# Core D1 and D3 Assessment Report

Philosophy Dept. June 30, 2009

#### Method

At the request of USF's WASC team, the philosophy department collected as many final papers as it could obtain from instructors of Core D1 courses and of Core D3 courses (in philosophy). From roughly 341 Core D1 final papers obtained, every 3<sup>rd</sup> paper was selected until 75 were collected, and from roughly 161 Core D3 (philosophy) final papers, every 2<sup>nd</sup> paper was selected until 75 were collected. All 75 Core D1 and 75 Core D3 papers were selected and prepared for blind review by the department's program assistant, Annmarie Belda.

Two committees, one for D1 and the other for D3, were formed to create assessment rubrics and apply them to the relevant sets of papers. The Core D1 committee was composed of David Kim (Chair), Jeffrey Paris, and Ron Sundstrom, and the Core D3 committee was constituted by David Kim (Chair), Tom Cavanaugh (incoming Ethics Coordinator), and Jackie Taylor (outgoing Ethics Coordinator). The Core D1 rubric is structured by 3 learning outcomes, and the Core D3 rubric by 4 learning outcomes, all derived from the official language of the USF Core Curriculum. And both rubrics assess student achievement in terms of 4 categories: "1" stands for "Less than Adequate Achievement," "2" for "Expected Achievement," "3" for "Highest Achievement," and, "NA" for "Not Applicable."

Each reader scored a set of 50 papers, and every set of papers was arranged in an overlapping pattern (i.e. papers 1-50, papers 26-75, and papers 51-75 and 1-25), with the end result of every paper being scored by two readers. Insofar as a learning outcome was deemed by the two readers to be applicable to the paper, and the two scores given did not vary by more than one level of achievement, the average of the two scores was taken as the final score for the learning outcome assessed in the paper. When the two scores varied by more than one level of achievement, a third reader (the third member of the committee) was called upon to score the paper, and the average of the three scores formed the final score for the learning outcome in question. And when one reader deemed the learning outcome inapplicable to the paper (and ascribed an "NA"), while the other reader deemed it applicable and thus offered a numerical score, *both* ascriptions were placed in the final score box in lieu of a final average. The results are organized in an excel tally sheet for D1 and for D3.

#### D1 Rubric

According to the USF Core Curriculum, a D1 course aims to enable students to:

- 1) "Understand the value of thinking philosophically by reflecting on the meaning of one's own life, the conceptual foundations of human actions and beliefs, the nature of the self and of human responsibility."
- 2) "Understand and discuss coherently the central philosophical issues, such as the problem of evil, the existence of God, free will, the mind/body relation, human knowledge, and the question of being."

- 3) "Demonstrate an ability to identify and articulate, both orally and in writing, the primary philosophical themes and issues found in the writings of the major philosophers."
- 4) "Demonstrate an ability to evaluate philosophical arguments critically, both orally and in writing, using philosophical methods that have been developed by either historical or contemporary philosophers."

The Core D1 committee regarded the first of these to be a goal, not a learning outcome. It may be a kind of master ability, acquired when the abilities 2-4 are acquired. Each of the remaining three enumerated abilities are registered in the D1 rubric as learning outcomes with slight modifications: A) "Discuss central philosophical issues," B) "Identify and articulate issues found in writings of major classic and/or contemporary philosophers," and C) "Evaluate philosophical arguments critically."

#### D3 Rubric

The aim of a D3 course, according to the USF Core Curriculum, is to enable students to:

- 1) "Identify and articulate central ethical problems concerning equality, justice, and rights, and understand the role these play in personal and professional life."
- 2) "Compare and contrast major ethical theories, to show how actions can be determined to be just or unjust, right or wrong, or good or bad, and to demonstrate knowledge of the strengths and weaknesses of major ethical theories."
- 3) "Investigate ways of settling ethical disputes in arriving at ethical judgments."
- 4) "Think and write critically about classic and contemporary moral issues."
- 5) "Identify the contributions of diversity and recognize the challenge that it presents in resolving contemporary ethical issues."
- 6) "Demonstrate an ability to apply ethical theories and values in personal decision-making."

