Executive Summary

This evaluation of the Philosophy Master of Arts degree program at Texas Tech University is based on the Department of Philosophy Graduate Program Review 2005-2011 (December 2010) document and on interviews conducted with Dr. Mark Webb, the department chair, with 8 of 9 current faculty members and a visiting professor, as well as with 14 of the 23 current graduate students. The interviews and a short tour were conducted on February 18, 2011, with a longer department tour on March 9, 2011.

The Philosophy graduate program began in 1984, with a faculty of six. Since then the department’s full-time faculty has grown to a maximum of 12 during the 2003-2005 academic years, to a current nine. The department currently has 23 students enrolled in the program, down from 28 in 2005.

Comparative data for curriculums and research were largely obtained by reviewing the web sites of other selected philosophy departments in the top 15 master's-only list from Philosophical Gourmet. The comparisons were made with Tufts University (rated #1), Georgia State University (#2), Northern Illinois University (#3), the University of Wisconsin Milwaukee (#4), and the University of Houston (#6).

The department faculty indicated that a primary goal of the department graduate program is to provide students with a general philosophy background that would prepare them for admission to doctoral programs in the discipline. Of the 43 students who have graduated from the program since the last review, 25 have been accepted into advanced degree programs: 16 PhD Philosophy (in schools such as Berkeley, Duke, and Texas), 5 law schools (in schools such as Baylor, Berkeley, and Texas), and 4 to other graduate programs (such as Rice and Texas Tech) with 6 others accepting college teaching positions. The schools, and the numbers attending, suggest they are achieving this goal.

The faculty and students feel the program has good leadership, which has created a positive environment that was not present just a few years ago. The leadership, coupled with good students and faculty, has structured a learning environment that, with a few more resources and an updated strategic plan reflecting
our new realities, could propel the program into the top 10 of terminal MA Philosophy programs in the
country.

**Program Overview and Vision (Good)**

The department focuses its graduate program effort on preparing students to gain admission to doctoral
programs in philosophy. The Philosophy Department is dedicated to excellence in teaching, research, and
service; providing the core of a liberal arts education for all undergraduate students of the University; and
contributing to specialized programs for undergraduate and graduate students within the Philosophy
Department and other units. Expected student learning outcomes include learning to evaluate basic
assumptions, learning to evaluate theories critically, developing the ability to communicate complex
thoughts clearly, developing the ability to construct philosophical arguments, and developing the ability
to write clearly about issues.

The Department has clearly achieved at least part of its vision, having been recognized recently as a top
15 terminal master's program in a rating system that relies mainly on faculty reputation for comparisons.
Their vision is to be recognized as one of the best Masters-only departments in the country, recognized
nationally for excellence in philosophical scholarship and undergraduate education, and provide value to
the larger mission of the university especially through Ethics scholarship and teaching. They contribute
to the University’s mission through Honors College courses, courses that contribute to Women's Studies,
Religious Studies, and Asian Studies, and close involvement with the Fine Arts doctoral program.

A long-term plan for departmental development does not appear to exist, beyond stating that they want to
improve the current top-15 ranking. However, the history of faculty turnover and loss of resources will
make reaching this goal difficult without serious discussion about strategies and tactics in line with
currently available resources and research expectations.

**Faculty Productivity (Good)**

Since its last review in 2005, the program has maintained a qualified faculty that offers graduate
education in a wide range of subfields, despite the loss of several junior faculty members during that time.
The list of specialties for existing faculty suggests noticeable overlap, leaving several important
specialties without expertise. The faculty members feel that hiring junior faculty in the missing specialties
would, more than any other factor, improve their ranking. The faculty members feel that more time is needed to allow them to do research, write papers, and proposals. They currently have 2-2 or 3-2 teaching loads that are somewhat high among their peer group. In addition, they feel more travel funding to attend conferences would raise the visibility of both the department and individual faculty members.

