

**Macalester College
Philosophy Department
Assessment Plan
For
Philosophy Majors
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Department Mission

The Philosophy Department aims to foster rigorous, creative and productive philosophical activity at Macalester College and in the broader community. The central topics of philosophy, which are at the heart of liberal arts education, are the nature of reason and knowledge, the structure of physical and mental reality, the meaning and value of life, how one ought to live and act, and the origin and function of society,

The Philosophy Department therefore encourages focused study of these core issues as well as interdisciplinary inquiry that emphasizes the hallmarks of philosophical method: critical thinking, open and respectful dialogue, conceptual clarity, and attention to ethical and political significance.

Philosophy students develop strong skills of logical analysis and textual interpretation, clear and persuasive written and oral argumentation, moral and political sensitivity, and a deep appreciation for the rich history of philosophy and its diverse ongoing practices. Such training provides excellent preparation for nearly any career and for a lifetime of continual intellectual growth, moral reflection and critical social engagement.

Philosophy Department Learning Goals

The members of the Philosophy Department see philosophy primarily as an *activity*. This consists of working on a variety of philosophical issues and sharing philosophical insights with others. To facilitate the activity of doing philosophy, the Philosophy Department adopts the following three general learning goals for all students in our courses:

- I. Primary among these is the development of the skills associated with philosophical discussion and investigation. The skills essential for doing philosophy are also skills needed for a variety of intellectual endeavors including virtually all of the professions. Moreover, the acquisition of philosophical skills is a transformative process that equips the individual to critically reflect on the issues of today.
- II. Secondly, the Philosophy Department seeks to impart knowledge of the tradition of philosophy. This includes an acquaintance with some of the works of classical and contemporary philosophers and building knowledge of the major philosophical schools, figures and issues.
- III. Finally, in pursuing the goals described above it is important to encourage respect for opposing views, especially views opposed to one's own. It is also important to state one's own views and reasoning in a way that encourages open discussion and critique.

Relationship to Macalester's Mission Statement and Macalester's Statement of Purpose and Belief

Macalester's *Mission Statement* emphasizes high standards of scholarship. The Philosophy Department expects its majors to produce excellent scholarship appropriate at an undergraduate level. Macalester's *Statement of Purpose and Belief* states, "Students should develop the ability to use information and communication resources effectively, be adept at critical, analytical and logical thinking, and express themselves well in both oral and written forms." The learning goals of the Philosophy Department are directly related to this aspect of the *Statement of Purpose and Belief*. The *Statement of Purpose and Belief* also states,

“We expect students to develop a broad understanding of the liberal arts while they are at Macalester.” The Philosophy Department’s emphasis on major philosophical schools, figures and issues involves considering a core part of any liberal arts education. In addition, the skills that the Philosophy Department seeks to develop in reasoning, interpretation, and communication are vital skills for pursuit of understanding in the liberal arts.

Philosophy Department Learning Goals/Outcomes for Majors

Goals/Outcomes Related to Skills

Reasoning

Goal: Philosophy majors will develop proficiency in a variety of techniques of effective reasoning.

Learning Outcomes: Philosophy majors can determine the validity of arguments, present reasoned arguments for a variety of positions and recognize both formal and informal fallacies. In general, this requires that majors demonstrate a mastery of the techniques of both formal logic and critical thinking including techniques of conceptual analysis (hypothetical thinking and thought experimentation).

Interpretation

Goal: Philosophical works are often complex and difficult and philosophy majors should be able to effectively interpret works of philosophy, where effective interpretation is understood as implying respectful interpretation.

Learning Outcomes: Majors should demonstrate a general understanding that the Principle of Charity is the most effective interpretive strategy. Specifically, this means that before raising critical objections to any given text, majors should demonstrate an ability to interpret the text in its most favorable light, be able to develop a plausible interpretation that clarifies seemingly obscure or inconsistent material, and finally raise interesting questions about the text.

Majors should also be able to relate canonical philosophical texts to ongoing philosophical research or debates, and clearly articulate the main positions and arguments in major contemporary philosophical texts. Majors should be able to compare and contrast philosophical texts and figures in ways that improve the understanding of each, as well as demonstrating an ability to relate major philosophical texts to their own personal and intellectual development.

