

April 20, 2004

Office of Academic Affairs  
426 Woods Hall  
University of Missouri, St. Louis  
8001 Natural Bridge Road  
St. Louis, Missouri 63121-4499

UM-St. Louis Five-Year Program Review of the Department of Philosophy  
External Reviewer's Report

Introduction

When I was invited by Interim Associate Vice-Chancellor Margaret Cohen to serve as the external member of the philosophy department's program review, I understood that the departmental review was part of business-as-usual. It was the department's turn on the more or less regular list of departments up for periodic review. The task at hand for the department and its reviewers would be to see how, in these tight financial times, the philosophy department could make the most of its slim resources to contribute to the university's currently stated missions. My special role as the external member of the review committee would be to provide whatever expertise might be needed to evaluate the department's quality and character relative to my academic field, and to offer what suggestions I might have from my experience of philosophy departments at other universities about what a philosophy department could do in the context of UMSL's particular mission and situation. This general understanding of the point of the review was reconfirmed at the initial meeting with the administrators (especially by Margaret Cohen, Jerry Durham, and Nasser Arshadi.)

In fact, what I found on my visit was a department in severe crisis. The department had lost a number of faculty for a variety of reasons over the past several years that had not been replaced. A department that, at its highest point, had had fourteen in-rank faculty on its roster, was now down to six in-rank appointments. The most recent resignation, that itself may have been due in part to a sense of the university's unsupportive attitude to the department, was not met with an authorization for the department to make replacements (rather than replace the one senior position with another senior position, the department had requested authorization to appoint two faculty at the junior level). The failure of the university to support the department over a number of years – mainly, in failing to authorize faculty lines, but also in neglecting the department in other ways – had led, by the time of my visit, to a very serious lowering of faculty morale. One faculty member's self-described state of mind was "seriously depressed." Another described the department as having "an Alamo mentality." An e-mail this morning informed me that since the time of my visit another senior faculty member has received an attractive offer from another university, which undoubtedly has made the situation even worse than it was two weeks ago.

As I shall emphasize below, the philosophy department at UMSL has until now been truly impressive. It has created and maintained a community of faculty that has been admirably devoted and effective in serving its students and the university at large, while nonetheless maintaining a level of research productivity and engagement with the profession that makes it stand out as one of the most distinguished academically at UMSL. Its efforts and accomplishments in connection with every standard aspect of a university's mission have, for the past few years at least, gone unrewarded, with the result that the university is now in imminent danger of losing what has been an unrecognized gem.

What was especially disheartening was the fact that, even at the time of my visit, the administration appeared to be either unaware of or indifferent to the crisis its neglect had precipitated and to the value of what it was in danger of losing. As an outsider, it is impossible for me know how to account for the disconnect between the administration's and the philosophy department's perceptions of the situation. To what extent has the problem been due to a failure of communication and to what extent is the problem a symptom of a deep difference in the values of the parties in question? Either way, the situation is in immediate need of repair. The philosophy department until now has been, in my judgment, extraordinarily dedicated and cooperative in serving the university community under difficult circumstances while maintaining a level of scholarship that has brought the individuals and the group professional prestige and distinction. If the university does not act immediately and decisively in supporting the department, the faculty will either leave the university or stay on as alienated citizens, and the university will lose, perhaps forever, what should be one of its strongest sources of pride.

#### General evaluation of the philosophy department

As I have already indicated, the philosophy department at UMSL meets very high standards according to what I take to be the three basic constituents of a philosophy department's typical mission: scholarship, pedagogy, and service to the greater community.

#### **Scholarship**

The department's self-study, along with the *curricula vitorum* included as appendices, details the scholarly accomplishments of the faculty (see especially pp. 13-15), so there is no need for me to repeat the specifics here. I can, however, attest, to the accuracy of the self-study's more evaluative descriptions. A large proportion of the faculty members do indeed have national and international reputations as respected scholars. The journals in which the work of faculty at all levels are publishing articles, and the presses in which they are publishing books are among the most competitive and prestigious in the field. The level of productivity is commensurate with that at first-tier colleges and universities. The faculty's ability to get grants and fellowships (for which there is a *very* small pool in philosophy), the number of invitations to edit volumes, serve on committees, and give papers and commentaries, not to mention the faculty's receipt of excellent job offers, all testify to their outstanding reputation and engagement with the profession. (Though I shall not concentrate on the nonregular faculty, I should add that they strike me also as exceptionally well-trained and highly credentialed, adding to the intellectual caliber of the department.)