Over the period covered by the department's self-study, the philosophy faculty collectively has 30 publications. This averages about three articles per person over the time span, or 0.5 publications per person, per year, although examination of details revealed that some individuals were much more productive than others were. No peer department data on productivity were provided with the Philosophy Department self-assessment. However, from checking the web sites of the comparison programs, it appears the other programs had averaged one or more publications per faculty member per year over the same time span. Grants and other external funding are minimal and erratic for this program as well as for the discipline. In the comparison programs, most grant dollars came from summer workshops and seminar programs, and then often from only one or two individuals.

**Quality and Quantity of Graduate Students and Graduates (Very Good)**

The Philosophy M.A. program has gradually increased from nine students in 1998 to its current 23 students, with a peak of 28 in 2003-2005. Entering GRE scores have dropped slightly since the last review, but do not appear to have affected program quality.

Current students consider funding to be outstanding. The principal support for graduate students is in the form of teaching assistantships paying $12,000 for a nine-month appointment, competitive with the largest programs and more than provided by several top competitors. However, most of the comparison programs also provide a tuition waiver to the student, no matter the assistantship stipend.

The faculty members feel that more TA support is needed to increase the student population; the current $50k used comes from a special interest fund that is their only mechanism for TA support. In some years, they also offer one or two $1,000 merit scholarships to students enrolled full-time in the program. The money for the merit scholarships comes from their Graduate Tuition account, which is also used to support such activities as graduate student travel to conferences. They also offer several modest competitive scholarships that are open to both undergraduate and graduate students. These range in amount from $200-$500, with one or more awarded each year to graduate students. In addition, they often
promote second year students to GPTI status, paying $13,000 for nine months. A strategy needs to be developed with the Dean that will continue to provide attractive packages for students.

The faculty noted the students run their own colloquium series as well as a conference, one of only 3 in the country, a sign of an involved student body. In addition, the students have been presenting their research at several conferences- five were going to present later in this semester. This activity supports the future of their discipline and prepares them for PhD work.

The department has focused its graduate program effort on preparing students to gain admission to doctoral programs in philosophy. Most of the comparison schools have the same goal, except for Georgia State, which prepares its students mainly for the workforce. Of the 43 students who have graduated from the program since the last review, 25 have been accepted into advanced degree programs: 16 PhD Philosophy (in schools such as Berkeley, Duke, and Texas), 5 law schools (in schools such as Baylor, Berkeley, and Texas), and 4 to other graduate programs (such as Rice and Texas Tech) with 6 others accepting college teaching positions. The TTU program also has a secondary goal of preparing graduates for the workforce, and 12 of the 43 graduates have done so.

Based on our review, the committee concluded the program could grow to 30 students with the current faculty and a continuation of current levels of TA funding. The increase in students must be accompanied by recruitment packages that continue to be competitive.

**Curriculum and Programs of Study (Very Good)**

Comparative data for curriculums were largely obtained by reviewing the web sites of some other philosophy departments in the top 15 master's-only list from *Philosophical Gourmet*. The comparisons were made with Tufts University (rated #1), Georgia State University (#2), Northern Illinois University (#3), the University of Wisconsin Milwaukee (#4), and the University of Houston (#6).

The department has limited structure in the program. All but one (Houston) of the comparison programs in philosophy have a core requirement consisting of either sets of courses selected from within specified areas of the discipline (such as epistemology and metaphysics, and logic), or they require all students to take specified core courses as part of their degree program. The department’s approach, a relatively unstructured program, has the advantage of allowing individualization of courses of study, focusing on student interests. However, this may work against the goal of getting into the best PhD programs if key courses are not offered.
Department faculty members feel the pressures, given their faculty size, in handling the demand for their undergraduate philosophy courses and their involvement in interdisciplinary programs. Philosophy faculty offer courses in the Fine Arts doctoral program, in Women's Studies, Natural History and Humanities (Honors College), and Religious Studies, among other interdisciplinary programs. Both faculty and students mentioned issues with PhD in Fine Arts required courses which enroll both Philosophy graduate students (knowledgeable about philosophy) and PhD in Fine Arts graduate students (taking their first course in philosophy) as not meeting the varied needs of either population. Internally, students and faculty also have issues with the large number of graduate students enrolled in seminar classes; courses designed for 12 in a discussion section now have 25-30 or more, not conducive to a good learning environment using current teaching approaches. New personnel approaches (such as new faculty lines, adjuncts, and visiting professors, perhaps teaching at a distance) should be investigated to allow the department to provide its content across the university, without penalizing its own productivity.