Research:

Goal: Philosophy majors should demonstrate effective and thorough research habits.

Learning Outcomes: Since philosophical progress is made relative to a background of literature, a philosophy major should demonstrate in the capstone paper that he or she is aware of what has already been written on the topic. The student should demonstrate an understanding of how this is necessary both for originality and also as a way of being respectful of those who have written on the issue one is considering.

Communication:

Goal: Philosophy majors should develop skills necessary for clear and concise writing and speaking, including an ability to make the material accessible for its intended audience.

Learning Outcomes: Each senior major will write a paper that is suitable for presentation at undergraduate conferences and for publication in undergraduate journals. Senior majors will present their work to an undergraduate audience at Macalester on Senior Philosophy Day and submit their papers to an undergraduate journal. On Senior Philosophy Day, students will demonstrate their confident command of the main subject area of their paper, including the ability to respond to challenging questions from an audience of their peers.

The Macalester Philosophy Department publishes an in-house undergraduate journal (the *Macalester Journal of Philosophy*) and this provides a natural forum for assessing the capstone papers, though students are also encouraged to submit their papers elsewhere. In these published papers students will demonstrate thorough knowledge of, and engagement with, the pertinent scholarly literature on their topic and undertake a persuasive critical analysis of the issues relevant to their thesis or argument.

Goals/Outcomes Related to Knowledge

Knowledge of Major Philosophical Schools, Figures and Issues

Goal: Philosophy majors should be knowledgeable of major philosophical schools, figures and issues in the philosophical tradition and be able to engage with their works in a way that is both sympathetic and critical. This outcome is, of course, dependent on students developing effective interpretive skills.

Learning Outcomes

Especially in assignments and examinations in Ethics (PHIL 125), Ancient and Medieval Philosophies (PHIL 230) and Modern Philosophy (PHIL 231), students will demonstrate knowledge of the major philosophical schools, figures and issues. Among the most important schools are: rationalism, empiricism, realism, idealism, materialism, dualism and consequentialist, deontological and virtue ethics. Among the most important philosophical figures are: Plato, Aristotle, Descartes, Locke, Hume, Kant and Mill. Among the most important philosophical issues are: the nature and extent of knowledge; the relation

between the mind and the body; the nature of the self; the good life; the meaning of life; freedom and responsibility; justice and morality; meaning and truth. Majors should become knowledgeable of major schools, figures and issues in at least two sub-disciplines of twentieth century philosophy (such as but not limited to: the philosophy of mind, philosophy of language, philosophy of science, philosophy of mathematics, twentieth century Continental philosophy, ethical theory and social and political philosophy).

Assessment Tool One

Regular Curricular Offerings

Curriculum for Majors

Nine Courses:

Five Required Courses

PHIL 120 Introduction to Symbolic Logic
 PHIL 125 Ethics
 PHIL 230 Ancient and Medieval Philosophy
 PHIL 231 Modern Philosophy
 PHIL 489 Senior Seminar

Four Electives

At least four electives, including 3 courses at the 300-level, 1 of which must be designated as metaphysics/epistemology, 1 of which must be designated as value theory, and 1 of which must be designated as topics in the history of philosophy.

Goals/Outcomes Related to Skills There are five courses that are taken by all philosophy majors and together these provide an opportunity to ensure that the required skills are introduced, refined and demonstrated at key points in the major. In PHIL 120 students learn essential reasoning skills (assessed through thirteen weekly assignments and five tests), and in PHIL 125, 230, and 231 students develop research and interpretive techniques. Students continue to refine these skills in upper level courses. In PHIL 489, senior majors have an

opportunity to work on their capstone paper in which they demonstrate how effectively they have mastered the skills outlined in this assessment plan.

