

**2016 Five Year Program Review
Department of Philosophy
University of Missouri–St. Louis**

External Reviewer's Report

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1. Basis

This report is based on the Department of Philosophy's October 2016 Self-Study report, material drawn from the UMSL Department of Philosophy's website and from a site visit on October 18, 2016. During that visit, I met with Provost Skilling, Dean Yasbin and participated in meetings with a review committee drawn from UMSL faculty. In a series of meetings, we met and interviewed: all non-retired research and teaching faculty, two staff members, three undergraduate philosophy majors and seven graduate students in the Masters program.

2. The Continuing Crisis

2.1 Research Faculty Numbers

While there are many issues in this review that bear discussion, the single, dominating issue is the size of the research faculty. Their numbers have dropped from an historical high of 14 around 1997, to nine ten years ago (2007-2008), through a low of just three in 2014-2015 back to the present number of five (two full, one associate and two assistant professors).

This is, unfortunately, a lingering problem. The external reviewers for the 2004 and 2010 review wrote in alarm of the situation. In 2004, Susan Wolf from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill wrote:

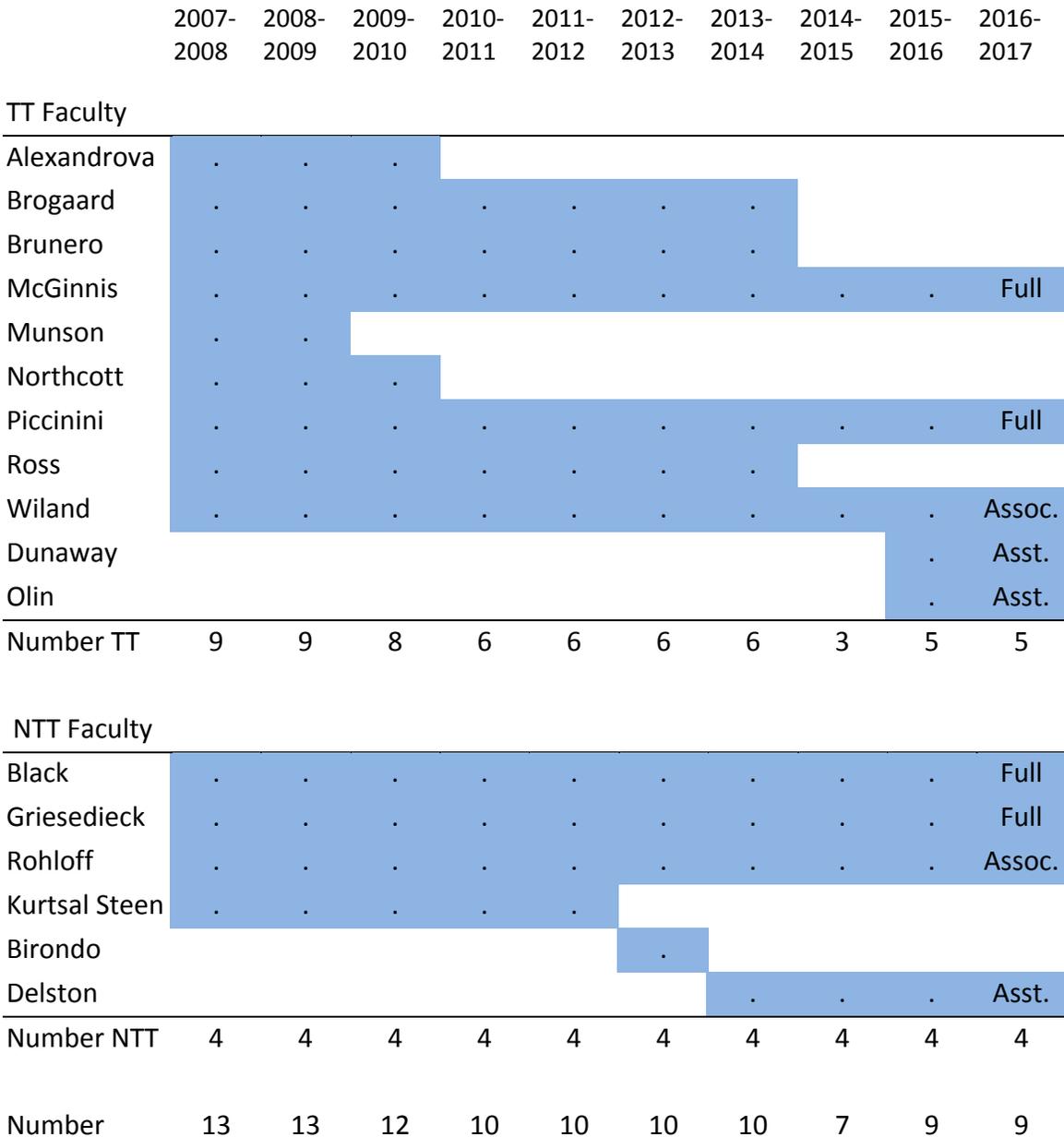
In fact, what I found on my visit was a department in severe crisis. The department had lost a number of faculty for a variety of reasons over the past several years that had not been replaced. A department that, at its highest point, had had fourteen in-rank faculty on its roster, was now down to six in-rank appointments.