The Core D3 committee came to the conclusion that most of the crucial elements of abilities 3 and 4 were already accounted for in other abilities listed in the

D3 Core language. So the committee configured the D3 rubric in terms of four learning outcomes corresponding, with slight modifications, to the remaining abilities listed: A) "Identifies central ethical problems," B) "Compares and contrast major ethical theories," C) "Demonstrates an ability to apply ethical theories to ethical decision-making," and D) "Identifies how diversity affects ethical theories and ethical decision-making."

## Reflections on Method, Rubrics, and Results

The tally sheets offer the department an interesting statistical portrait of its Core teaching. Much of the picture remains incomplete or ambiguous, but there is enough to prompt careful consideration of how to improve our portion of the Core.

One of the inherent limitations of the D1 and D3 reviews is the use of a single measurement tool: the final paper. Most of the learning outcomes for the D1 and D3 rubrics concern *classic* and *central* topics, texts, and figures. But many courses are configured by syllabi that focus on classic material early in the semester but assign final papers at the end of the course when more contemporary and more derived or applied topics are addressed. Therefore, many final papers will not squarely match many of the learning outcomes. Also, many final paper assignments, whether or not they concern

classic topics, are not designed to be comprehensive in a manner that could make them assessable in terms of multiple learning outcomes. Rather, they are often purposefully confined projects within a series of focused exercises. The upshot is that there remains some unclarity about exactly how well our students fare *overall* with respect to D1 and D3 learning outcomes. Quite possibly, in WASC terms, students may have done poorly in their papers, but performed well in their exams, earlier papers, and other assignments. And, as will be discussed shortly, these considerations seem to be more pertinent to D3 final papers. Lastly, adjuncts teach roughly half of our Core courses, but only two were able to supply papers for the assessment in time. The majority of the adjuncts simply do not assign final papers, and two who did assign final papers were unable to deliver them in time for the assessment. Thus, it turns out that we do not have a full picture of what might have been given us by a review based on this single measurement tool.

Looking over the two tally sheets, it appears that the assessment of D1 was the more straightforward of the two. All three D1 readers regarded all 75 papers to be assessable in terms of all three learning outcomes. Also, a third reader was called in only on two occasions.

In the D3 tally sheet, the assessment of learning outcomes 1 and 3 were unproblematic in the sense that every paper received two numerical scores without the need for a third reader. The assessment of learning outcome 2, however, reveals some recurring differences in judgment as to whether this learning outcome was deemed applicable to a given paper. Subsequent discussion revealed that there were some differences in the interpretation of the language of the learning outcome and perhaps of the USF Core Curriculum statement from which it was derived. For example, one reader understood the learning outcome to accommodate any comparison/contrast of positions on whether a given act or policy was ethically right or wrong. For example, the learning outcome would be deemed applicable to a paper that examines two opposing Kantian views on the morality of abortion. The other two readers, however, interpreted the learning outcome more narrowly in terms of metaethical or normative theoretical comparison/contrast (e.g. comparing/constrasting a deontic/Kantian vs. a virtue/Aristotelian approach to abortion). And even on this narrower construal, there were some differences in opinion as to whether learning outcome 3 applied to many papers. Much of this pattern of discrepancies may be a result of some inherent ambiguity in the official USF Core Curriculum language itself. It may be interesting to see how Philosophy's D3 assessment compares with THRS's D3 assessment on this point. Finally, the dominant pattern for learning outcome 4 was the judgment of inapplicability. Other assessment tools seem necessary to see how our students fare in this regard.

### Action Plan

Over the summer and certainly during our late August Fall Retreat, the department will generate recommendations or policies regarding writing assignments in relation to Core learning outcomes, the use of turnitin.com to deter plagiarism and to create an online paper repository, and uniformity on essentials in syllabi and teaching. Also, a careful review of adjunct syllabi, grade distribution, and teaching evaluations will be conducted. In addition, meetings with D1 faculty and meetings with D3 faculty will be arranged for the Fall. Furthermore, the Chair will meet with every adjunct faculty over the summer

and Fall. Finally, the department will undertake measures recommended by the USF WASC team.