This memorandum is a response to Provost Shirley Mullen’s request for program review progress reports in her August 23rd 2005 memo to faculty. It presupposes two prior memos I submitted to the Program Review Committee on behalf of the philosophy department. The first of these memos, which I submitted to that committee on January 28th, 2004, contains our department’s Program Review Assessment Plan. The second constitutes our “5-year” departmental assessment report. I submitted that to the PRC on April 4th, 2005.

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).

In our departmental assessment report, we acknowledged that we had not yet implemented our projected assessment strategies due to a variety of factors including an impending department member’s retirement, another department member’s course reduction one semester, and another department member’s course revision efforts that were not directly related to the specific goals in our departmental assessment plan.

This postponement of the implementation of our new program review assessment plan was not a result of a lack of seriousness about or a neglect of our general program revision efforts. In addition to what I stated in my memo to the Program Review Committee of April 4th, 2005, let me explain very clearly here that the philosophy department has been hard at work ever since the new GE program was approved to revise the five courses we teach that were approved as GE
courses. Though we have taught each of these courses for a number of years, their role in the new GE program has required us to revise them to make them more suited to meet the goals of that program. Moreover, since our new program review goals are based on these new GE components of these courses, we have had to make these course revisions in order to be in a position to begin implementing our new proposed assessment methods. Now that these revisions are largely in place, we are finally in a position this semester to begin employing these evaluation strategies.

Here is a timeline that will help to illumine this narrative:

Fall 2003: Proposals submitted to GE Committee for five courses
January 5th, 2004: We receive the GE Committee memo approving these proposals
January 28th, 2004: New philosophy department program review assessment plan submitted to program
Fall 2004: Vander Laan does not teach PY 6 due to course reduction; Taylor implements new diversity elements in PY 6 (work funded by Irvine grant); Wennberg’s last year of teaching.
Spring 2005: GE course revisions finalized
Fall 2005: New program review assessment plan based on new GE course revisions implemented.

We are well aware that the combination of the necessary postponement of our new assessment plan implementation, our very early progress report deadline, and the impending WASC review has created an urgent situation in which we need to work hard as a department to provide tangible results of our efforts. As a result, we are devoting ourselves this semester to ongoing conversations in our weekly department meetings about our goals and our assessment tools.

Before the beginning of this fall semester, the three members of the philosophy department met to discuss our program review assessment plan. We focused on specific ways in which the three of us would implement our proposed assessment strategies in relevant courses during this fall semester. Our conversation on this topic continued when we met twice with our assessment coordinator Marianne Robins. We will continue to discuss specific aspects of our program review plan throughout the semester and academic year at our weekly department meetings. See below under section “C” for a detailed and specific agenda for these meetings.

Here are responses to the five questions in Shirley’s August 23rd, 2005 memo to faculty that are based on these departmental interactions:

A. What part of your plan will you be seeking to implement this year?

We will be implementing two of our three departmental student goals and two of our three college-wide student goals. All of these goals have to do with our Philosophical Perspectives GE Common Context courses (there will be eight sections of this course this year) and our
GE Common Inquiries Reasoning Abstractly courses (Christian Apologetics, Ancient & Medieval Philosophy, Modern & Contemporary Philosophy, and Critical Reasoning & Logic).

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). The three of us will be employing different strategies to assess student achievement of these goals. These strategies include having students: (a) write a brief essay in which they discuss a reading that reflects on the nature of liberal arts education and the role of philosophy, (b) write a brief essay in which they describe an encounter with a philosophical idea in one or more of their classes, (c) respond to a question in an oral exam about the role of philosophy in the Christian liberal arts after relevant course reading, lecture, and discussion, and (d) write a brief in-class essay about the role of philosophy in the Christian liberal arts after reading a professor’s essay on the same subject. In each of these cases, students will be encouraged to draw on their biblical and theological knowledge as well.