In 2010, George Rainbolt of Georgia State University wrote:

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.

Their assessment is quite correct and holds all the more urgently today. Moves of this magnitude in the research faculty place extreme pressures on a department. While the department is performing admirably in the face of these difficulties, there is only so much stress a department can sustain.

In order to gauge for myself how these movements looked, I prepared the following chart that plots faculty numbers over the past decade:



(This chart was prepared by me, so I am responsible for any errors!)

The chart shows clearly that 2014-2015 was a real low point for the department; and that it came even after the alarm had been raised in the 2010 review.

An external measure of the decline is the erosion of the status in the Department's very successful Masters program in philosophy. The Department's website¹ in 2004 could boast that the Masters program: "...is rated by an independent agency, on the basis of faculty quality, as *among the top three M.A. programs in the nation.*" That was an enviable boast. The self-study reports that the Philosophical Gourmet Report "at one time" ranked the program as tied in second place among all terminating Masters programs. The latest 2014-2015 Philosophical Gourmet Report² lists five programs as top or strong. It then lists three in an "other" category; and then seven more in a "worth considering" category. The UMSL program is the sixth in this final category. While in general I have misgivings about how seriously the Gourmet Report should be taken, in this case, it is obvious that the drop in ranking is a fair reflection of the loss of faculty.

2.2 Prospects

A strength, such as the program enjoyed, is easily lost and hard to regain. Survival of the department in anything like its traditional form with its nationally ranked strength does require a restoration of faculty numbers and a renewal of confidence among the faculty that these turbulent times have passed. My overall sense is that repopulating the research faculty with well-chosen appointments will restore its former strength. That this would happen is not automatic. However I am confident that it will happen on the basis of the following factors:

First, the remaining core of senior research faculty were part of a faculty group that proved able to recruit well. There is every reason to expect that they can continue to do so. One index of their ability to recruit well is that they have recruited faculty that are the targets of poaching raids. This is a perennial difficulty for a strong department, but also a clear indicator that it is hiring well. (Of course, the corollary is that strong hiring must be supported by an expectation that replacement hires will be allowed when faculty are lost to raids.)

Second, the present five research faculty are themselves a strong group, each with a successful record of research. Strong candidates would likely find it a plus to have them as colleagues.

Third, the internal morale in the department remains strong. Over the last few years UMSL has sustained repeated budget cuts and layoffs. My expectation was that I would find a dispirited community of faculty, students and staff. We met sequentially with each group: T/TS faculty, NTT faculty, staff, undergraduate students and graduate students. In each meeting the committee was pleased to find a high morale within the department. Each group had unhesitating praise for the

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https://web.archive.org/web/20041010232128/http://www.umsl.edu/~philo/Message_from_the_Chair/message_from_the_chair.html

² <http://www.philosophicalgourmet.com/maprog.asp>

supportive culture within the department and the Chair was often singled out for compliments.

Fourth, the department has proven itself highly effective. During troubling times and with large shifts in faculty numbers, it has kept functioning, functioned well and has done so cheerfully. We saw this clearly in the maintenance of both an effective program of undergraduate and graduate teaching; and the continued research productivity of the remaining research faculty.

2.3 Recommendation

My summary recommendation on this most important of matters is that the department be authorized to expand its research faculty. The glory days of fourteen research faculty may now be out of reach. However the department has some confidence that a restoration to ten research faculty would be sufficient. This accords with numbers of full time, tenure/tenure track faculty in the comparison class provided by the Minter Group. The 2016 average among the group is 10.6. The largest and second largest numbers are 20 and 17. The lowest are 4 and 5. Unfortunately, UMSL is the 5. To bring the research faculty up to 10 would make the UMSL number only slightly worse than average. It is a modest goal.

