Introduction

The Department of Philosophy at Georgia State University is an excellent program. It has a productive, young and energetic faculty. Over recent years the department (with support from the college and university) has exhibited a perceptive eye for young talent. It has a nationally recognized M.A. program with high quality graduate students. It offers a well-balanced and strong (especially given the resources available) undergraduate and graduate curriculum. It appears to have an excellent working relationship with the Dean’s office and other administrative offices in the University. It has strong and effective leadership, which has managed its relatively meager resources extremely wisely and efficiently. For example, it offers an effective graduate student teacher training program in order to teach large numbers of undergraduates well with minimal resources and it manages to recruit impressive graduate students despite woefully inadequate assistantships. Finally, the department demonstrated high morale at all levels. Everyone we spoke with – the tenured and tenure-track faculty, the lecturers, the staff, the graduate students, and the undergraduate majors – indicated that they were happy to be at Georgia State. We believe that Georgia State University has a Department of Philosophy of which it is justly proud.

The review team has three major recommendations in light of our reading of the self-study, our conversations with many of the department’s stakeholders, and the questions posed to us.

First, we do not believe that there are good reasons for converting the Department’s terminal M.A. program into a Ph.D. program. The discipline of philosophy already has sufficient number of Ph.D. programs (some believe too many), and adding to this number will be beneficial neither to the profession nor to society as a whole. Moreover, it does not appear that Georgia State will have the resources in the near term necessary to build and maintain a high quality Ph.D. program. On the other hand, we believe that the Department’s terminal M.A. program does provide genuine professional and social benefit. It is one of a handful (perhaps one of the top two or three) of programs in the country that enable students who for one reason or another are unprepared but otherwise qualified for a first rate Ph.D. program to acquire the relevant background and training. The Department’s recent placement record in this regard indicates that it has found itself an important and beneficial niche.

Second, we believe that the department’s support of its graduate students is shockingly inadequate. The size of the stipend and the teaching required for an assistantship in the department compares poorly with the department’s peers and is exploitive. We believe that just and competitive - not just with peer terminal M.A. programs but with Ph.D. programs that are not nationally competitive - assistantships should include $10,000 the first year and $15,000 the second and teaching one course per semester in the second year. The department’s own recommendation of $10,000 per year and 2 courses per semester in the second year is also inadequate, but it is better than the current funding and course load.
Third, we believe that too much of the department’s teaching mission is accomplished by non-tenure/tenure-track instructors. Fewer than 25% or 30% of the sections taught by the department each semester are taught by tenure track (henceforth TT) faculty and the department teaches more credit hours per TT faculty than any other department in the College of Arts and Sciences. Consequently, we strongly believe that after completing the tenure-track hires approved under the previous self-study the department needs two to four additional TT positions. Moreover, while we applaud the department’s decision to focus its resources in ‘empirical philosophy of mind’ and ethics/social and political philosophy (and to a lesser extent the history of philosophy), we are worried that core areas of philosophy necessary to pursue these niches may have been neglected. For example, we believe that at least one of these new hires should be in epistemology and/or metaphysics. The department’s goal of splitting the 4000/6000 courses is important and well-considered. It appears to have the support of all of the department’s constituencies. While we endorse this goal, we believe that it should await the addition of TT hires.

Finally, in her letter, the Dean asked us to consider three questions: one concerning enhancing the undergraduate program, one concerning enhancing the graduate program, and one concerning external support. We believe that our last two recommendations go directly to the Dean’s first two questions. Improving the quality of the graduate students with more competitive assistantships and increasing the TT positions will improve the quality of undergraduate teaching and lower class sizes and will improve the national reputation of the department’s graduate program. Concerning the third question, which essentially boils down to recommendations for identifying sources of support for the department, we are afraid we do not have much to offer. As a humanities discipline, philosophy does not, unfortunately, have access to large amounts of external funding. The department has, however, chosen to focus on two of the more ‘lucrative’ areas and has done quite well in obtaining external support. In the end, philosophy is one of those disciplines that has to be largely supported by the university. It may be the case that all or most of the units at Georgia State are of similar quality to its Department of Philosophy. If that is the case, we have little to recommend but you have much to be proud of. If not, we respectfully encourage you to adequately fund one of your best programs.

Strengths and Weaknesses

The Philosophy Department at Georgia State is very strong. The faculty is first-rate, the curriculum is strong, and they do an excellent job of educating their graduate students and have built, and maintained, one of the best M.A. Programs in the country. It is clear to the review team that this Program should continue to be supported.

Although the M.A. program does an excellent job of educating graduate students, the review team believes that the graduate students are overworked and undercompensated. The team also found that the undergraduates felt that they were not able to interact sufficiently with TT faculty.

Historical and Current Context

In many ways the Department has done an extraordinary job over the past few years in terms of faculty hiring and retention. As the Dean’s letter noted, the new faculty members are all excellent. The Philosophy Department at Georgia State has a good eye for talent. This
Department is able to support the programs it offers, though it must use large numbers of graduate students and lecturers – around 75% of its sections are taught by non-TT faculty. The critical thinking courses – both at the introductory level, and those integrated into the curriculum at higher levels – are an excellent idea, and the University is to be applauded for working this material into the curriculum. But when the lower level courses are taught by graduate students who are working on courses, theses, etc., the quality of instruction is likely to suffer. Easing the graduate student load would likely improve the undergraduate curriculum. This was also a problem in the last report.

The TT faculty are doing a great job, given their numbers, in supporting the Department programs and curriculum. Of course, more TT faculty would help. There was some concern expressed that the Department was lacking a researcher in core metaphysics and epistemology, which is foundational to the other areas.

The Department does an excellent job also of reaching out to others in the academic community, and community at large. Faculty from the Philosophy Department help run the Ethics Center – which has many events that are of great current interest – for example, discussions of Jared Diamond’s work which is of general interest to members of the academic community. Members of the department also support the Neuroscience Institute. The members of the philosophy department are good citizens of the University.

The Department has compared itself to other departments with terminal M.A. programs, and this seems entirely appropriate. That it is in the same league as Tufts is impressive, given the relative lack of resources.

Although there are a few suggestions we can make for improvement, some of which are imperative, we agree that given its resources the Department is doing an excellent job, and should be supported.

**Progress Toward Goals and Objectives**

In terms of faculty and research quality the Department has done a good job in meeting its goals. The Department is composed of professionally active faculty who are either well established in their fields already, or, in the case of junior faculty, well on their way to establishing excellent reputations in their areas of expertise. The Department has strengths – as noted in the self-study – in value theory, empirically informed philosophy of mind, and 19th century philosophy. New hiring is crucial to build on these strengths and improve the foundations of the department in terms of core support in the curriculum.

The University could also help to support the faculty in their research. One suggestion is providing pre-tenure leave of one semester to junior faculty. We realize that doing this for all junior faculty would be expensive. However, other colleges and universities limit the expense by offering the leaves on a competitive basis.

In terms of graduate education, the department is doing very well. Certainly the graduate students receive an excellent education. As noted earlier, however, their workload, particularly in the second year when they are teaching a heavy load as well as taking courses and writing
their theses, is too heavy for them to really be able to concentrate on their studies. In this respect, the Department correctly feels that it has not met objectives set out in the last self-study. At that time graduate student compensation and workload were identified as problems, but no amelioration of the problem has occurred since the last self-study. It is clear that a major reason for this is lack of resources. To some extent, it seems to us that the lack of resources is driven by institutional factors that don’t consider the unique niche developed by the M.A. program. Compensation of the M.A. students in the Philosophy Department should at least mirror that of the Ph.D. students elsewhere at the University.

As noted earlier as well, the undergraduates, while they are very pleased with the faculty, feel that they are underserved in that they do not have adequate access to the TT faculty. The curriculum itself is strong, but many sections are taught by non-TT faculty, and when undergraduates get to the upper level courses, those courses are taught to both undergraduate and graduate students, and the undergraduates feel left out. Splitting the 4000/6000 courses would greatly help here.

In terms of the University’s strategic plan the Philosophy Department is a model department. One factor clearly highlighted in the strategic plan is the development and support of interdisciplinary programs that fill important academic and social needs. The Philosophy Department has not just one, but two, areas of strength in strongly interdisciplinary areas – empirically based philosophy of mind, and value theory. The first depends upon connections between philosophy and the sciences and social sciences, and has tremendous potential for major social impact in terms of research focused on understanding – for example – how people do and should make decisions, what goes on in the brain when people think about moral decisions, and how we can understand something like ‘free will’ without assuming a dualistic conception of a person. Value theory – and the Department’s contributions to the Ethics Center – is absolutely essential to public policy, which the strategic plan identifies as an ongoing concern of the University. Ethical theory can inform issues having to do with distribution of benefits and burdens within a society, policies on how to handle emerging technologies, and our obligations to the environment and future generations.

**Quality of the Curriculum**

The review team found that the course offerings at all levels were appropriate (with the proviso about the 4000/6000 courses noted above and below). The Department has clearly thought carefully about the lower level undergraduate courses (particularly the critical thinking course) and has developed a solid method for teaching the many students who take that course. The Department’s preparation of graduate students for teaching that course is excellent. The review team suggests that more attention be paid to Philosophy 2010 (the introductory course): more attention to the preparation of the graduate students who teach sections of that course would, we think pay off. Although the Department has general guidelines for the course, undergraduates report wide differences among sections, and think that 2010 could do a better job of preparing them for later courses. (The undergraduates suggested special sections of the course
for majors or those thinking about majoring in philosophy. This may not be practical, given that many students do not know of their interest in philosophy until they are taking the course, but it might be worth trying out this suggestion.) The review team also suggests that the Ethics and Social/Political requirement for majors require a theory course (either 4700 Ethics or 4800 Social and Political Philosophy). This would mean requiring two courses in that area, if the Department also wishes to keep the special applied courses as fulfilling that requirement. We think that the recent changes in its structure have strengthened the major. We note that the undergraduates expressed a strong preference for having TT faculty teach more of the undergraduate courses aimed at majors. This is a good suggestion, and one that the review team endorses, while noting that this would exacerbate the existing staffing problems.

In general, the undergraduate philosophy majors with whom we met were extremely strong students deeply interested in philosophy. They could do well in good Ph.D. programs. As things stand, though, they would benefit from more interaction with TT faculty who, generally, are in a better position to advise them about graduate school, and also about their work in philosophy courses.

The review team found the M.A. program, with its various tracks, to be very strong. With the traditional track as well as the Brains and Behavior track, Georgia State is doing an excellent job preparing its M.A. students for further study in philosophy or in neuroscience. The M.A./J.D. track is also doing well by its students.

All three graduate tracks (and the undergraduate major) require at least one course in metaphysics or epistemology; yet the department does not have a TT faculty member who specializes in traditional core studies in metaphysics and/or epistemology. This weakness was noted by many of the faculty in discussion with members of the review team, and by the graduate students. Traditional metaphysics and epistemology are at the center of academic philosophy. Any specialist area in philosophy ultimately depends on problems treated by these core areas.

As we have noted in the introduction to this report, we support the Department’s goal of separating the combined 4000/6000 courses. Undergraduates feel dominated and excluded, and think that they are not learning as much or as well as they could; graduate students, while being less adamant about the need for the split, note that the presence of undergraduates and the need for two-level teaching makes the combined courses less effective than they might be.

Another problem is that, because of the high teaching loads and low pay for graduate students, not a few of them are not completing the M.A. program in two years. The fall semester of the second year is when the highest teaching loads occur; it also the time in which students are taking seminars, working hard on theses, and trying to put together the kind of application that will get them into the best Ph.D. programs. The evidence suggests that not a few of the graduate students find the work-load and stress such that they cannot do the best work they can on applications (statements of purpose, writing samples, time spent filling in application forms), and so must reduce their teaching or course load, and wait until their third year to apply. (Most philosophy Ph.D. programs allow students to begin their studies only in the fall semester.) This is another cost of the low level of graduate support.

Quality of the Students
The review team was favorably impressed by the quality of the undergraduate and graduate students that we met. We were convinced by the evidence presented by the Department that they are attracting some of the best undergraduate students at Georgia State. The same goes for the graduate students. As we have noted in the introduction, the M.A. program is doing an excellent job at attracting and educating very good students, many of whom go on to excellent Ph.D. programs. As we have noted throughout this report, our main worry about student quality is that the onerous teaching requirements and low levels of support may, eventually, hurt both the undergraduate and graduate programs.

**Quality of the Faculty**

The review team was very favorably impressed with the high quality of the faculty. All of the faculty seem committed to collegiality and to good teaching; and the tenure track faculty are remarkably productive with respect to research. The faculty are energetic and committed to the excellence of the M.A. program and eager to improve the undergraduate program (as indicated by the newly structured major). Nevertheless, a significant number of the faculty feel the need for a new TT line committed to traditional, core problems in epistemology and/or metaphysics.

**Resource Adequacy**

The review team was asked to evaluate the adequacy of resources available to the Department in seven areas: faculty, administrative, technological, space, laboratory, Georgia State Foundation, and library. Laboratory resources not relevant to philosophy teaching and research. In the case of three other areas (administrative, technological, and library) the current level of resources appears adequate given the current circumstances. The University and College should be congratulated. Space resources and Georgia State Foundation sources need to be supplemented, but the overwhelming inadequacy of faculty resources cannot be missed.