Our student goals in our Reasoning Abstractly courses are that students who take these courses “will demonstrate increased facility with abstract philosophy reasoning” and will be able to articulate “the use of philosophical tools for the purposes of faith-learning integration and interdisciplinary thinking in their Christian liberal arts coursework.” The three of us will be employing different strategies to assess student achievement of these goals as well. These strategies include having students: (a) read and discuss a number of texts that directly consider the nature, powers, and limits of human reason itself and write essay test answers that demonstrate their understanding of the various theories surveyed, (b) evaluate and develop their own philosophical arguments at the beginning and end of the course, (c) analyze and evaluate the philosophical arguments of others at the beginning and end of the course, and (d) discuss a wide range of philosophical arguments over the semester and show an ability to recognize and evaluate such arguments by means of a number of exams throughout the semester so that student progress can be measured by comparing their exam results at the beginning and end of the semester.

B. As you review your plan, what seem to be the “places of need”?

As we reflect on this part of our plan that we will be seeking to implement this year, we are aware that one important place of need is for us to get clearer in our own minds about exactly what our student-learning goals amount to and whether our proposed assessment strategies will be adequate to enable us to measure our accomplishment of them. We need to clarify our thinking by being much more specific about our goals and assessment strategies. For instance, in the third paragraph of section “A” above, we say that one of our strategies this semester will be to have students write essays that “demonstrate their understanding” of the “various theories” surveyed. We need to discuss together at much more length what exactly these theories are and what specific essay elements would count as evidence that students understand these theories. Moreover, we need to talk about how to evaluate the students’
essays so as to be able to assign a range of scores to them depending on the degree to which
the relevant student understanding is demonstrated in them. See section “C” below for a list
of questions of this sort that we will discuss at regular department meetings this year.

Our other main need at this point is to be diligent to alter our regular instructional efforts so
as to make sure to incorporate these new assessment strategies. We have already been
providing our students with instruction in these areas, but we have not been employing these
particular assessment tools to measure their learning. So we are not providing new readings
or new lecture content or new discussion topics, but we are providing new opportunities for
our students to show their learning in these areas. Of course we have always examined them
and required them to write essays. What is new is the specific nature of the exam questions
and essay topics.

C. What uncertainties do you have as you think about implementing this plan?

Our uncertainties have mostly to do with (a) whether the questions we are asking our
students to answer are sufficiently specific, (b) whether we will know how to assess student
learning on the basis of their answers to these questions, and (c) how we will use the results
of these assessment strategies to improve our courses. We have already become aware of the
potential difficulties in these areas as we have continued to discuss how we will implement
our plan. Our conversations have revealed initial differences among us about how we have
been interpreting the questions and what the results will mean. We are also unsure about
how our adopting different specific assessment methods will affect our ability to come up
with general conclusions about what students have learned and what instructional changes
may need to be made. I suspect ongoing conversations will help us to reduce our uncertainty
about these things.

Here is our tentative fall semester schedule for these department conversations together with
the specific questions that we plan to discuss at these meetings:

Wednesday, October 12th: Conversation with assessment coordinator Marianne Robins about
our program review assessment implementation plans this semester

Tuesday, October 25th: Discuss our student goals in Philosophical Perspectives (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)). Talk about: (a) how to make these goals
more specific by stating sub-goals for student understanding of the nature of philosophy and
student understanding of the nature of a Christian liberal arts education as a whole, (b) how
students can show an ability to recognize the emergence of specific philosophical questions
in their other, non-philosophy courses, (c) how students can show with specific examples
their potential use of philosophy as a tool in their ongoing construction of a Christian
worldview, and (d) how to recognize an “A” essay, a “B” essay, etc.
Tuesday, November 1st: Discuss the student goals in our Reasoning Abstractly courses (that students who take these courses “will demonstrate increased facility with abstract philosophy reasoning” and will be able to articulate “the use of philosophical tools for the purposes of faith-learning integration and interdisciplinary thinking in their Christian liberal arts coursework.”). Talk about the specific list of abstract philosophical abilities that fall into the categories of analysis (which involves an ability to identify, understand, and evaluate concepts and arguments) and synthesis (which involves an awareness of worldviews, and a sensitivity to how ideas fit (or fail to fit) in the context of the big picture).