The scheduling of this restoration should be measured and staged. Faculty searches are onerous. Hire too many too quickly and there is a serious danger, both of overloading the already overburdened faculty and of making poor choices. With staging, the new faculty can participate in further hiring, assuring better search outcomes and greater commitment by the larger numbers of faculty involved in the searches.

In principle, this restoration could be achieved by conversion of teaching faculty lines to research faculty lines. If at all possible, this should be avoided in the present situation. Teaching faculty numbers have remained steady at four faculty. Their quality and their stability are a significant, possibly underappreciated strength of the department. Their presence enables the department to carry a much larger teaching mission than could be sustained by the same number or research faculty. Should they be lost, the department will need to deal with the unintended consequences of a reduced teaching capacity.

2.4 Morale

Above, I already noted the high morale in all constituencies. The uniformity was remarkable. There was a second unhappier uniformity. When the topic of relations with the university more broadly was raised, the optimism was lost. We watched people slump in their seats and a darkness of mood descend.

Much of the pessimism results inevitably from the struggles and funding cuts of the past years, university wide. It is not specific to the Philosophy Department. The remedy lies outside scope of this review. Fortunately, there is a cautious sense now that UMSL might be beginning its return from the worst.

Within the scope of this review, however, there have also been oblique indications of strains between the department and the higher administration. At its worst, it was expressed in a lingering sense that the department was not valued or properly supported and that the administration was not invested in the department's success. Once again, the oblique indications were that the worst has passed and that a new, strong relationship is being forged. My impression, after visiting the campus, is that there is strong support for the department from the administration. Since morale matters, anything that can be done to reassure the department here would be beneficial.

3. National Trends

In guidelines given to me, it was suggested that I consider national trends and the consistency of the department's goals with them.

Since my department is a department of history and philosophy of science, I am not in a good position to report overall trends in the field of philosophy. However I can report overall trends in philosophy of science. Roughly three decades ago, philosophy of science was heavily focused on general issues in science. It looked mostly at issues common to all sciences: research programs and revolutionary changes, general issues in theory confirmation, realism, explanation and related matters.

Over the last few decades, the emphasis has shifted to the individual philosophies of the particular sciences. The shift has been driven in part by the fact that sciences can differ foundationally in important ways, so that a one-size-fits-all philosophy of science will not work everywhere. Physics is organized around laws. Philosophers of biology debate whether there are any law of biology at all.

The now well established "philosophy of's" are philosophy of physics and philosophy of biology. The current excitement is presently drawn in the philosophy of sciences of the mind: psychology, cognitive science and neuroscience. This focus has spilled over into philosophy more generally. Moral philosophy is now undergoing a slow transformation at the hands of so-called "experimental philosophy." X-phi uses the methods of psychology to test empirically many of the factual assumptions widely assumed in moral philosophy. The result has been largely negative, but their importance is undeniable.

Here the department is especially well-positioned. Its areas of special faculty strength are ethics, psychology and neuroscience. The match is almost too good to be true.

That said, I have commented on trends because this was asked of me. May I also urge that trends should be watched but not always pursued? Philosophy is an ancient study and, as with any venerable discipline, it has a core of stable material. Trends come and go. Teaching and faculty expertise needs to be maintained in this core. Since the faculty is presently depleted, maintaining a breadth of core expertise should be a part of any faculty hiring program.

4. Why Philosophy?

A second issue to which I was asked to respond is the importance of philosophy in university education. There are, broadly speaking, two considerations that are already expressed in the response given in the self-study.

First, study of philosophy is a worthy end in itself. It seeks to give answers to fundamental questions that every thinking person asks. How is the world? How do we know of it? What are the right and good actions? These are issues that have been deliberated for millennia by some of our most creative thinkers. Their collected ideas and insights form the core corpus of philosophy. Students bereft of any exposure to academic philosophy will struggle to recreate these insights for themselves or to learn them second hand from less reliable sources. Why should they have to struggle so, when this venerable corpus is part of their intellectual heritage?

If we decide that students do not need academic experience of philosophy, then we are limiting our goals. We are no longer educating students. We are no longer giving them a breadth of perspective that will serve them in all areas of their lives, personally and professionally. We are seeking simply to turn out technicians who are adept only at a narrow set of well-defined tasks.