#### **Teaching**

Like most philosophy departments, the department at UMSL serves the needs of two sorts of students. On the one hand, there are students who discover that they love philosophical inquiry, who might minor or major in philosophy, or go on to pursue an advanced degree. On the other, there are students who take philosophy to fulfill a requirement for another course of study, to get

training in logic or critical reasoning, or to get a basic introduction into the ethical or conceptual issues that arise in another discipline or profession. This department does an excellent job of balancing these goals. The number of majors strikes me as perfectly commensurate to a department at a university of this type. The number of “credit hours” and cross-listed courses show the department to be extremely cooperative and helpful in serving the needs of the university at large.

During the on-site visit, the review committee had the opportunity to interview a number of students about their experience with the philosophy faculty in the undergraduate and masters’ programs. The discussion was remarkable for the students’ uniformly high, and I would even say heart-warming, praise for faculty, both in-rank and out of rank, both junior and senior. Students repeatedly commented on the faculty’s generosity with their time, on their patience, availability, and genuine concern at communicating effectively, and on the fact that the faculty treated them with intellectual as well as personal respect. Moreover, we were witness to students who had evidently been turned on to philosophy by this department, and more generally to a love of ideas in a way that is likely to shape their lives permanently, whether professionally or nonprofessionally. Surely this is one of the missions a university ought to have. Obviously, the department has been enormously successful in engaging and teaching its majors and graduate students. I have never seen a more satisfied and grateful group of students (and this, despite the lack of financial support).

In addition to serving those students who are interested in concentrating on philosophy, however, the department clearly serves the pedagogical needs of the students whose main interests lie elsewhere. As the department’s self-study explains, the department teaches courses required by a number of other schools and departments (including nursing, education, criminology, business – see p. 5 of the Self-Study for the whole list) and the survey of student engagement (appendix B) shows high student satisfaction with these courses as well. While many philosophy departments do this sort of service teaching grudgingly and with a patronizing attitude, the department at UMSL takes it seriously as a central part of its mission, and gives the students high quality attention.

### **The Masters Program**

Recently, the philosophy department began a masters’ program in philosophy. It got off to an excellent start, getting national attention and praise, and in its beginning years has already begun to place students in top-tier Ph.D. programs. It continues to attract students, but with so little support from the university, it is unlikely to be able to continue on the positive path it has begun. Supporting the Masters Program is a relatively inexpensive way to gain some national academic prestige for the university, as well as showing support for the kind of entrepreneurial energy that, in other contexts, the university seems to want to encourage.

### **Service to the community**

The philosophy department’s service to the community overlaps with its teaching missions to a considerable extent. I have already mentioned the number of courses which the philosophy department provides to complement and support other programs. Because these courses are unlikely to be highlighted by the other departments themselves, the university’s reliance on the philosophy department’s offerings probably goes largely unnoticed. In addition, the department has proposed the establishment of a Center for the Public Understanding of Science, with a special focus initially on ethical issues in genetics. This idea strikes me as having tremendous potential value, of national as well as local interest. Evidently, however, the department’s suggestions have met with no encouragement at the administrative level.

In meetings with university administrators, the question of how the philosophy department might better contribute to the university's specific current missions was raised. Included in this context was reference to a university focus on improving students' writing ability, and on the American Democracy Project, aimed at training responsible citizens. The philosophy department is surely contributing to these goals already, to a great degree. Because the emphasis on writing had been mentioned at the meeting with administrators, I asked some of the faculty how much writing they assigned in their courses. One faculty member mentioned that the standard load for one of his courses included five 1-page papers, a 5-7 page paper, an 8-12 page paper, and a final exam! Here, at least, was one faculty member who was quietly doing just what the university wants to encourage, but in a way that escaped the administration's notice.

Because academic philosophy generally emphasizes clear and precise writing, rigorous argument, and reflection on both (or all) sides of an issue, I suspect that a survey of both the content and the methodologies employed in current departmental course offerings would show the department to already be fostering the improvement of students' writing skills and the training of responsible citizens to a salutary degree. Note, for example, that the department's self-study lists among its instructional goals the provision of "training in critical analysis and reasoning... This means engaging students in Socratic dialogue to prepare them to examine critically their own beliefs and demand everyone to meet a high standard of rigor. Learning to write papers that present arguments is also part of the process." The numerous courses in moral and political philosophy are also particularly apt for coordination with or inclusion in the American Democracy Project. Again, I note the department's own sense of its mission described in the Self-Study (page 3): "We aim to give serious and rigorous instruction in a variety of fields of professional ethics including business ethics, medical ethics, computer and media ethics, with the goal of nurturing an ethical approach to all the professions among the regional leaders that the university seeks to train."

There seems to me a failure of communication here. The philosophy department is energetically pursuing the very goals and values the university wants its faculty to pursue, and meeting them with great success (especially given the constraints under which it has been forced to operate), but the message is not getting through. Either the philosophy department has been too reluctant to toot its own horn, or to couch it in language the administration is looking for, or the administration is simply not listening.

