

**Program Review External Reviewer Report  
Department of Philosophy, UM-St. Louis**

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**1. Effectiveness**

**A. Research**

The members of the Department of Philosophy are *extremely* effective researchers. The Philosophical Gourmet Report (aka the Leiter Report) ranks the faculty of philosophy programs in terms of research. The Department is ranked among the top-ten MA programs in the US and deservedly so. Their CVs demonstrate that, as a whole, the six tenure-track faculty who will be at UMSL in August of 2011 have a remarkable record of achievement. Their numerous publications appear in venues of the highest quality. UMSL is justifiably proud of the fine research being conducted in the Department of Philosophy.

However, the research effectiveness of the Department is at risk. The current situation is startlingly similar to 2004. In that year, the number of tenure-track faculty had quickly fallen to six and the outside reviewer, Dr. Susan Wolf, noted that this was not enough to support a national research reputation. She said that UMSL was “in imminent danger of losing what has been an unrecognized gem.” In Fall 2011, the Department will again fall to six tenure-track faculty. I agree with Dr. Wolf that six tenure-track faculty, no matter what their quality, is not enough to retain a national research reputation. The Provost and Dean deserve credit for the fact that the Department of Philosophy is no longer an “unrecognized” gem. Both clearly expressed their recognition of the fine research being done there. However, the University is now in imminent danger of losing a recognized gem.

The Department must remain on the Leiter Report list. The number of applications received by UMSL and Georgia State University (GSU) illustrates the Report’s power. For the Fall 2011 admission cycle, GSU (which is in Tier 2 of the Leiter Report and admits only in fall terms) received approximately 175 applications. For the past few years, UMSL (which is Leiter’s Tier 3) received approximately 30 applications per year. This is about what GSU received when it was in Tier 3. If UMSL falls down or off the Leiter list, the very existence of the graduate program will be in doubt and faculty will seek to leave. Immediate action is necessary to preserve the research strength of the Department.

**B. Teaching**

The faculty of the Department teach effectively. Their syllabi show a consistent presentation of top-notch material. Their courses, both at the graduate level and at the undergraduate level, are well-organized and the rigor is appropriate to the context, beginning with introductory materials in 1000-level courses and increasing appropriately through the graduate program. The syllabi also show that the faculty put time into their courses. They grade based not only on multiple-choice exams but also on papers of appropriate length and topic.

Student evaluations can be an important measure of teaching effectiveness (although they must be viewed critically). However, I was not shown the results of a common UMSL student

evaluation instrument and results from student evaluation instruments must be locally normed. Therefore, this measure is not available.

I do not have the information needed to judge the effectiveness of the courses taught by graduate students and adjuncts. The problem is a lack of appropriate assessment, especially when it comes to the online courses. I have no reason to think that these courses are ineffective, but there is no systematic assessment of the online courses.

Another measure of teaching effectiveness is quantity. When it comes to undergraduate service courses, the Department of Philosophy is clearly doing quite well. The vast majority of the almost 8,000 credit hours it produces come from undergraduate service courses. This is more than respectable credit hour production for an institution of UMSL's size. The service courses integrate well with UMSL as a whole. The Department of Philosophy has clearly embraced interdisciplinary perspectives. The faculty have established links to (at least) business, mathematics, nursing, gender studies, and honors program. All of these units spoke highly of the Department's collaborations.

However, when it comes to quantity of majors, the Department has a serious problem. The Department has long had between 30 and 40 majors. This is low for a school of UMSL's size. The data presented and remarks over the course of my visit made it clear that the philosophy majors are bright and well-trained. The ones I spoke with were very happy with the program. The Department skims the cream of the UMSL undergraduate students, taking some of the best and training them exceptionally well, but at the same time failing to reach students who, while they may not be stars, would enjoy and profit from a major in philosophy.

The faculty have built a high-quality graduate program. The requirements for the MA degree are well organized and well structured. The graduate students have clearly formed a strong intellectual community. They are happy with the program and its faculty. They particularly appreciate the accessibility of the faculty. The number of graduate students is appropriate for a philosophy MA program. The only major problems with the graduate program are (a) that the stipends are too low for UMSL to compete effectively with other top-ten MA programs and (b) that the graduate students need better preparation for their role as teachers.

### C. Service

The Department of Philosophy is small relative to other top-MA programs and relative to the size of UMSL. Faculty service loads are high. As to the quality of service, the data in the Five-Year Review Narrative understandably focus on teaching and research, but neither in it nor in any other venue did I find any evidence of problems with the Department's service. I conclude that its service is effective.

