The following is the philosophy department’s annual assessment update. In this memo, I will (1) summarize the program goals that we formulated and adopted as reported in our “Philosophy Department Program Review Assessment Plan” memo to the Program Review Committee of January 28th, 2004; (2) summarize the assessment methods we have employed and the data we have collected on the basis of our use of these strategies; (3) explain how we collectively interpreted the results of each of our individual assessments; (4) report what we decided about how we will use the results of our assessments; and (5) describe the next steps we will take in the form of revised goals and refined assessment strategies.

1. **Review of Program Goals.** The philosophy department’s goals for program assessment are focused on our department’s contribution to the new GE program. Our role in the new GE program involves three major areas of our program: (a) our “Common Context” philosophy course, (b) our “Reasoning Abstractly” courses, and (c) a required Senior Seminar philosophy major course that will enable our majors to satisfy two new GE requirements: (i) a writing-intensive course in the major and (ii) integration of the major discipline. Our departmental goals concern these three areas of our program. Moreover, the college-wide goals we have chosen to emphasize at the present time fit with our departmental goals. Our first two departmental goals (and the college-wide goals that correspond to them) focus primarily on all Westmont students who take philosophy courses to satisfy GE requirements. Our third department goal (and the college-wide goals that correspond to it) has to do primarily with philosophy majors.

   a. **Departmental goals:**

      i. **Students who take “Philosophical Perspectives,” the philosophy department’s “Common Context” GE course, will be able to articulate (at the end of the**
course) what the contribution of philosophy is to their Christian liberal arts education.

ii. Students who take a philosophy course to satisfy the “Reasoning Abstractly” GE requirement will demonstrate increased facility with abstract philosophical reasoning.

iii. Philosophy majors who take the new Senior Seminar course required for all philosophy majors will demonstrate (a) conformity with the formal standards for a good philosophical essay and (b) ability to integrate philosophical learning with Christian faith and anticipated post-graduation living.

b. College-wide goals

i. Christian Orientation Standard Goal: Our first and third departmental goals involve student demonstration of the ability to articulate the contribution of philosophy to the construction of a Christian worldview. In both cases, students will be required to show that they understand how to use philosophical tools in the integration of liberal learning and biblical and theological knowledge. This will require students to show familiarity with scripture, Christian doctrine, etc. as specified by student learning outcome A1 in this standard.

ii. Critical-Interdisciplinary Thinking Standard Goal: All three of our departmental goals involve student employment of critical-interdisciplinary thinking, though in different specific ways. This pervasive role for critical thinking is to be expected, since this form of reasoning is at the heart of philosophical method.

iii. Written and Oral Communication Standard Goal: Though all of our courses involve the writing of essays and philosophical conversation, these two types of activities will be especially emphasized in our new Senior Seminar course. One of the main goals of this new course required for philosophy majors is to provide opportunity for, instruction about, and evaluation of extensive philosophical writing. Moreover, class sessions will emphasize ongoing philosophical conversation.

In sum, our assessment plan outlines three departmental student goals and three college-wide student goals together with specific assessment strategies we planned to adopt for each goal so that we could gather evidence of student learning relative to our desired outcomes. Some of these goals involve courses we are currently teaching and some have to do with a senior seminar course
that we will not be introducing into our curriculum until the spring semester of 2008 (since it is
designed for senior philosophy majors who are under the new GE program).

Last semester we implemented new assessment strategies to evaluate our progress toward the first
two of our three departmental student goals and the first two of our three college-wide student
goals. All of these goals have to do with our Philosophical Perspectives GE Common Context
courses (there were three sections of this course last semester and there will be five sections of this
course this semester) and our GE Common Inquiries Reasoning Abstractly courses (Christian
Apologetics, Ancient & Medieval Philosophy, Modern & Contemporary Philosophy, and Critical
Reasoning & Logic).

