

External Review - Department of Philosophy

Executive Summary

The External Review Committee found no serious problems of a strictly academic nature, and they applauded the general direction in which the Department is moving. The reviewers report the Department has built a fine undergraduate philosophy curriculum and, while continuing its deep commitment to undergraduate teaching, it is now increasing its contributions to the discipline and building its national and international stature. The reviewers noted that the Department has recently made four excellent junior appointments; its research productivity is increasing; and it is developing what promises to be a very good Ph.D. program. The general thrust of the committee's first two recommendations is that the University support the Department at this critical stage in its development.

The reviewers commented that the Department of Philosophy has enjoyed a long period of good internal administration and excellent relations with the central administration. The resulting collegiality, cohesiveness, and deep commitment to the Department (and to the University) by Philosophy faculty members provides an important human resource on which the Department can draw. The more tangible resources (support staff positions, physical space, computing and combined UBC-SFU library resources) are quite adequate for the continued development of Philosophy at SFU. The committee made two recommendations concerning personnel issues which were referred to the Chair and the Dean.

SIMON FRASER UNIVERSITY
Office of the Vice-President, Academic
MEMORANDUM

To: Members of the Senate Committee on Academic Planning
From: Alison Watt
Subject: External Review - Department of Philosophy
Date: 16 June, 1995

The External Review of the Department of Philosophy and the Department's response will be on the agenda of the 12th July SCAP meeting. Dr. Tietz will attend the meeting.

The external review committee members were:

Dr. Ann MacKenzie, Glendon College, York University (Chair)
Dr. Gerald Dworkin, University of Illinois at Chicago
Dr. Bernard Linsky, University of Alberta
Dr. Dennis Krebs, Department of Psychology, Simon Fraser University

Enclosures: 2



Report of the External Review Committee

Department of Philosophy
Simon Fraser University

Site visit March 15-16, 1994

Report July 29, 1994

Revised October 18, 1994

SYNOPSIS

We find no serious problems of a strictly academic nature, and we applaud the general direction in which the department is moving. It has built a fine undergraduate philosophy curriculum and, while continuing its deep commitment to undergraduate teaching, it is now increasing its contributions to the discipline and building the national and international stature of the SFU Philosophy Department. It has recently made four excellent junior appointments; its research productivity is increasing; and it is developing what promises to be a very good PhD program. The general thrust of our first two recommendations is that the University support the Department at this critical stage in its development.

SFU Philosophy has enjoyed a long period of good internal administration and excellent relations with the central administration. The resulting collegiality, cohesiveness, and deep commitment to the department (and to the university) by philosophy faculty members provides an important human resource on which the department can draw. The more tangible resources (two non-academic support positions, physical space, computing and combined UBC-SFU library resources) are quite adequate for the continued development of Philosophy at SFU. Our final recommendations concern the only two problems we identified in the area of administration: that the University's procedures failed to cope with a gender problem*, and that the Department

* see note on page 8

has failed to create structures facilitating communication with its students and thus has lost the benefit of student input to decision-making.

ACADEMIC RECOMMENDATIONS:

- (1) that the department be allowed to replace one of its retiring faculty with a high level tenure track appointment (at least at the Associate Professor level);
- (2) that the Department be encouraged to develop innovative ways to increase the TA funding for philosophy graduate students.

ADMINISTRATIVE RECOMMENDATIONS:

- (3) that the University identify the reasons why its procedures failed to cope adequately with the situation in philosophy, and take appropriate steps;*
- (4) that the Department work with its undergraduate majors to create structures which facilitate communication;

1. ACADEMIC MATTERS

1.1 Assessment

We find no serious problems of a strictly academic nature, and we applaud the general direction in which the department is moving. It has built a fine undergraduate philosophy curriculum and, while continuing its deep commitment to undergraduate teaching, it is now increasing its contributions to the discipline and building the stature of the Department. It has recently made four excellent junior appointments; its research productivity is increasing, and it is developing what promises to be a very good PhD program.

1.1.1 Faculty

The Full Professors are all active scholars making solid contributions to their areas. The Associate Professors have greater research ability than their publication records indicate; they are, for the most part, active scholars who are clearly qualified for graduate supervision. The Assistant Professors are all fine young philosophers who have contributed significantly to re-energizing the department. In addition, the department makes excellent use of part-time

* see note on page 8

funds to hire foreign visitors who enrich the curriculum and the intellectual life of the department.

The age profile of tenure track faculty members is reasonably good, given the hiatus (1977-89) in hiring, with two members in their sixties, five in their fifties, one in his forties, and four in their thirties. However, five faculty members are scheduled to retire between 2002 and 2007, right at one of the projected peak retirement periods for the humanities in North America.

1.1.2 Research

After a period of lower publication productivity than one might expect, there has been an evident revitalization of research activity and publication. It is clear that the department members have remained current with developments in their fields and some of the recent publications seem to be the fruit of extended years of work.

The department is best known internationally for organizing high profile conferences on the foundations of Cognitive Science, the proceedings of which are published in the Vancouver Studies in Cognition series, originally by UBC Press. It is a reflection of the excellent quality of these conferences that the publication of the series has been recently taken over by Oxford University Press.

1.1.3 Curriculum and Teaching

The Department mounts a highly structured, rigorous undergraduate curriculum in philosophy. It provides philosophy majors with solid foundations in the discipline, good contact with current developments, and an excellent preparation for graduate work. It contributes significantly to the Liberal Arts education of all students taking philosophy courses, providing them with logical and conceptual skills, and instilling in them high standards of intellectual clarity and a broad humanistic outlook.

The graduate program has undergone a good deal of growth in recent years. Good supervision (and the "Moral Tutor" system) seems to be solving the problem of high withdrawal rate of Philosophy MA students. We agree with the (favourable) external reports on the new PhD program. Given that SFU students will have access to the library resources at UBC and graduate courses in some fields not frequently covered at SFU, we think that the

program will be quite successful.

1.2 Problems and Suggestions

Research activity. In support of the recent increased emphasis on research, we offer the following suggestions. First, although members of the department are conscientious and effective in raising grants to fund conferences, they could be more vigorous in pursuit of grants to support their own individual (and group) research. Second, research presented at conferences should be prepared for publication. Third, the research time of the non-tenured faculty members must be carefully protected. Junior faculty should not have heavy administrative responsibilities until their research is well established. (The Chair and other senior members of faculty may need to provide academic leadership here.)

Teaching and the curriculum. We would like to comment on some concerns expressed by faculty and by students, and mention one of our own.

Faculty members are concerned about the possibility of needing to reduce undergraduate course offerings to make room for more graduate courses. We think they are addressing the matter in constructive ways. The modifications being envisioned are, in our opinion, likely to strengthen the undergraduate curriculum. Furthermore, we suspect that the department has more flexibility than it realizes. The undergraduate philosophy major is very highly structured; we think that the number of required courses could be reduced with no damage to quality of the program; this would allow for judicious rotation of advanced undergraduate, with graduate, courses. It is imperative, however, that professors be given teaching credit for mounting graduate courses and for heavy supervisory responsibilities. This is essential both for the quality of the graduate program and for facilitating the research activity that comes with graduate teaching.

The undergraduates expressed the concern that two specific required courses are being used as obstacles, preventing people from majoring or minoring in philosophy. (The self-study report describes these as "gateway" courses into advanced work.) We do not believe that adequate preparation for higher division work in philosophy is a problem in the SFU undergraduate philosophy program, and we think the discipline is not well served by "gateway courses" or by "gatekeeping instructors". People enter philosophy from different starting points and go into quite diverse areas (e.g. from music

into aesthetics, from history into philosophy of history, from women's studies to political philosophy, etc.), and our view is that instructors of specifically required courses should take pains to encourage students to continue study of the discipline. Furthermore, since Philosophy is generally considered a "demanding major" in most universities (and Simon Fraser is certainly no exception), students tend to select themselves, and "gate-keeping" is quite unnecessary.

We are also rather surprised to find that the average (and median) grades of Philosophy students are the lowest in the University. Given the high quality of work achieved by Majors and Honours students in a demanding program (a point made by both of the visiting faculty members), one wonders whether the marking by philosophy instructors conforms to the general practice at SFU. If not, SFU philosophy students are being inappropriately disadvantaged in competition for undergraduate scholarships and for admission to (and funding during) graduate work.

1.3 Academic Recommendations

We have two main academic recommendations:

(1) that the department be allowed to replace one of its retiring faculty with a high level tenure track appointment (at least at the Associate Professor level); and that the department be allowed to commence immediately with the appointment process, "mortgaging a retirement" if necessary.

We believe that the Department needs a high profile (but still youngish) philosopher to add academic muscle and lustre as the department develops its PhD programme. There are two important academic functions which such an appointment could fill; each one, in our opinion, is sufficient to justify the appointment. One is that the department would do well to choose an area for special emphasis in attracting top students to its PhD program. (This could be either building on an existing strength or enriching another area.) The other is that the department may wish to revise its view of the role to be played by its Chair, given the change in its self-conception; in which case perhaps an external search for the next Chair would be appropriate.

A couple of further comments are in order here. First, the SFU Philosophy Department is fertile soil for administrative seeding: the Department has the potential to add significantly to the prestige of the University, and the Department has an impeccable track record on wise use of funds. Second,

although obviously one does not hire entirely on the basis of age, nonetheless, the main imbalance in age profile of the department comes in the forties, there being only one tenure track person in that category.

(2) that the Department be encouraged to develop innovative ways to increase the funding for philosophy graduate students.

The basic idea here is that philosophy graduate students may well be ideally qualified to serve as teaching assistants in courses mounted by other departments. Here is one example: given philosophy's participation in cognitive science, philosophy graduate students might make excellent TAs in specific psychology courses; since Psychology at SFU does not have enough of its own graduate students to fill all the TA positions it needs, everyone would benefit from this kind of resource sharing.

2. ADMINISTRATION and RESOURCES

2.1 Assessment

2.1.1 Departmental administration

The department has benefited from a long period of good administration leading to an enviable sense of collegiality, cohesiveness, commitment and loyalty to the department by the faculty. Procedures are well established and run smoothly. The department seems to be well represented within the university and to work well with the central administration.

The transition to the new Chair of the department seems smooth.

The two non-academic positions, Departmental Assistant and Secretary, are adequate to support the Department.

2.1.2 General Resources

The library has been dealt with by the PhD review, and we have no reason to disagree with the PhD appraisers.

Computing resources are generally satisfactory, although the University seems to be contemplating the imposition of a fee for modem access to the main frame and thus to INTERNET. We think this is very unwise. Any university which fails to adapt adequately to the increasing importance of

INTERNET to the scientific and scholarly community will be placing its own scholars at a serious competitive disadvantage.

The Philosophy Department's new physical space is excellent.

2.2 Problems

2.2.1 Gender climate

2.2.2 Communication

Undergraduates find communication with the department difficult and frustrating. The one formal mechanism in place – an undergraduate student representative on the Department's Committee of the Whole – does not provide an adequate or effective channel of communication. According to several students and staff members, less formal methods, for example through the departmental assistant, also seem ineffective.

2.3 Recommendations

We have two recommendations about administrative matters:

(3) that the University identify the reasons why its procedures failed to cope adequately with the situation in philosophy, and take whatever steps are appropriate to avoid repetition.

(4) that the Department work with its undergraduate majors to create structures which facilitate communication; that among the options to be

considered are: (a) creation of an departmental undergraduate studies committee which contains at least one student member and which reports directly to the Committee of the Whole, (b) an undergraduate version of moral tutors for majors and honours students. This will involve the department making more precise the limits of the role of the administrative assistant as their representative.