Specific comments about the program, from both faculty and students, follow. These comments represent a consensus among those present.

The students interviewed

- consider the number and quality of graduate seminars to be outstanding.
- indicated the environment in the department is both collegial and professional.
- feel the small classes are a real bonus and add to the department’s environment.
- like the option of taking courses outside their major; which allows them to minor.
- take the MA mostly by coursework with a “mini-thesis” as a culminating activity.
- indicate that most students apply to a PhD program; they expect placement in good to excellent PhD programs.
- feel that additions are needed to the faculty, specifically in the areas of epistemology/metaphysics, philosophy of science, applied ethics (The students also noted that junior faculty leave frequently).
- feel that a small faculty has meant that some courses are not taught while others are taught by non-experts; students feel they are occasionally “short-changed” in their education by this approach.
- feel a graduate level logic course would be an important addition to the program.
- feel that while little curricular structure has its value, it may hurt their getting into the best PhD programs.
• would like a 4-6 course core (such as history, mind, epistemology, applied ethics, philosophy of science, metaphysics).
• feel a writing seminar and a research seminar are needed for their professional development.
• indicate the strengths of the department are in ethics, religion, and aesthetics.

Faculty indicated the following were key needs of the program:
• Specialist in ethics (currently no specialist although three faculty do teach the topic)
• An epistemologist
• A metaphysics specialist
• More TAs for use in recruiting high-quality students

These comments appear to be on target, and should be considered in developing a new strategic and tactical plan. The faculty also indicated that their assessment plan and procedures are now under review. These assessment and planning exercises will be important to the department’s future—their significance to the program should not be underestimated.

Facilities and Resources (Excellent)

The department facilities and space are outstanding, with staffing adequate for the program size. Some existing department space could be better utilized, resulting in more classrooms or seminar rooms. We, and the students, noted that more and better computers are needed for assignments and research.

Conclusion

Many of the comments and suggestions in our report are similar to those made in prior assessments, and will need to be addressed in the next evaluation period. The faculty and students feel the program now has good leadership, which has created a positive environment that was not present just a few years ago. The leadership, coupled with good students and faculty, has structured a learning environment that, with a few more resources and an updated strategic plan reflecting our new realities, could propel the program into the top 10 of terminal MA Philosophy programs in the country.
The demands of graduate instruction and participation in interdisciplinary programs have led to reduction in undergraduate course offerings and an increase in seminar class size. To meet these demands, the department needs additional faculty in specific areas of expertise. Priorities should also be established for areas to be filled by future new faculty lines or adjuncts. We note that some duplication of expertise exists among the current faculty.

Another resource issue has to do with funding for graduate students. This has been unpredictable, both in amount and in timing. Both have made it hard for the department to recruit the best students from their applicant pool. Consideration should be given to growing the graduate program within the limits of existing resources. If more resources do not become available, the department should reassess its priorities.

These issues (resources and development priorities) pose significant challenges in today’s environment, with hard choices that will need to be faced soon. We suggest the Philosophy Department engage in a strategic planning process to update and develop both strategies and tactics to meet these challenges. Again, it appears to us that, given a few added resources linked with an up-to-date plan, could allow the program to move significantly in the terminal MA rankings.

The Department has no distance education offerings.

**Overall Assessment of the Department**

The Philosophy Graduate Program Review Committee rates the status of the Philosophy Master of Arts program as *Very Good.*