### **Comparison with other philosophy departments**

The self-study's choice of departments selected for comparative purposes is excellent. Its comparison with the University of Wisconsin at Milwaukee is particularly apt, as it is another urban branch campus of a state university with an exceptionally strong philosophy department. (I note that U. of Wisconsin-Milwaukee have fifteen in-rank faculty, however, as compared with UMSL's six.) Virginia Tech is another good example of a branch campuses of a state university with well-known strength in philosophy. (It has eleven in-rank appointments.) But the quality of the faculty at Milwaukee, Virginia Tech, and Tufts, is much better known than is the quality at UMSL, in part perhaps because their graduate programs are older, and more widely supported, and there is more money available for advertising.

Due to my personal history, I happen to be aware that the University of Maryland, Baltimore County, would provide another useful point of comparison. It, too, is an urban branch

of a land-grant university, with what has been an impressive and active philosophy faculty, but it, too, is in danger of degenerating.

### Recommendations

The philosophy department has built up an exceptionally productive and accomplished group of faculty, which has been serving the university in multiple ways for many years. Its ability to recruit and retain talented young in-rank faculty, and to develop so loyal, dedicated, and skilled a group of nonregular faculty has been in considerable part a function of the congenial and stimulating atmosphere it has fostered in which there is mutual respect and a communal commitment to high standards of intellectual achievement, pedagogy and responsibility to each other and to the greater community. Although, with the job market in philosophy continuing to be tight, there will be an available pool of philosophy Ph.D.'s looking for jobs for the foreseeable future, faculty of the caliber of the current department members will have other options, which will look increasingly better, if the university's support and appreciation of the department is not improved. Even harder than finding people to hire at the current level of intellectual quality and professional productivity and distinction, however, is maintaining the tradition of engaged citizenship that the department has developed over time. The future health of the department has been jeopardized, to say the least, by the university's neglect, and it is not clear whether, in light of recent departures (and possibly another one soon to come?), it is still even possible to save it. The first order of business must be to try to restore faculty morale by assuring the department of the university's support. This can only be done by committing funds, especially to restoring in-rank faculty lines to replace some of the losses it has recently suffered. I would urge that two junior faculty positions be authorized to be searched for during the 2004-05 academic year, and that two more be *guaranteed* (independently of whether retention efforts in the current case are successful) for the following year. (In discussion with the faculty, the department pointed out needs in philosophy of mind and contemporary metaphysics, which seem to me well-considered, especially if the department favors candidates whose work is not especially technical and who have a broad range of fairly general interests and teaching competencies.)

Financial support for the Master's Program would also do a lot of good: The program helps build community among the undergraduates, graduates and faculty; provides an opportunity for a higher level of intellectual discussion than a wholly undergraduate program can; trains a group of T.A.'s who can contribute to the teaching mission of the university; and enhances the reputation of the university.

The faculty did not even bother to complain about the fact that there were no travel or research funds available that would encourage or support the faculty's ability to attend and present their work at conferences or to bring people to campus for colloquia or roundtables, but I would strongly recommend that such funds be made available. Even a relatively small amount of money would make a significant symbolic gesture, rewarding and encouraging the faculty's active research life. I would be very surprised if the department's peer departments did not have travel funds as well as more support for outside speakers' programs.

The administration's aim in this study was to find ways in which the philosophy department could contribute more fully to the goals of the university at large within the constraints of its current limited resources. As I have suggested, the department has been so demoralized and stretched so thin that, without more resources, it would be unreasonable to

expect the department to be able to do more than it is already doing. However, if some trust and good will between the department and the administration can be restored, there may be some ways in which the department's contribution to the missions of the university may be even more effective than it already is.

First, I would encourage that paths be forged for better communication between the department and the administration. As I have mentioned above, it seems to an observer that the department's mission is already much closer to that of the administration's than either group seems to realize. For example, relatively slight alterations in the department's current offerings might easily fit into the administration's plans for new programs in democratic education as well as for programs in biotechnology. I also suggested that a meeting be arranged between the philosophy department faculty and someone from the development office to discuss the possibility of matching donors interested, for example, in business ethics or in ethical issues in biomedicine, with appropriate faculty members. Second, with some carefully placed publicity, emphasizing the value of philosophical training for professional careers, especially in law, but also in medicine, science, and public policy, the philosophy department might encourage people to add a minor in philosophy or to make philosophy a second (double) major. Of course, this would increase their already large enrollments and advising responsibilities, which they are not in a position to undertake without additional faculty lines.

I realize that in light of the financial situation of the university, my recommendations are not likely to be welcome. Support for the philosophy department is urgently needed, however, if the character and quality of this fine and commendable department is not to disintegrate. It would be extremely shortsighted to neglect it now.

Please feel free to contact me if there are any questions about the department that I have failed to address.

Respectfully submitted,

Susan Wolf  
Edna J. Koury Distinguished Professor of Philosophy  
University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill