

Philosophy Department PLO #2: Skills

“Students will be able to construct structurally solid arguments and to critique faulty ones appropriately.”

1. What we learned about our students’ learning

The department’s skill outcome was the PLO we assessed in the 2011-2012 academic year. David Vander Laan created a rubric for skills assessment and used this rubric to assess the work of the four students in the Senior Seminar he taught in the spring of 2012. The students were assessed on the skills of argument understanding, construction, and evaluation. The assessment instrument was a 10-12 page philosophical essay. Every score but one was “Good” or better. The low score of “Fair” appeared to be work that was hastily done.

	Excellent	Good	Fair	Poor
Understanding	2	2	0	0
Construction	3	1	0	0
Evaluation	2	1	1	0

Since Senior Seminar is the very last course our majors take, we hope that by that time they will be proficient in their philosophical skills, especially those skills that pertain to the understanding, construction, and evaluation of philosophical arguments. All of our courses are designed to help them acquire and hone these skills to some extent. Though we are pleased that all four students in this class did at least good work in argument understanding and construction (and three of them in all three categories), we would like to see an overall improvement in our students’ argument skills.

2. Changes we have made and plan to make to improve student learning

In order to help our majors achieve a higher level of proficiency in argument understanding, construction, and evaluation, we have decided to add a new course to our curriculum that will focus on formal logic. We recently submitted a proposal for this new course to the Academic Review Committee, and we are expecting that they will approve it soon. We hope to offer that course for the first time either in the fall semester of 2015 or the fall semester of 2016. Since we will be requiring our majors to take this course rather than the less formal and less rigorous Critical Reasoning & Logic course (PHI 12) that has been the philosophy major logic requirement, we are hoping to see improved argument skills in Senior Seminar in the future as a result.

3. Effectiveness of our current methods for assessing student achievement

Though we continue to think that the philosophical essay format provides the best vehicle for the assessment of students' argumentative skills, we are discussing the possibility of supplementing these essays with non-essay assignments that require students to analyze, construct, and evaluate philosophical arguments. These assignments would be more focused on individual arguments and argument skills and so would enable us to determine more accurately in what specific ways our students are excelling in their implementation of these skills and in what specific ways they need further assistance to cultivate and improve them.

4. Potential changes to our assessment work

Changes to our assessment work in this area are currently focused on introducing the new formal logic course mentioned in #2 above and constructing the supplemental argument analysis, construction, and evaluation assignment mentioned in #3.