporting research. The University and the Department of Philosophy and Religion will continue to provide a strong major in this field. The department will continue in its role as a "service department," primarily in General Education. The enrollment of the university will continue to increase, which will affect the number of students in General Education courses. This in turn will cause class size to be a concern. There will be a continuing and increased need to evaluate new teaching techniques and technologies.

4. Mission

The Department of Philosophy and Religion provides an education in the traditions of the liberal arts. Students who major in Philosophy and Religion are given an education in critical thinking and, respectively, in the principles of the religious thought of humanity and the core problems of philosophy. Students who graduate with a degree in Philosophy and Religion will be equipped to succeed in professional training in the field or in graduate school. Students taking courses in Philosophy and Religion to meet requirements in General Education will be exposed to the general principles of the field and be aware of the great complexities and diversities which are to be found in human religious and philosophical traditions. Students in all levels of the study of philosophy and religion will be able to exhibit critical thinking skills and writing skills.

The department is committed to teaching as its primary purpose. Faculty must be concerned about the education of students and will be committed to giving intensive training in the knowledge and skills of the discipline. In addition, the department will develop the communication skills of the students by providing opportunities to write and speak in class activities. The goal of this educational process is to graduate students from UNCP who are well rounded in the disciplines of Philosophy and Religion and who are capable citizens of the nation and of the world. Teaching rests on a foundation of scholarship and the department will maintain and improve its record of important research.

5. Objectives

The Department of Philosophy and Religion will continue to be committed to teaching. The primary objectives of the department are instructional, which requires a faculty committed to teaching majors and general education students. One of the primary objectives of the department is the training of Majors in philosophy and religion to prepare them for work in the discipline, professional training, or graduate school. Our goal is to provide courses that cover the essential elements so that each student will be able to compare and contrast the major theories in the discipline. They should be able to discuss critically the issues and concepts of the relevant areas. We expect our students, majors and non-majors, to be able to read and interpret critically. We try to enhance their ability to take thoughtful, reasoned, and informed positions.

A major objective of the department is the strengthening of our capacity to cover the breadth of the disciplines by offering more courses in a wider variety of sub-disciplines. This will be facilitated by the addition of three new faculty members, who joined the department in the last three years. Despite the additions, however, our full-time faculty of five and one half (taking into consideration Dr. Merrill Miller's phased retirement over the next three years) is still one and one half fewer than we had in 1991, when the university's enrollment was approximately one half of the current enrollment. As indicated above, we rely heavily on adjuncts to provide the breadth of material our students require. Our goal is to continue to offer students the array of classes they will need for their future success and, given sufficient resources, to expand the courses we offer.

Broadening our offerings will be of great benefit to our majors who do not go on to graduate school but immediately begin work in some area of the discipline. By giving them a wider education in the field of Philosophy and Religion, they will be more able to perform at an adequate level or better. The wider range of courses will also assist those

graduates who will attend graduate school by giving them a firmer grounding in the elements of their area of study. In addition to the departmental majors, students seeking a well-rounded general education will have a wider range of courses to choose from, thus broadening their exposure to the liberal arts.

6. Strengths and Weaknesses

The department's primary strength is the wide range of interests and abilities of the current faculty. In the hiring process, we have sought and successfully hired generalists, professors capable of teaching a wide range of classes. Another relative strength is that our numbers have grown: we have added three new members in the last three years.

Our primary weaknesses are (a) that we still rely heavily, perhaps too heavily, on adjuncts and (b) that, despite the demand, we simply cannot find qualified adjuncts in the field of philosophy. Whereas we provide an adequate education for our majors who choose the philosophy emphasis, the professors stretch themselves thin, often conducting independent studies to allow students to graduate on time.

7. Proposed Actions

Our top priorities are (a) to accommodate the greater demand for classes in Philosophy and Religion, particularly in light of demographic projections for a larger enrollment, and (b) to achieve more flexibility in our course offerings so students will have more options, with respect to majors, minors, and general education. Now that we have filled a new position with a specialist in Buddhism, Hinduism, and Islam, our top priority is to minimize the impact of the half time loss of Dr. Miller. With his phased retirement, we will need to find someone capable of teaching the classes he has taught for the last sixteen years, which will not be easy.