2. **Data.**

   a. **Philosophical Perspectives.** Our student goals in Philosophical Perspectives are that
      students who take this course “will be able to articulate (at the end of the course) what
      the contribution of philosophy is to their Christian liberal arts education”
      (departmental student goal) and will demonstrate their “ability to articulate the
      contribution of philosophy to the construction of a Christian worldview” (college-
      wide student goal). This past semester the three of us employed different strategies to
      assess student achievement of these goals. Here is a brief summary of our three
different approaches:

   i. **Chris Callaway** chose to achieve the *departmental goal* by means of two
      assessment strategies: (1) He had his students read an essay that reflected on
      the nature of a liberal arts education (Michael Oakeshott’s “The Idea of a
      University” and then facilitated an in-class conversation about the essay.
      Chris reported back to us at our department meeting of January 3\(^{rd}\) that during
      the discussion the students seemed to show a good grasp of the central ideas
      of the essay, and they zeroed in on the distinction Oakeshott draws between a
      “proper” (liberal arts), university education and the kind of education that
      consists of skills-acquisition in preparation for a job. They also spent
      considerable time discussing Oakeshott’s claim that a university does not and
      should not have a purpose or mission. They related their discussion of that
      claim to education at Westmont. (2) Twenty-two of his students (almost
      exactly two-thirds of the class) wrote a brief extra-credit essay in which they
      described encountering a philosophical idea or issue in one of their other
      classes. The assigned grade reflected their understanding of a philosophical
      issue (and what counts as a philosophical issue) as well as their writing. Chris
      reported that the students wrote about a wide range of philosophical issues,
      and that the mediocre and good papers successfully identified a philosophical
      issue in a different class, the better ones used philosophical terms and
concepts in explaining these issues, and among the weaker ones, nearly everyone failed to identify a genuinely philosophical issue (instead they tended to discuss a theological issue or personal spirituality). Chris’s strategy for achieving the college-wide student goal in this course was to have his students read an article on the value of philosophy by Christian philosopher Jacques Maritain and to write an essay on this same topic. Chris evaluated these student essays in terms of (a) the students’ grasp of the topic, (b) the quality of their argumentation, and (c) the quality of their writing.

ii. Jim Taylor used the “pre-test/post-test” strategy. He shared at our January 3rd department meeting that about a third of the way into the semester, he had his students read an essay he had written on three tensions that characterize a Christian liberal arts education and how these tensions might be resolved. Then he led the students in an in-class discussion of the issues raised by the essay. The students showed a high degree of comprehension of and appreciation for the issues. After the discussion, the students wrote essays in class in response to the following two questions: (a) what is the contribution of philosophy to a Christian liberal arts education? and (b) what is the contribution of philosophy to the construction of a Christian worldview? The students’ essays on the first question were intended to be an indication of their initial thinking relative to the departmental goal for this course and the students’ essays on the second question were aimed at revealing their baseline ideas with respect to the college-wide goal for this course. Jim assessed these “pre-test” essays in terms of the number and quality of relevant substantive student observations about these two roles of philosophy. He deemed an observation adequate as long as it demonstrated a good understanding of the nature of philosophy, the nature of a Christian liberal arts education, and the nature of a Christian worldview. During the last week of the course, Jim handed the students’ essays back to them and gave them an opportunity in class to read their own essays and to write another essay commenting on them in light of the following question: Do you still agree with what you wrote? If so, why? If not, why not? If you think that you need to add something you left out or affirm something you denied (or deny something you affirmed) what would it be and why? Jim evaluated these essays in terms of the reasons given for the conclusions drawn. Jim reported that all the students showed at least an adequate understanding of the natures of philosophy and the Christian liberal arts and the connection between them in their first essay and that around half of the students indicated a change of mind or further learning about these things on their second essay. About a third of the class made especially insightful comments.
iii. David Vander Laan reported at our January 3rd meeting that several times during the semester, his Philosophical Perspectives class specifically discussed the nature of the liberal arts, the role of various disciplines (including philosophy) in the liberal arts, and the connection between liberal arts and the idea of vocation. The assigned readings for the days given to these discussions were “Plato’s Allegory of the Cave” (section 1.2 of Lawhead’s *The Philosophical Journey*) and “Vocation in the Kingdom of God” (chapter 5 of Plantinga’s *Engaging God’s World*). (At a number of other points in the semester, they touched on these themes more briefly, especially in the sections of the course on the nature of philosophy and epistemology.) In their final exam, students were asked to explicate the relationship between the liberal arts and the notion of vocation as conceived by Plantinga. David said that the students averaged 9.36 out of 10 on that exam question.

b. *Reasoning Abstractly Courses*. Our student goal in these GE courses is that students demonstrate increased facility with abstract philosophical reasoning. We taught two of these courses last semester: Christian Apologetics (Taylor) and Ancient and Medieval Philosophy (Vander Laan).

