

Philosophy Department PLO #1: Knowledge

“Students will demonstrate knowledge of important philosophical positions, concepts, arguments, and themes.”

1. What we learned about our students’ learning

During the 2009-10 academic year, the philosophy department collected and discussed data relating to our Knowledge program learning outcome.

In our Ethics course (PHI 104), which Mark Nelson taught during the fall semester of 2009, this outcome was assessed by means of a 2000-word essay. Five of the 10 students scored “good” or “excellent,” and 8 scored “OK” or better in their demonstration of their ability in the essay to explain important philosophical positions, concepts, arguments, and themes.

This table provides a more specific breakdown of student performance on this essay assignment relative to our Knowledge program learning outcome:

Student	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Grade	E	G	G	G	G	O	O	O	P	P

E = Excellent
G = Good
O = OK
N = Needs work
P = Poor
F = Failure

In our Senior Seminar course, (PHI 195), taught by David Vander Laan in the spring semester of 2010, the Knowledge outcome was assessed via a one-page essay question. All five of the responding students gave strong (excellent) answers that displayed their knowledge of both the issues and the views of the particular thinkers named in the question.

Student	1	2	3	4	5
Grade	E	E	E	E	E

E = Excellent
G = Good
O = OK
N = Needs work
P = Poor
F = Failure

The result in Ethics seemed decent but left room for improvement, particularly given that Ethics is an upper-division class. It is worth noting that the class had an unusually high enrollment, and that not nearly all students were philosophy majors or minors. The result in the Senior Seminar, in contrast, was clearly encouraging. Together these results suggest that by the time of their graduation, those who major in philosophy understand philosophical ideas, the views of particular philosophers, and the contributions of Christian philosophers to ongoing and historical debates. It is to be expected that Ethics (which will always be taken before the Senior Seminar) shows somewhat weaker results, and this would be expected even if the students were all philosophy majors. Still, it is worth seeing whether the result can be improved in the future.

2. Changes we have made and plan to make to improve student learning

Though we are pleased with our majors' performance relative to our Knowledge PLO by the time they take Philosophy Senior Seminar (a course required of all our majors) in their last spring semester before they graduate, we are discussing the possibility of formulating a broad and minimal list of things we would like our majors to know by the time they graduate. This list would be based on the core major courses all our majors need to take other than Senior Seminar (Philosophical Perspectives, Formal Logic, two history of philosophy courses). Our goal will be for our majors to graduate with an acceptable amount of knowledge of enough of the items on this list (rather than complete knowledge of each item).

3. Effectiveness of our current methods for assessing student achievement

We think the essay format is the best way to assess our student learning with respect to our Knowledge outcome. However, some of us also sometimes make use of oral examinations in order to determine our students' knowledge of important aspects of philosophy.

4. Potential changes to our assessment work

In future department meetings, we will continue to discuss improving the list mentioned in item 2 above and adding the objective test mentioned in item 3 above.