



UMass Amherst’s Educational Effectiveness Plan (EEP) provides departments with an ongoing structure for conducting systematic inquiry into the effectiveness of their efforts to support student success. Departments initially developed and submitted their EEP inquiry plans and evidence gathering strategies in spring 2018 and are asked to provide updates on their progress on a regular basis. EEP activity is also incorporated into the University’s strategic planning process – with departments including their EEP progress and findings into their 2021 Strategic Planning Refresh. What follows is the department’s most current reporting, as synthesized by the Office of Academic Planning and Assessment (OAPA).

Philosophy EEP

Identify the evidence you currently use (beyond GPA) to determine that your undergraduates have achieved the objectives you have for them.

Our primary form of evidence concerning the extent to which our majors achieve the SLO’s is their performance in classes. The only other form of evidence we look at, outside of class performance, is the work students do in the IE course, Phil 500. The senior papers in that class are evaluated by a small committee at the end of the academic year with an eye to their manifestation of mastery of the SLO’s, and then reported to the department as a whole.

Since 2018 we have added two additional sources of data. (1) We now also use our Philosophy in the Public Schools course, Phil 391E to get feedback. The last assignment for this course will involve questions that relate directly to our last SLO, which involves how students apply their philosophical skills outside of their UMass classroom. (2) We invite undergraduate majors to attend a focus group to discuss aspects of the major, and what changes they might propose. This meeting will next occur later this spring and is held in conjunction with the Philosophy Club.

Please describe the focus of your inquiry and explain why this inquiry is important to your department right now.

Line of Inquiry 2018: The department feels that it already has a very good sense of the extent to which the basic philosophical skills outlined in the first five SLO’s are realized by our students. What we do not really know, and it is not obvious how to find out, is the extent to which the sixth goal (applying their skills in more “real world” contexts) is realized. This is why poster presentations and op ed-style assignments are now part of our IE class, Contemporary Problems. It would be good to get a more systematic understanding of how studying philosophy helps our students when they go out into the world.

Progress your department has made toward addressing your line of inquiry, and the types of evidence that you have collected to inform your inquiry.

The evaluation of our undergraduate program has many components, and is always ongoing. The curriculum committee looks at enrollments to gauge student interest in different philosophical subjects, and adjusts the course schedule accordingly. The Chair reviews all SRTI's – not just the numbers, but the student comments – to see which faculty have been successful teachers, and suggests (or sometimes requires) remedial action where there is a problem. And we have an “EEP committee,” with three faculty members, tasked specifically with assessing the extent to which our SLO's are being achieved, and making suggestions for improvement. All of these methods of evaluation have led to important changes in our undergraduate program over the past two years, and to proposals for future developments.

As our line of inquiry from 2018 suggests, we have been using the integrative experience course, Phil 500, as our primary vehicle for assessing our majors. This makes sense, because it is taken by virtually all of our majors in their senior year, and so gives a snapshot of how our majors are doing as they near graduation. For Based on the feedback we have collected, and the assessment of student performance, the IE has been revised. Here are some of the changes in the newly designed Phil 500, and data we collected that led to those changes. First, we no longer require a lengthy philosophy paper. There are too many other goals that need to be accomplished in the course, and so the papers will all be on the shorter side, some on the chosen philosophical topic (personal identity), some on the integrative experience component of the course. This recommendation arose in part from the assessment of the term papers by the EEP committee. Because students were largely on their own in developing these papers from a previous course, the quality was not at the level that we would like. (We used a simple rubric in evaluating these papers: each SLO was graded on a ten-point scale for each student paper by each member of the EEP committee.)

This assessment of the writing of our majors also led to a substantial change in how we will be doing our junior year writing course beginning next year, discussed below. Second, based on our senior surveys going back many years, we know that one of the sources of unhappiness with the philosophy major has been the lack of career counseling. The instructor has thus made discussion of philosophy and careers a major component of the course. And we will be holding a career advising session through the Philosophy Club this spring. The somewhat disappointing assessment of the papers by our majors in Phil 500 has also led us to rethink how our junior year writing requirement should be fulfilled. Our current junior year writing course focuses a lot on the mechanics of good writing, with components of linguistics and logic, but does not require that the students produce and work on a substantial philosophical paper. A faculty member is designing a new course where the emphasis will be on philosophical writing. This will be offered as an alternative to our current junior year writing course.

Another major focus of our 2018 line of inquiry involved determining to what extent our philosophy majors are able to apply what they learn outside of the classroom in “real world” contexts. The EEP committee did not find much evidence to show that we are achieving this

goal. One way the department has tried to do better is by introducing a new seminar, Phil 391E, for undergraduates on teaching philosophy in the public schools. This course is being offered for the second time this spring. The course involves discussing how to make philosophy relevant to children, and then taking a number of field trips to an elementary school in Springfield to try out teaching philosophy in the classroom. At the end of this course, the students will complete a survey having them reflect on their experience of applying philosophy to “real world” situations through engagement with fifth graders.

Finally, there is discussion in the curriculum committee about introducing a new course, Philosophy for the Public Sphere, that would focus on writing philosophy geared to the public sphere, for example, papers that “translate” an article from a philosophy journal for a broader audience, journalistic pieces on philosophers and their views, book reviews, and op-eds. These sorts of exercises worked well in the Phil 500 course and a stand-alone course might be the best way to achieve the relevant SLO.

What are your department’s next steps regarding your continuing and/or upcoming EEP line of inquiry?

As noted, we do still need to gather more information on our alumni and how their experience as a philosophy major at UMass has affected their future career development. We always have multiple ongoing “lines of inquiry.” But one focus going forward will be how our outreach efforts with teaching philosophy to children are succeeding. In addition to the Philosophy in the Public Schools (PIPS) program already mentioned, we are developing a summer program for high school students in philosophy. The focus will be on underrepresented minorities, and the tuition for this program will be free. It will be offered for the first time this summer. This program will not only be a public service through making philosophy education more widely available; we hope it will bring a diverse group of future philosophy majors into our program. (Diversity in philosophy is a challenge at all levels – faculty, graduate students, undergraduates – both with respect to gender and minorities.)

The department's focus this Spring 2020 will be on the graduate curriculum: We are surveying our graduate students with respect to their experience in our first-year pro-seminar and our dissertation seminar. We will use this data to decide if changes are needed in how these courses have been designed. As noted above, we will also be assessing the experience of the undergraduates in the PIPS seminar, 391E. And we continue to have the EEP committee review the work of students in our integrative experience, Phil 500 course.

What are the Student Learning Objectives for your department or program(s)?

Philosophy, B.A.

- Students will be able to present and explain views and doctrines, arguments in support of them, and objections to them.
- Students will be able to place views and arguments in context (either historical literature, or contemporary literature, as is appropriate to the topic).
- Students will be able to present and explain original views and arguments.
- Students will be able to write in a way that conforms to the canons of good writing, including clarity, organization, grammar, spelling, punctuation, usage, and scholarly citation.
- Students will be able to apply their philosophical skills to questions concerning social and political issues, ethical issues that arise in their personal lives, and problems that confront them in their work lives.

Philosophy, M.A.; Philosophy, Ph.D.

- Students will be familiar with the literature in a number of different areas of philosophy.
- Students will be capable of pursuing independent research at a professional level in at least one major area of philosophy.
- Students will have the speaking and writing skills necessary to publish in professional journals and present their work at conferences.
- Students will be able to transmit their knowledge of philosophy to their future students and engage them so as to foster a love of learning.