i. Jim Taylor reported at our January 3rd department meeting that in the first week of his Christian Apologetics class, he distributed to his class a passage from a philosophical essay that contained a philosophical argument. He then told the students to read the essay silently in class and to take time to try to discern (a) the conclusion of the argument (that for which the author was arguing) and (b) the premises of the argument (that by means of which the author was arguing for his conclusion). The passage was relatively brief (only a paragraph) and the argument contained in it was moderately difficult to discern. Students were given 20 minutes to write the argument down in standard form (premises listed first and then the conclusion). This in-class exercise served as a pre-test. On the last day of classes, Jim gave his students in this class another excerpt from a philosophical essay that contained a philosophical argument. This passage was a bit longer, but the argument it contained was about the same length and of a roughly equivalent degree of difficulty. He gave the students 20 minutes to formulate the argument contained in that passage in standard form as well. This in-class exercise served as a post-test. Both pre-test and post-test were evaluated in terms of the students’ ability to recognize and articulate the arguments (premises and conclusions). Jim said that about half the students were able to discern the argument in the pre-test (some more accurately and thoroughly than others) and the other half missed the mark completely. On the post-test, around
three-fourths of the students were able to recognize and articulate the argument (again, some more thoroughly and accurately than others) and one-fourth of the students were not.

ii. David Vander Laan reported at our January 3rd department meeting that early in the semester the students in his Ancient and Medieval Philosophy course were asked to analyze an argument by Zeno, and later they were asked to analyze an argument by Augustine. In each case students were asked to write a well-crafted version of the argument which made clear the premises, conclusion, and inferences. Students were also asked to give a critique of the argument. David added that, naturally, over the course of the semester they discussed many arguments, sometimes presenting well-crafted versions and analyzing them in detail, and other times analyzing them less formally. He said that the students averaged a score of 90.4 on the first argument analysis question and 88.6 on the second (discounting the scores of zero for those who skipped the latter).

3. Interpretation of the Results.

a. In our discussion at our January 3rd, 2006 meeting and in subsequent reflections, we arrived at the following interpretative conclusions concerning our assessment strategies in these GE courses and the results of our implementation of these strategies:

i. We need to be clearer and more precise in our communications with our students about what is expected of them in their performance on these instruments and how we will evaluate them.

ii. We need to give more time to the processing of the relevant content by means of in-class discussion.

iii. We need to have further discussions about the possibility of making our assessment instruments more uniform (e.g., using the same articles and the same sorts of assessment tools) so that we can have a better basis on which to compare results from one class to another.

iv. Though we have good reasons for thinking that our students are learning in general what we want them to learn about philosophy and the Christian liberal arts in Philosophical Perspectives and about good abstract philosophical reasoning in the Reasoning Abstractly courses, we need to find ways to make our goals more specific, our instruments more specific, and our evaluations more specific so that we can come to more specific conclusions.
about what our students are learning and so that we can be in a good position to formulate more specific subsequent plans for future instruction and assessment on the basis of what we have learned about student learning and about our progress toward our instructional goals.

4. **Using the Results.**

   a. For *Philosophical Perspectives*, we need to identify as a department a list of key ideas about philosophy and the Christian liberal arts that we will all attempt to communicate to our students and that our assessment instruments will be designed to emphasize. We already have a document that we use as a blueprint for topics that should be covered in this course, and we need to add to this document more specific points about philosophy, the Christian liberal arts, and the relationship between the two.

   b. We have decided to collaborate on the preparation of thorough instructions on how to write a well-crafted argument, to be included as an appendix to all *Reasoning Abstractly* course syllabi. The appendix will include what students of Critical Reasoning and Logic will have learned about writing well-crafted arguments, along with some explanation of how this helps us analyze arguments.

   c. We will also work toward more specificity in goals, instruments, evaluations, inputs, and communications in all of the courses for which we have adopted program review goals.

   d. We have samples of student essays and argument analyses on file in the philosophy department. We would be happy to make them available on request.

5. **Next Steps.**

   a. Last semester we met a number of times to discuss our program review plans and progress. We have been working toward more specificity along the lines summarized above. We intend to meet as a department on a regular basis this semester as well. We will meet every Tuesday during lunch unless there is a conflict, and we will devote at least part of every meeting to discussion of our program review plan and progress. This semester we will be implementing, in three of the five sections of *Philosophical Perspectives* that our department is offering, improved versions of the assessment strategies we employed last semester. We will also be implementing revised forms of the evaluation methods we used last semester in the three Reasoning Abstractly courses we are teaching this semester (Christian Apologetics, Critical Reasoning and Logic, and Modern and Contemporary Philosophy).