With respect to both (a) and (b), there is a difference in the respective strengths of the two components of our department. Though we would be reasonably satisfied if we happened to find someone who could teach philosophy on an adjunct basis, the students would benefit from another full-time philosophy professor. The department is somewhat unbalanced at this point. We have three and one half full time and five part time religionists, but only two philosophy professors. As the university grows, hiring another philosopher will be imperative to maintain the course offerings for the larger student body and to meet the curriculum needs of the department.

8. Assessment

Section 5, we stated that our objective for majors is to acquaint them with "the essential elements [of the discipline]," thereby enabling them to "compare and contrast the major theories...and to discuss critically the issues and concepts of the relevant areas." Our objectives for liberal arts students are to improve "their ability to read and interpret critically" and to enhance their ability to take "thoughtful, reasoned, and informed positions."

Of the available means of assessment, only periodic and comprehensive examinations will allow us to determine whether students have mastered the relevant critical thinking skills and the essential elements of the respective disciplines of philosophy and religion. We use this method for majors and non-majors. Some professors use examinations that are comprehensive of the material covered to that point of the semester. In the future, for the purposes of objective assessment, we plan to use more comprehensive questions on the final examinations.

We regard this method as superior to the alternatives. There is no capstone course in our departmental curriculum, nor do we have the personnel to add one (or two, as would be necessary given that we have two distinct emphases). Though some department members use a variant of student portfolios as part of their means of evaluating performance, we do not believe that this tests for mastery as opposed to mere exposure. Along the same lines, there is no standardized test that would give an accurate indication of whether students had mastered the skills and material we present. The only method we deem adequate for verifying results is what the British call “continual assessment.” This method consists of a series of examinations. Whereas British universities have traditionally relied on a single, intensive set of examinations that cap off ones undergraduate education, they are moving more and more toward continual assessment, using as their model the testing approach we take in the United States. The technical term pedagogical specialists favor to denote this method is “course embedded assessment.” We believe it is the best method to insure that we, along with our students, are achieving the objectives we set forth. Having said this, we should point out that we are currently discussing the prospect of using student portfolios on a more widespread basis, consistent with a policy shift currently being considered by the university.

On an informal basis, we monitor the progress of graduated majors, tracking graduate school success (and the possible lack thereof), as they apply their training in professional contexts. We also monitor feedback from liberal arts graduates who keep us informed of their ongoing job performance. This method, while important, relies on testimony and depends on a potentially unrepresentative sample of our graduates. It gives the potentially misleading impression that all our graduates do well in the next phase of their lives. Those who are struggling in their professional lives, if there are any, rarely return. The anecdotal information we collect on an informal basis is therefore not part of our strategy for verifiable assessment, though it provides valuable informal feedback.

A more objective measure is the percentage of graduates of our program who apply and are accepted into graduate school. This is not difficult to gauge, given that we are actively involved in their selection of graduate schools and in the application process. We also regard as important, for obvious reasons, whether our graduates successfully complete a graduate program after acceptance.

Evaluation of our success with graduates who go straight to work within the discipline (without graduate school or professional training) is more difficult and less quantifiable. One of the chief means of evaluation in such cases is to interview our graduates. Such interviews are currently conducted on an informal basis. We proposed in the past (2001) that such interviews be conducted more formally and systematically in conjunction with the Office of Alumni Affairs and the Office of Institutional Effectiveness. To this point, there has been no follow-up on the proposal.

With respect to the stated objective of broadening departmental offerings, we will assess our effectiveness by carefully monitoring the range of courses available to students each semester.

9. Use of Assessment Results

Results from the assessments, both the embedded assessments and the interviews with graduates, will be used to conduct on-going reviews of the department's program and curriculum. Specific weaknesses in our offerings would be apparent from the difficulties faced by our graduates in subsequent educational endeavors and in their professional work. The evaluations will be reviewed by the department, which will then develop plans to remedy any problems. As for the embedded assessments provided by examinations, our goal will be to guard against grade inflation, which would give the appearance that students had mastered material better than they actually had. By giving the fairest possible assessment to students of their performance, we also insure a high standard of quality control for the specific educational products we, by consensus, have resolved to deliver.

If it becomes evident that our range of courses is not optimal, particularly in the case of majors preparing for further training or professional service, we will take the necessary steps to add to the courses or course material we offer. If this requires the addition of new faculty, we will go through the appropriate channels to request the necessary institutional support.