External Review Committee

Ann MacKenzie, Glendon College, York University

Gerald Dworkin, University of Illinois at Chicago

Bernard Linsky, University of Alberta

Dennis Krebs, Simon Fraser University

Note: from Dr. J.M. Munro, Vice-President, Academic

Section 2.2.1 entitled "Gender climate" has been removed from the report because it provides information which obliquely but clearly identifies two individuals. The content of these comments relate to 1) a dispute about gender-neutral language about which the Chair has developed an interim working resolution, and 2) a concern about attitudes and treatment of students which is qualified by a parenthetical comment by the external review committee in which it states: "The extent to which this is gender-related was not clear to us." Thus, this observation may not be gender-related.

Both of these comments were made on the basis of concerns expressed by individuals to the review committee. The review committee was not required, under its terms of reference, to seek clarification from the individuals about whom the complaints were made. The Chair and the Dean both are aware of the comments and will address them in a manner consistent with normal personnel matters and in accordance with the external review guidelines.

Response to the Report of the External Review

John Tietz, Chair: Department of Philosophy

The 7 page report of the External Review Committee contains four specific recommendations but it also makes a number of specific statements about the Department and I begin by addressing some of these. In what follows, it should be remembered that the Review Committee strongly praises the Department and its program saying: "it has built a fine undergraduate philosophy curriculum and, while continuing its deep commitment to undergraduate teaching, it is now increasing its contributions to the discipline and building the national and international stature of the [Department]." Our recent addition of a Ph.D program stands as part of this contribution. In addition, the review says that the Department "has enjoyed a long period of good internal administration and excellent relations with the central administration. The resulting collegiality, cohesiveness, and deep commitment to the Department (and to the University) by Philosophy faculty members provides an important human resource on which the Department can draw." My response reflects discussions with students and faculty.

Individual Remarks

1. On p. 4, the reviewers make three specific suggestions concerning the research activities of the Department: The first encourages more vigorous effort at bringing grant money into the Department. Although philosophy departments have traditionally found it more difficult to find external funding than departments with more "empirical" aspects to their programs, we agree with this suggestion and have created a research funding committee to pursue and coordinate grant applications. We anticipate more vigorous effort in that sector in the current application period. Second, the reviewers encourage the presentation of research at conferences. We have been fairly active at conferences in the past and will continue to encourage efforts in that area. Third, concerning the research

activities of new, untenured appointments, the reviewers recommend that we avoid onerous administrative responsibilities on junior department members. We have undertaken to do that, but with only eight tenured members (two of whom retire in one year) it is difficult to run the Department without asking for help from our four recent appointments. As Chair, I have limited their roles to that of supporting committee members (except in the case of the visiting speakers committee).

2. On p. 4, the report says: "the undergraduate Philosophy major is very highly structured; we think that the number of required courses could be reduced with no damage to the quality of the program." The required courses for the Philosophy major are listed on p. 116 of the 95/96 Calendar: 100, 120, 203, 210, one of 150/151 (for a total of 16 lower-level hours in philosophy), and 30 more hours of upper-level Philosophy courses including 301 and four courses from three different area lists. We are bound to point out, first, that our lower-level requirements are actually fewer than those of most other departments in the Faculty of Arts, many of which require 18-21 hours of lower-level work for majors in their subject. Second, our upper-level requirements are based on the minimums mandated by the Faculty of Arts and include more choice than many other departments. The reviewers seem not to have compared our requirements with those of other departments in the Faculty. In 1993 and early 1994, we completed a curriculum review, involving meetings with students, in which we discussed our departmental requirements at length in the light of the uneven preparation exhibited by many students entering our upper-level courses, and a dramatic increase in the number of transfer students from the regional colleges. There was no suggestion during that internal review from students or faculty that our requirements were too stringent. We therefore disagree with the reviewers about the requirements in our undergraduate program.

While the professionally oriented interests of the Department have produced an impressive list of excellent students, many of whom have gone on to top graduate programs elsewhere, and several of whom have gone on to successful and even lustrous careers in the discipline, we fully recognize

that a significant proportion of our upper-levels students are in fact majors from other departments and we enthusiastically encourage interdisciplinary interests. Students not majoring in the Department must meet only the prerequisites for specific courses, not the general requirements for a BA. in Philosophy.

