Philosophy Discipline Program Review  
Year One Statement

November 17, 2011

The Philosophy Program: Its Mission and Relation to the College

The Mission Statement of St. Norbert College asserts that the College shall provide “an educational environment that fosters intellectual, spiritual and personal development.” Consistent with its set of core values, the College is devoted to developing in its students skills “in critical and analytical thought, quantification, synthesis, problem solving and communication” that they will learn to apply “as responsible citizens of a diverse, interdependent, changing world.” The aims of the philosophy program at St. Norbert, and the nature of philosophy itself, place the work of our discipline near the center of our Catholic and Norbertine heritage and the tradition of liberal arts education. As philosophers at St. Norbert College, our mission is to effect the intellectual, spiritual and personal development of its students by teaching the philosophical tradition in a way that emphasizes critical thinking skills and encourages reflection on values.

Philosophy, as the love of wisdom, is inseparable from the notion of intellectual development. But philosophy is more than the attainment of knowledge; it urges us to cultivate wisdom, a virtue that enables us to reflect on the proper ways to acquire and apply knowledge. Philosophical practice at a Catholic institution is motivated not solely by curiosity or a predilection for conceptual and theoretical puzzles, but also by the desire to transform oneself and the world through wisdom.

While all philosophical questions are ultimately interconnected, those that are most important in a Catholic context deal with the nature of truth, the self, the good life and its moral and spiritual dimensions, beauty, justice, and related questions concerning value. A disciplined and concerned approach to the perennial and fundamental questions of philosophy will require the development of critical thinking skills, including habits of reasonableness and objectivity, the ability to identify formal and informal fallacies, to write argumentatively, and analyze inductive and deductive arguments.

Mastery of the critical thinking skills intrinsic to the practice of philosophy nurtures other qualities of mind and character conducive to responsible citizenship and professional excellence, including confidence in one’s learning, the courage to question, a sense of wonder and curiosity, and a deepening respect for others in the shared quest for wisdom and truth. In accordance with the principles of the Catholic intellectual tradition, the philosophy program advances the spiritual development of its students by encouraging them to integrate faith and reason in the search for truth and wisdom.

State of the Program: An Overview

The Discipline has experienced some discontinuity in the staffing of its regularly scheduled sequence of courses. David Duquette has been serving as Divisional Associate Dean and has course release to enable his work in that office. Paul Johnson served two years as Faculty Chair and had one course release per semester. John Holder was away on sabbatical for the spring 2011 term. Don Abel is on a phased retirement plan; beginning this year, he teaches three courses in the
fall term and is off for the spring. We currently have the benefit of two Teaching Fellows, Dr. Tanya Randle and Dr. Tomas Bogardus, to help us cover the courses required of our majors and minors.

Faculty members in the discipline are not always teaching in their areas of strength. Our General Education commitments, the discontinuity noted above, and interdisciplinary contributions sometimes require that we mount courses within our competence, but outside our areas of expertise and research interest. In some cases, courses scheduled within those areas of strength get under-enrolled and cannot be offered.

Course rotations are not always clear or rationally planned out. A combination of logistics (e.g., too few offerings at the 200-level) and contingencies—and again, our commitments to the General Education Program—sometimes imposes the need to improvise on the scheduling of courses. Discipline responsibilities to other programs, (e.g., the Classics Program, Pre-Health, Business, and Music) also serve to complicate the scheduling process.

A review of enrollment data shows that, for reasons that remain to be discerned, student load has not always been equally distributed among faculty.

State of the Program: Majors and Minors

The total number of majors and minors has held steady since the last program review in 2007 and is perhaps even on the upswing. We have more majors than average peer institutions, though our numbers are lower than average aspirant institutions, in comparison to whom we hover around the median. The number of women majoring in Philosophy remains well below the gender ratio for the College generally, but this reflects the national trend in the field, where the proportion of men to women in the profession, while improving somewhat over the last decade, remains skewed.

Since 2007, four students from the program have gone on to apply to graduate programs in philosophy; none has gained admittance. Of these four, two have gained admittance to law school or graduate programs in an area closely related to philosophy (e.g., a medical ethics master’s degree program). Though our tracking of students after they leave is tenuous at best, it appears that not many of our majors go on to pursue advanced degrees in any area. In truth, we are uncertain whether we should encourage our more gifted students to continue on with their studies, given that prospects for employment in philosophy beyond graduate school are so dim. However, we believe that those students who do choose to pursue post-graduate study should be able to expect a better success rate in gaining admission to a quality program.