Second, it is easy to misunderstand what philosophy is. The field does, of course, have distinctive problems that attract perennial attention. However the essence of philosophy is not any particular subject matter, but a mode of thought and analysis. Philosophy addresses problems whose solutions are to be secured just by rigorous critical thinking as opposed, say, to laboratory experiment. Philosophical training is, ultimately, a training in thinking clearly when no path seems tractable.

In this sense, we are all philosophers. We all, at one time or another, face problems that require precisely this skill. In our daily work, which is the ethical choice? Or, closer to my own field, just how does science work? How does it reveal the secrets of nature? Or, in any particular science, there are problems in the foundations. Are the methods and goals of physics and chemistry the same? How might they differ?

An accomplished philosophy faculty has a depth of expertise in a wide array of these issues and can easily call upon an enormous literature that has wrestled with these problems. More importantly, they are equipped to train students in the fundamental skill of critical analysis and rigor of thought. It is a universal experience of professors of philosophy that students who take a rigorous philosophy class learn to be better thinkers and analysts in all their areas of interest. And conversely, a student who has not experienced such a class can struggle to see through problems that a competent philosopher finds transparent.

How can one manage in any context when faced with a seemingly intractable problem and the only tools one has to solve it is clear thought? Doing just that is stock in trade for philosophers. It is the fundamental skill taught in philosophy classes.

5. Curricula and Other Matters

My hope had been that I could make some strong recommendations on the teaching mission of the department. While the self-study document was highly informative and helpful and reported on many promising initiatives, I found in the end too little systematic, quantitative material to support strong conclusions in this area. However some impressions did develop and there was considerable anecdotal reporting to reinforce them. Here I remark on them.

In the commissioning of the committee, we were asked to seek creative ways to increase student enrollment. Our discussions with faculty produced clear willingness to engage in outreach and recruitment efforts. Indeed the department already has a strong history of outreach. The self study reports energetic efforts that include enhancement of its online teaching; helping set up high school philosophy clubs; involvement in the St. Louis Annual Conference in Reasons and Rationality; involvement in the creation of the “Big Questions Series” on campus; and the developing of courses with the Jewish Federation of St. Louis. These are good signs. Some philosophy departments can be strikingly insular and avoid such outreach efforts.

However the principal problem is that the faculty are philosophers, not public relations experts; and they already have many demands on their time in merely maintaining their present obligations. My sense is that further assistance and guidance in outreach would be welcomed and well-used.

There was some discussion of the possibility of expanding the majors program through encouragement of double majors, thereby increasing the department’s graduation rate. Without fuller data, it is hard for me to assess the prospects. Anecdotally, however, one problem is apparent. A sizeable portion of the undergraduate population are transfer students. They have, on anecdotal reports, two years at UMSL, with both funding and career ambitions the limiting factors. Such students will find it hard to amass the credit hours needed for a double major. It was striking, but still at the anecdotal level, that all three of the undergraduates we met were in precisely this situation. They reported that undertaking a double major fitted neither into their scheduling nor as a career need.

Encouraging double majors—if that is all that it is—can be done without cost, so there is no problem in just that. If however double majoring is to be encouraged by mounting a tailored program, then there is a cost in the commitment of teaching resources to the classes required by the tailored program. These resources should not be committed without first having clear, quantitative indications that the program would be well-used.

Since double majors will likely need to engage in the program over a longer period than the two years available to transfer students, it would be natural to couple any such efforts with a focused and successful program of recruitment at the freshman level, presumably from high schools.

The self-study (p. 17) reports a drop in the numbers of students in the MA program. There were 33 in 2012, 39 in 2013, but the numbers dropped to 23 in 2014, 21 in 2015 and 17 in 2016. I heard conflicting reports on the cause of the drop, so I cannot report usefully on the past. However the future is clear. First, anecdotally, from discussion with students who did come to the present program, the level of financial support offered is sufficient to bring in students. However the more important factor is the quality of the faculty, both in their intrinsic merit and their numbers. For that quality is the principal attraction that draws in Masters level students. With the present reduced cohort of research faculty, it seems likely that recruitment effort will face increasing difficulties. News of the withering of a program does not travel very quickly. But it does travel. There is only so long that the program can recruit on the memories of past glories.

Reviewer

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