3. On p. 5, the report claims that the grades of Philosophy students “are the lowest in the university,” and that our upper-level students are “inappropriately disadvantaged” in scholarship competition and graduate school applications. Neither of these claims is true. Our upper-level grades are virtually the same as those in some other departments (Economics and History for example). Our lower-level grades *are* slightly lower than some other Arts departments but not lower than some others: we average about 35-40% A’s and B’s. Furthermore, some other departments require our lower-level courses for their own students and they have not complained about our grading practices. Indeed, in our view, some other departments are clearly too lenient in their grading practices: we believe that the ‘C’ grade denotes average performance where some other departments take ‘C-plus’ and even ‘B-minus’ to designate the average.

There are several reasons why grades in any university’s philosophy courses might be lower than in other departments: the difficulty of the material and the stress on original sources even in many introductory courses, a higher proportion of written work than is required in some other departments, the demand for original thought and close reasoning of a kind not experienced in other disciplines at this level, and the fact that philosophy is not taught as a subject in the secondary schools. Virtually all university students take their first philosophy course at that level and the unfamiliarity of the subject and its demands would undoubtedly continue to cause problems for some students even if we graded more leniently. We should also point out that in a study of performances on admissions tests for graduate school, philosophy majors achieve the highest level of above average scores in the verbal component of the GRE and only mathematics majors achieve higher above average scores for the LSAT and GMAT. Our own experience indicates that our majors have done well in graduate

applications. The demanding nature of the subject clearly attracts some of the best students and, given the success rate of our own students, it does not appear that our own are "inappropriately disadvantaged" in their postgraduate careers. Finally, we have not experienced a consistent pattern of complaints about grading practices in the Department.

4. The reviewers also stress the need to give teaching credit for graduate instruction. This has long been a point of debate in the Faculty of Arts. A small graduate program such as ours cannot be expected to meet the same criteria for course enrollments or thesis supervision used to measure work loads in large departments. We have recently undertaken to assign modest amounts of teaching/supervisory credit at the graduate level where, in previous years, these activities were performed over and above undergraduate teaching assignments which, until recently, formed the entire basis for the instructional work load in our Department. We also recommend that one hour of teaching credit be given as release time for those who chair the Graduate and Undergraduate Program Committees since these individuals put a great deal of time and energy into these duties.

Specific Recommendations.

The reviewers make four specific recommendations, the first two academic and the second two administrative:

1. "That the Department be allowed to replace one of its retiring faculty with a high-level tenure track appointment..." The Department has recently requested replacements for two of its faculty retiring on September 1, 1996. We have asked that one of these positions be at the Assistant Professor level and that the other be at Associate/Assistant rank. The review continues on to suggest that the next Department Chair be recruited externally as one of these replacement positions. The University does not currently support external searches for departmental chairs unless it can be shown that there are extenuating circumstances precluding current Department

members from taking the position. Although there are potential candidates for Chair among current faculty, the pool is very small. If we could find the right Associate Professor-level appointment, one who would be interested in departmental administration at some point, the future administration of the Department would be more secure.

The review also stresses the importance of future recruitment at the level of Associate Professor with respect to the graduate program of the Department: the right appointment at that level would enhance the Department's reputation and help it attract more and better applicants to its program. The Department has also undertaken to find women candidates for our two replacement positions. Although we believe that all candidates, regardless of gender, must meet the same criteria established by the needs of the curriculum and our research program, we should also do everything we can to encourage outstanding female candidates in applying for these positions, should they be authorized.

In anticipation of future replacements for our two imminent retirements, we have also decided to focus on two main areas in order to enhance our research interests and to strengthen our graduate program. The reviewers recommend strengthening central research areas in order to attract top students to its graduate program. The areas of ethics and political/social philosophy, and the philosophy of mind and language have been singled out: these are areas in which all four of our most recent appointments have been made and in which we would like to continue development. An interest in the history of modern philosophy (since Descartes) would also be a qualification for candidates in both of these areas.