Goals/Outcomes Related to Knowledge As a result of taking PHIL 125, 230, and 231, students will demonstrate knowledge of major schools, figures and issues in the philosophical tradition. Major schools include (but are not limited to): rationalism, empiricism, realism, idealism, materialism, dualism and consequentialist, deontological and virtue ethics. Major figures include (but are not limited to): Plato, Aristotle, Descartes, Locke, Hume, Kant and Mill. Major issues include (but are not limited to): the nature and extent of knowledge; the relation between the mind and the body; the nature of the self; the good life; the meaning of life; freedom and responsibility; justice and morality; meaning and truth. In requiring that majors select 1 elective each in metaphysics/epistemology, value theory, and topics in history of philosophy, majors will be expected to acquire a broad knowledge of the main areas of philosophy while also exploring one or more particular areas in depth.

Persons responsible for administering Assessment Tool One: Instructors of relevant courses. Individual instructors are responsible for developing courses related to the learning goals and outcomes for majors and employing assessment tools related to those goals/outcomes. Some examples from individual instructors are given in Appendix One. Faculty will be expected to explicitly incorporate some of the department learning goals and outcomes in the 'goals' listed in their course syllabi. Faculty will regularly and collectively discuss their procedures for meeting department goals and outcomes in particular courses in order to assure a shared understanding and effective implementation of the assessment tools. Furthermore, the department's learning goals and outcomes, and especially the ways these are implemented by the course offerings and by major/minor structure will be shared with students on the department homepage, when students officially declare a major or minor, and in unofficial gatherings with students.

Assessment Tool Two

Senior Capstone Paper

In the *Macalaster Catalog* we list among the requirements for the major that, "majors in philosophy are required to write a senior paper to be submitted to an undergraduate student journal, though it is not required that the paper be accepted for publication. The paper is due at the end of February of the senior year and a copy should be given to the department chair. The senior capstone

requirement in philosophy is normally satisfied by a senior paper written for Philosophy 489.”

Senior majors are required to write a capstone paper that will be:

- (i) reviewed by the member of Macalester Philosophy Department best qualified to assess how well the student addresses the topic of the paper (see Appendix Two for rubric for assessment criteria). The majority of our seniors submit their papers for publication in the *Macalester Student Philosophy Journal*, so for most papers this assessment will be administered as part of the review process for publication in this journal.
- (ii) the basis for an oral presentation given to an audience of undergraduate Macalester students on Senior Philosophy Day and the faculty of the Macalester Philosophy Department. Classes in the Philosophy Department are cancelled for this day and students enrolled in these courses are required to attend the senior presentations in lieu of class attendance. This enables majors and prospective majors enrolled in these classes to preview what we ultimately expect of our majors. Faculty members of the Macalester Philosophy Department will assess each presentation (see Appendix Two for rubric assessment criteria).

Person responsible for administering Assessment Tool Two: Instructor of PHIL 489 Senior Seminar for the preceding Fall.

Assessment Tool Three

Graduating Senior Survey

Each major in the Senior Seminar will complete an online survey towards the end of the fall semester. This is an anonymous survey and will provide the department with indirect evidence of student learning. Students will be asked to rate the knowledge and skills acquired in the course of pursuing a Philosophy Major and reflect on what they have learned.

(See Appendix Three for 2009 Online Exit Survey)

Person responsible for administering Assessment Tool Three: Instructor of PHIL 489 Senior Seminar. The results of this survey will be held by the Department Coordinator until after the majors have graduated.

Assessment Tool Four

Graduate School Applications

Although in any given year only a minority of our students apply to graduate schools for further study in Philosophy, our major should aim to make such students competitive. Philosophy majors should also be well placed in pursuing other careers such as law. We will keep a record of graduating seniors applying for postgraduate work (in all areas of study) and attempt to track our seniors for three years after graduation.

Persons responsible for administering Assessment Tool Four: This material should be collected by the academic advisers of record for each graduating senior and forwarded to the department coordinator. It will then be shared by the department chair with the department as a whole, and stored in a permanent computer file on the department and college servers.

The faculty of the department will annually review information from assessment plan implementation at a department meeting in the late spring or early fall. Individual faculty will be responsible for collecting assessment material drawn from individual courses; the department chair working with the department coordinator will be responsible for gathering and distributing assessment material not derived from individual courses.