Tuesday, November 8th: Discuss the potential refinement of our assessment strategies in light of the conversations about our goals in the preceding two weeks. Talk about the issue of each of us having different assessment strategies and whether this will be an advantage (because we can compare and contrast them to see which of them or what aspects of them are more or less effective) or a disadvantage (because we will not be able easily to compare and combine the results for the purpose of making decisions about what course improvements we need to adopt.

Tuesday, November 15th: Discuss the possibility of developing a document for use in abstract reasoning courses that would specify a list of abstract reasoning skills that all courses in this area seek to develop. This document could be used to unify our abstract reasoning courses with respect to their achievement of abstract reasoning GE goals. We already have a document for our Philosophical Perspectives courses that serves this purpose by listing a number of philosophical questions by major category that these courses are expected to cover (see attached). Though the abstract reasoning courses are already focused on abstract reasoning skills, such a document would give students a better and more explicit idea of the sorts of reasoning skills they are expected to develop and improve in these courses. It would also make it easier for them to see how these same skills can be used in non-philosophy courses as well when philosophical issues are discussed in those courses.

Tuesday, November 22nd: (No program review conversation due to philosophy search committee meeting)

Tuesday, November 29th: (No program review discussion due to other commitments)

Tuesday, December 6th: Discuss the topic “what makes for good philosophical writing?” in preparation for the implementation of our written and oral communication standard goal in our senior seminar course. Discuss the many books now available that address this topic and talk about coming up with a department document based on these books that we can give to students for their use in writing philosophical essays. Discuss the possibility of paying closer attention to student written philosophical work for the purpose of establishing a baseline to use when we begin evaluating student written philosophical work in senior seminar.

Finals Week: Discuss the results of all of our implementation efforts during the semester. Discuss how to interpret these results and begin to talk about how we can change our courses next semester in light of what we have learned about student learning.
Week of January 2nd, 2006: Discuss potential improvements to our Philosophical Perspectives courses and our Abstract Reasoning courses based on our review of the evidence from the previous meeting during finals week. Plan our agenda of program review meetings and discussion questions for the spring semester.

D. What plans does the department have for discussing what your gathered evidence means for the department?

As just mentioned, we plan to have at least one meeting between the fall and spring semesters to discuss the results of our assessment strategy implementation. We will meet once during finals to discuss the results of this implementation and once right before the spring semester to discuss how we might improve our courses and assessment strategies. That way we will have time for individual reflection between the two meetings.

E. How do you plan to function differently as a result of this evidence? Do you have examples of having made changes in your program in response to evidence?

Since the student learning goals we are implementing this year have to do with the central GE objectives of these courses, we will use the results of our evaluation procedures to continue to try to improve the extent to which these courses are enabling our students to achieve these goals. We are likely to change both course inputs like readings, lectures, topics, etc., and the assessment strategies we use to measure student learning.

When we begin to teach the senior seminar course to which I referred above, we will have an ideal opportunity to collect evidence that will help us to improve our overall major program, because this course will be required of all philosophy majors in the spring of their senior year, and we will be able to use that opportunity to learn from them about specific changes we can make for the better.

We make ongoing changes to our overall major and to the individual courses offered by our department in response to evidence. One example of this is our continual adjustments to our courses on the basis of student feedback on course evaluations. These evaluations have motivated us to change our syllabi, course topics, textbooks, teaching strategies, assignments, etc. We have also gotten valuable feedback in the last two years from senior philosophy majors that we have interviewed as a part of the senior interview process in which all faculty are asked to participate. We have also changed the structure of our major over the last few years by altering the specific course requirements that define our specific major tracks. We made these changes in part on the basis of input we have received from students during advising sessions about what combination of courses works best for what purposes.

An example of a change we have made recently to our Philosophical Perspectives courses is that we are now requiring students to read something on faith-learning integration and the development of a Christian worldview. We made this change as a result of it becoming evident to us that, though we were discussing these things in class, our students needed additional material along these lines to better enable them to see what we are trying to do in class.