The reviewers also encourage a re-evaluation of the role of the Chair. In accordance with the suggestions of the reviewers, there have been several important changes in the role of the Chair beginning with the incumbency of its current occupant in May of 1995: the Chairs of the Graduate and Undergraduate Studies Committees have been given more autonomy. These two committees are presently encouraged to periodically review their programs and to suggest enhancements to the Department. The Undergraduate Studies Committee also now includes the undergraduate

student representative. Both the graduate and undergraduate student representatives attend Department meetings. Department meetings are now run more formally with advanced distribution of the agenda and better organization of materials for discussion.

2. The second recommendation (p. 6) concerns opening up further options for graduate student support, such as teaching assistantships in other departments in which graduate students in the Philosophy Department might prove to be suitable. This is currently being pursued. We are also looking into the inclusion of some form of graduate student support in connection with individual and group faculty research grants currently in preparation.

3. The third recommendation (p. 7) concerns some problems with personnel. The Department Chair, the Dean of Arts, and the Academic Vice President have taken note of the deleted section and recommendation 3: "that the University identify the reasons why its procedures failed to cope adequately with the situation in Philosophy, and take whatever steps are appropriate to avoid repetition." Under its new Chair, the Department has discussed issues of departmental responsibility connected with complaints made against members of the Department with a view to procedural fairness. The note appended to the review by the Academic Vice President, Dr. Munro, states: "the Chair and the Dean both are aware of the comments and will address them in a manner consistent with normal personnel matters and in accordance with the external review guidelines." This process is underway and our responses to the other recommendations reflect the desire of the Department in fostering openness, where it is appropriate, and to continuing discussions with students concerning its curriculum. It should also be mentioned that the current Department Chair had not assumed office when the incidents indirectly referred to in the review took place. He has emphasized the importance of an untroubled future for the Department and has undertaken to improve avenues of communication and to clarify the routes and procedures of complaint should personnel difficulties occur.

It is also of concern to the faculty, students, and staff of the Department that the procedures by which complaints were initiated with the Review Committee are faulty and that a careful review should be undertaken by the academic vice president of the role of future review committees concerning complaints and criticisms of departments and individuals.

4. The fourth recommendation on p. 7 suggests improvements in avenues of communication between students and the Department. I have mentioned that the undergraduate representative to the Department has been included on the Undergraduate Studies Committee (that was recommended in the review report). The Chair of this committee has convened meetings with students about the future development of the curriculum and to discuss with them any problems with the curriculum. It should be pointed out, however, that we are not able to respond affirmatively to every request that may emerge. Our small department is hard pressed to mount its existing program and whatever we can do by way of additional special interest or experimental courses will be limited. There must also be discussion about whether proposed new courses, or other modifications to the curriculum, are consistent with the research and teaching interests of the faculty and with our conception of the nature of our program.

We have also undertaken to involve faculty more actively in the process of advising students about their careers, appropriate continuing courses, graduate programs, and in general encouraging them to consult us more frequently. There is enthusiasm in the Department for the idea of undergraduate moral tutors and some such system will be instituted in the near future. The role of the Departmental Assistant in student advice, as in other departments, involves monitoring course requirements, the specific programs of students, and departmental and university requirements for their degrees. The Assistant should also help students to find the best faculty member to counsel them about their careers and their courses. In general, the role of the Assistant should be to carry out the instructions of the Chair with respect to departmental policy in accordance with the job description of the position.

We hope to reinstitute our undergraduate philosophy club (an active Departmental institution in the 1970's that evolved into the current visiting speakers program) in order to encourage more contact between faculty and students. The graduate students already have a colloquium that meets once a week for the purpose of presenting and discussing their own work.

Finally, we are gratified that the reviewers thought highly of the SFU Philosophy Department. As they say about the undergraduate program: "the Department ... provides philosophy majors with solid foundations in the discipline, good contact with current developments, and an excellent preparation for graduate work. It contributes significantly to the Liberal Arts education of all students taking Philosophy courses providing them with logical and conceptual skills, and instilling in them high standards of intellectual clarity and a broad humanistic outlook." The reviewers also agree with the favorable external review of the new Ph.D program and with the direction of its development. It is a pleasure to consider suggested improvements in the light of their good opinion.