By our count, the Department currently offers roughly 80 course sections of which fewer than a third (perhaps fewer than a quarter) are taught by TT faculty. Moreover, the Department produces over 1400 credit hours per tenure/tenure track faculty - more than any other department in the College of Arts and Sciences. To some extent this may appear to be a problem of the Department’s own making. Certainly, the problem is exacerbated by the successful integration of the Department’s 1010 (Critical Thinking) and 2010 (Great Questions of Philosophy) into the University’s core curriculum. As we noted above, these courses are important, both socially and professionally, for all students and the University’s decision to integrate these courses into the core was wise. Nevertheless, such success breeds the need for additional resources.

As we understand it, the Department is currently searching to fill a new tenure track line and has been promised a second one from the previous (2003) action plan. This an important step in the right direction, but, as we noted above, in our judgment at least two to four additional tenure track positions are needed to meet existing needs. Of course, if the Department is to seek not merely the status quo, but to set for itself additional goals (for example, by splitting its 4000/6000 level courses), other positions will be required.

Of the remaining two areas of resources that need to be addressed (space and Georgia State Foundation), the most pressing is space. The committee was very impressed with the
Department’s accommodations. But additional faculty positions will require additional office spaces. Moreover, our conversations with undergraduate students indicated that they felt excluded from the Department to some extent. This is a recurring theme in departments with graduate programs. To address this problem departments must strive to provide resources meant exclusively for undergraduates. One way to do this is providing a space set aside in the department solely for the undergraduate majors – small computer lab, a small office/meeting room, etc. Unfortunately, there does not appear to be space available to meet these additional needs.

Goals and Objectives

The review team was asked to evaluate the departments goal’s and objectives.

After debating the wisdom of becoming a non-competitive Ph.D. program or first rate terminal M.A. program and failing to reach a firm decision, the Department listed six goals and objectives in order of priority: completion of the previous action plan’s approved tenure track hires, separation of the 4000 and 6000 level courses, improving the graduate assistantships by both increasing the stipends and reducing the expected workload, hiring an additional senior level faculty, lowering the class size in Philosophy 2010, and bringing back summer research funding for research productive faculty. We believe these goals and objectives are entirely appropriate and in accord with disciplinary trends. We also believe that the priorities are reasonable, but the review team would recommend some changes.

First, we entirely agree with the Department that the first priority should be the completion of the approved hires of the previous (2003) action plan. We take this as a base line for all other goals and objectives.

Second, we believe that following the completion of the previous action plan the number one priority for the Department, College, and University should be improving the graduate assistantships. The Department proposes increasing the stipend to $10K per year and reducing the teaching load in the second year to 2 courses per semester. We believe that the improvement should be more significant with a stipend of $10K the first year and $15K the second year and a teaching load of 3 course in the second year. But at a minimum the Department’s goal should be met. We believe this should be the number one priority not only because of the exploitive nature of the current assistantships, but also because offering more competitive packages affects virtually every aspect of the program. While we do not dispute that the Department has managed to recruit high quality graduate students under the current circumstances, no one can dispute that more competitive graduate packages will improve the Department’s competitive advantage. Having excellent graduate students affects the Department’s reputation, the recruiting and retention of excellent faculty, the placement record of the graduate program, and the quality of education in the undergraduate curriculum. The faculty, the graduate students, and the undergraduate students deserve better.

Third, while we agree with the Department’s rationale for splitting the 4000 level classes from the 6000 level classes, we believe this goal must be postponed until the ratio of TT teaching to instructor/visitor and graduate student teaching is improved. That is to say, we believe that the 4000/6000 level split will only serve to make worse a problem that needs to be addressed first. The Department needs from two to four tenure track positions (in addition to the positions
already approved) in order to address this need. Once this has been accomplished additional positions would certainly be justified in order to accomplish the 4000/6000 level split.

The remaining three Departmental goals of hiring an additional senior level faculty, lowering the class size in Philosophy 2010, and bringing back summer funding for research faculty are all quite appropriate in our judgment, but we believe that they must be put on hold until the graduate assistantship and TT faculty ratio problems have been addressed.

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, we are grateful for the opportunity to review such an up and coming Department of Philosophy at such a supportive University as Georgia State. We also appreciate your interest in our judgment.

We believe that the Department of Philosophy has done a very good job since its last review and has made significant strides to become a nationally recognized program. If the Department were to remain a terminal M.A. program (at least in the near term), improve its graduate assistantships, and increase the number of its TT faculty, we believe it will continue its improvement in the coming decade.

Respectfully submitted by

Hugh H. Benson  
Professor & Chair  
Department of Philosophy  
University of Oklahoma

Patricia Curd  
Professor of Philosophy  
Director of Graduate Studies  
Department of Philosophy  
Purdue University

Julia Driver  
Professor of Philosophy  
Department of Philosophy  
Washington University