State of the Program: Assessment

The internal assessment program put in place after the last program review needs to be re-evaluated in light of certain difficulties we’ve experienced in the attempt to implement it. While we remain committed to the basic structure and features of the program, we have not been able to work out the methods by which the data we need can be effectively collected, stored and analyzed. The simple requirement of having students deposit their first, Philosophy of Human Nature essays into a G-drive dropbox has proven difficult to implement reliably. Routing our data through the Office of Institutional Effectiveness adds a procedural layer to our compilation and analysis work that could safely be eliminated in favor of an in-house spreadsheet or database file system. This would provide us direct access to the data set for the purposes of both folding in new material and
following the trends on a more timely basis. Our assessment program needs attention and careful retooling.

The Vision for Philosophy at St. Norbert College

We envision a philosophy discipline that accomplishes its mission by offering a curriculum that meets the needs not only of its majors and minors but also of the General Education program, interdisciplinary programs, and other disciplines; adequately preparing majors and minors for post-graduate careers, including graduate study in philosophy and other disciplines, and law school; and providing an environment conducive to philosophical research and exploration by faculty and students.

Preliminary progress toward the attainment of these objectives can fairly be expected with Johnson and Holder returning to full-time duty, when David Duquette returns to the Discipline full-time, and when we hire a full-time replacement for Don Abel upon his retirement in two years. However, robust progress toward meeting these goals may require the addition of a faculty position in the not too distant future.

Goals and Action Steps

A. Restructuring our Assessment Regime

We remain committed to both the objectives of the philosophy program and the means by which those objectives are pursued, but we have encountered problems in the methods by which we assess our work. As noted, we are currently too dependent on IT for support and on OIE for data compilation. Our collection of data is cumbrous and burdensome, and its compilation inadequate to our purposes.

**Action Steps:**

1. Work with IT to secure an effective and reliable means of collecting and preserving papers submitted in the introductory course. The centerpiece of our program assessment is a portfolio of the written work that students produce as they work towards the completion of the major. We need to have the student’s first essay in Philosophy of Human Nature as a base-line entry in the portfolio so that subsequent progress can be measured against the skills the students brought with them to the College. We will explore the possibility of setting up e-portfolios for all declared majors to track progress in their written work as they progress through the curriculum.

2. Develop an electronic format for the evaluation of student papers. Direct data-entry into a uniform spreadsheet format will eliminate the need to route our data through OIE in order to compile our statistics.

These action steps are purely a matter of achieving a better implementation of our assessment design. The methods and standards by which our students are evaluated remain in place and, we feel, serve us well. The problems arise in the ways our data are collected, compiled and analyzed.

B. Discipline Contributions to General Education

**Action Steps:**

1. If the General Education reforms are enacted, we will undertake a thorough examination of our introductory course, presently Philosophy of Human Nature, and consider how best to serve the course descriptions under the new rubric of “Philosophical Foundations” and achieve the intended learning outcomes.
2. We need to have a richer selection of courses at the 200-level to complement, and prepare students for courses presently offered at the 300-level. Here again, the General Education Reform under the categories of the Core Curriculum offer us new opportunities to improve the curriculum, contribute more broadly to the General Education Program and serve our students better in the process. Each faculty member will think creatively about developing a new course or restructuring one presently in the catalog for offering at the 200-level.

C. Discipline Program Advisor

To provide better guidance for our majors, minors, and students who may be considering majoring or minoring in philosophy, we will develop a description for the position of Program Advisor and delegate some member of the discipline to serve in this capacity.

It is not unusual for students to declare a major or minor relatively late in their time at the College (late sophomore or junior standing) and there is a need to arrange their coursework so as to facilitate moving through the curriculum in a sequence of courses that is best for attaining an appropriate developmental foundation in philosophy.

D. Review of Program Curriculum

A survey of our peer and aspirant institutions reveals that our current catalog listings are not at any significant variance with their course offerings and program requirements. Nonetheless, we feel that the time is right for a careful review of our program curriculum with an eye to serving our students better and bringing our course offerings up to date. With two new members in the discipline and a replacement hire in prospect, we shall explore the possibility of making better use of the special competencies and research interests of faculty members.

Action Steps:

1. Reduce the present 4-course historical core to 3 (Ancient, Medieval and Modern) and revise the fourth component (Contemporary) into an upper level seminar course to be assigned to faculty members on a rotating basis, with one such course to be offered, ideally, every semester. This will enable us to provide students with more focused and timely course offerings in contemporary philosophy and permit faculty members to teach regularly in areas related to their research interests.

2. Further revision of program curriculum to enrich our offerings at the 200-level, with the intention of having each faculty member devise a course offering at that level.

3. Establish a 2-year course planning scheme so that faculty members and students will have a clearer view of what courses will be offered in coming semesters.

4. Develop and set in place a common resource for sharing syllabi and communicating a better sense of what each of our courses contain so that later course work can be based on and advance what the students have learned in their previous courses.

Our objective here shall be to prepare for a substantial revision of our catalog descriptions and offerings under the next 2-year catalog compilation.