## 2. National Trends, Program and Future Goals

Of the six tenure-track faculty who will be at UMSL in August of 2011, two focus their research on philosophy of mind, two focus on ethical theory, one focuses on Islamic philosophy, and one focuses on aesthetics. These important areas of philosophy cohere with national trends. The foci on philosophy of mind and ethical theory are well chosen as these are two of the more dynamic fields within contemporary philosophy.

As to future goals, the Department needs to take a more strategic view. The goals in the "Looking Ahead" section of the Five-Year Review Narrative are: (1) to recruit a visiting

professor, Zachary Ernst, to replace the two departing tenure-track faculty members, (2) to increase the number of majors, (3) maintain a strength in bioethics/philosophy of science, (4) to press for a college-wide ethics requirement, and (5) to add a tenure-track position in history of philosophy. These items are at the tactical, not the strategic, level. Each is an action item to attain an unstated strategic goal.

### **3. Department Selected for Comparative Purposes**

The Department made an excellent decision when it selected the Department of Philosophy at GSU for comparative purposes. Both UMSL and GSU are public research universities located in urban locations. They are of similar size and both are primarily commuter institutions. Most importantly, both are ranked among the top-ten MA programs by The Leiter Report. GSU is in Tier 2 and UMSL is in Tier 3. There is no program more comparable to UMSL than GSU. The University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee (Tier 2) and the University of Houston (Tier 3) would have been as comparable, although Houston would not have been aspirational. The remaining top-ten programs are either not public, not located in an urban setting, or are Tier 4.

### **4. Recommendations**

#### **A. Develop and Implement a *Five-Year Strategic Plan* and *Five-Year Priorities***

The department needs to develop and implement a strategic five-year plan. This plan needs to begin with two clear overarching *five-year strategic goals*: one for research and one for teaching. It is not my place to dictate the Department's goals, but I will venture to make two suggestions:

Research Strategic Goal: The Department of Philosophy will support the University of Missouri - Saint Louis' mission to produce "innovative research" by doing research that places it among the top five philosophy MA programs in the United States.

Teaching Strategic Goal: The Department of Philosophy will support the University of Missouri - Saint Louis' mission to provide "excellent learning experiences" by offering high-quality courses that support the University's General Education requirements and other programs as well as a major that produces a large number of graduates ready to take leadership roles in the State of Missouri.

Each of these overarching goals needs to be supported by *long-term (five-year) priorities*. With regard to research, the Department's top long-term priority should be to *increase the number of tenure-track faculty to ten by hiring two more philosophers of mind and two more philosophers who work in ethical theory*. Ten tenure-track faculty would leave the UMSL below the mean number of tenure-track faculty of the other top-ten MA programs (11.6), but it would be within the range of those programs.

The Department should not attempt to preserve its past strengths in bioethics and philosophy of science. The individuals who have left or are leaving are fine scholars, but they are gone and the Department needs to build based on its current strengths. With two hires in each of

the two recommended areas, the Department would have four philosophers of mind and four ethical theorists. This would provide the critical mass in specific areas needed to preserve and augment Department's national research reputation.

The current critically low number of tenure-track faculty means that progress toward this goal needs to be made soon. While economic times are tough and the Department has another urgent priority (see below), if at all possible, the Department should *do a search for a tenure-track position in either mind or ethical theory to join the Department in the fall of 2012*.

With regard to teaching, the Departments' top long-term priority should be to *increase the number of majors to 100*. The urgent priority in this case is to immediately make structural changes to the major to increase the number of majors and get off the UM Low Performing List. The current 36-hour major is much larger than national norms and the current requirement that students take four history courses is also not in line with national norms. I believe that this explains why the current major is skimming the cream of UMSL's students but not attracting large numbers. I recommend that the Department *reduce its major to 30 hours by reducing the required history courses from four to two*. The Department should also *offer a 30-hour Philosophy major with a pre-law concentration*. Philosophy is an ideal preparation for law school and philosophy majors earn higher scores on the LSAT than any other major. For these reasons, pre-law concentrations within a philosophy majors attract students.

## B. Implement the Following Tactical Suggestions

a. The Department should *immediately hire a visiting professor*, and it has identified a fine candidate. A visiting professor is not a strategic move, but it is a useful short-term step to ameliorate an immediate problem. However, I would caution that, when it comes to research and service, a series of visiting professors is no substitute for tenure-track hires.

b. The look and navigation of the Department's web site is solid and it presents a great deal of good information. However, the Department needs to *keep the pages up to date*. For example, the requirements of the MA as listed on the web page indicate that the students must pass two comprehensive exams, but this is no longer the case. In addition, the pages need to *provide more data about the program*. For example, the information on the graduate program is incomplete. It should provide comprehensive admission, retention, graduation, and placement data: number of applicants, number accepted, number enrolled, the % of those who enrolled who receive the MA within three years, mean and 25%-75% GRE scores for enrolled students, number of MA students who receive funding, the number who do not receive funding, the various funding packages, and placement of every MA graduate since 2000.

c. I recommend that the Department *require the GRE for graduate admissions*. This would bring it in line with national norms. (In addition, given how well philosophy students do on the GRE, it provides data that can be used to showcase the Philosophy program as compared to other graduate programs at UMSL). The Department should work toward admitting graduate students only in fall semesters.

d. The Department should *undertake more systematic assessment* of its courses, especially the online courses. With the use of common final exams and/or common paper prompts, the quality of student learning in the online courses can be compared to that in traditional courses. (This can be done with sampling. It is not necessary that every semester every online section have a final that is in common with the traditional version of the course.)

e. The Department should take steps to *more effectively prepare its graduate students to teach*. Before teaching, graduate student should be required to sit-in on an introductory-level course taught by a regular member of the faculty and meet weekly with a faculty member to discuss teaching. This should be structured as a course and required of all graduate students in their first year. The Department should standardize the courses taught by the graduate students with common texts, common syllabi, common exams, etc. This reduces the workload of the graduate students and enhances the quality of instruction as graduate students cycle through the program.

f. The Department should *develop a common core of a paper-grading rubric* to be used in all courses. Faculty members (but not graduate students) should be free to modify the core rubric for their courses. The rubrics in the Five-Year Review materials are too detailed.

g. The Department should *develop grading guidelines*. My review of the grades offered indicates that there is a lack of grading consistency among the graduate teaching assistants and that they may be giving in to the natural tendency to grade high to avoid student complaints. As a starting point, some sample grading guidelines can be found in Appendix A. (They are slightly modified from those of GSU.)

h. The Department should *be very sparing with the use of adjuncts*. Every time that an adjunct is used to teach a class, there is less money to support graduate students. Training graduate students to cover the needed courses is better thing using adjuncts.

i. The Department should *take some non-structural steps to improve the number of majors* (in addition to the structural changes noted above).

- Encourage students to double-major in philosophy and other disciplines.
- Begin a tradition of monthly pizza lunches for majors and philosophy faculty.
- Start an undergraduate-only philosophy club that focuses on social events (not talks or readings).
- Develop links to local community colleges by organizing days for groups of community college philosophy students to come to UMSL with community college faculty members.
- Urge the graduate students to encourage the major in the classes they are teaching.
- Market the major with flyers and posters that have a consistent scheme of tag line, color, font, etc. This scheme should be use on all posters for philosophy events.
- Knock down as much as is structurally possible of the north and west walls of seminar room and the north and west walls of the adjoining TA office to create an open common area. Remove the bookshelves, the boxes, and the stacks of paper. Set it up invitingly with used furniture, the *New York Times*, coffee machine, etc. The current seminar room is small and uninviting. Especially on a commuter campus, students need a place to hang out between classes. See drawings in Appendix B.

## **Appendix A GSU Grading Guidelines**

### Grading Guidelines in 1000-3000 Level Courses

While it is important to emphasize that faculty are free to give grades as they see fit, the Department has established guidelines for grades in all 1000, 2000, and 3000 level courses. Since these are guidelines, not absolute requirements, they should not be presented as firm rules in a course syllabus or used as justification for particular student grades. It is to be expected that there will be exceptional sections for which these guidelines are not appropriate. For example, a section of 12 students taught 8 am MWF might by random chance have very good or very poor students. Moreover, many instructors teach more than one section. In these cases, the guidelines refer to the total number of students enrolled as one group, not to each and every section one teaches. Thus, it is only in general that grades should fall within the following guidelines. Graduate student instructors who believe that the grades in a class should deviate from these guidelines must consult the Coordinator of Graduate Teaching before assigning grades.

1. A+, A, and A- grades should be 15 - 25% of the grades.
2. A+, A, A-, B+, B, and B- grades should be 50 - 65% of the grades.
3. Ds, Ws, and Fs should be 15 - 30% of the grades.

### Grades in Graduate Courses

See <http://www2.gsu.edu/~wwwphi/docs/PHIL/GradesinGraduateCourses.pdf>

**Appendix B Suggested Renovations to Create Common Area**

Thin lines indicate walls to be removed.

