Part 1

To be completed by the course coordinator:

(1) What GELO(s) were assessed for the course during the AY?

In the AY 15-16 the philosophy department, following the revised assessment schedule based on the 2014 change to the A3 SLOs, sought to assess progress on SLO 2: Present effective arguments that use a full range of legitimate rhetorical and logical strategies to articulate and explain their positions on complex issues in dialogue with other points of view.

(2) What were the results of the assessment of this course? What were the lessons learned from the assessment?

The usual approach the philosophy department takes towards assessment in critical thinking is to issue an instrument to all instructors for testing in all sections of the course, and then to evaluate the responses to the instrument. However, since SLO2 falls within the range of critical essay writing, as opposed to fallacy identification, and all sections of Philosophy 57 do critical essay writing, we thought it best to simply sample a subset of the essays from all the instructors. So, each instructor submitted five essays from each of their sections that had already been graded. The instructors met and discussed the results of their grading and the essays. Although instructors varied on what they allowed students to write their critical essays on they did not vary on the kinds of instructions given. The general instructions were that students were to write an argumentative essays which contained a thesis on a topic of social justice, the thesis was to be defended by at least two premises, each of which were to be supported by research. Importantly, students were required, for an A paper, to consider at least one counterargument to their argument based on some point of view that was established on the basis of research. For example, a student writing in defense of Obama care as a health policy was to consider at least one objection to the policy and offer a response to the objection.

The results of our discussion and norming exercise were that students still need a lot of help in improving on SLO 2. We found three things to be of central importance.

First, students often fail to distinguish the moving parts of an argument with sufficient clarity. As a consequence, they think that responding to one premise is sufficient for responding to another premise. We found that this problem could be remedied by having students diagram longer arguments earlier, before essay writing begins, so that they can use diagramming as a technique for improving their argument and response to a counterargument.

Second, students often think that an analytical argument requires that a third-party reader must come to the conclusion that their argument is the best, and that they have won the debate. We found this to be a problem when it came to explaining the assignment. We decided that an alternative way to set up
the writing assignment is to distinguish between a persuasive paper and an analytical paper. A persuasive paper aims to persuade the reader, while an analytical paper aims to analyze the arguments involved in a position. Both styles of paper are important, and closely related to each other. However, students should understand the difference between them when they set out on the task of writing one as opposed to the other.

Third, and related to the point above, students often pick weak objections to their own position when presenting a counterargument to the view they are defending. We felt that this happens because students are guided by the view that they should be winning the argument, as opposed to analyzing it and seeing where it can go, and how far they can go with it. We decided that this issue could be resolved by giving more precise instructions earlier on before we start in on the essay-writing process.

(3) What modifications to the course, or its assessment activities or schedule, are planned for the upcoming year?

Given the importance of SLO 2 we plan to make two modifications in 2016-2017. First, we plan to implement more discussion of informal logic concerning the issue of macro-argument analysis, as opposed to micro-argument analysis. In particular, students will be diagramming more arguments. Second, we plan to write out and clearly state the instructions for how to write an argumentative analytic paper, as opposed to a persuasive paper. We aim to present the important benefits of both papers, but we also aim to emphasize the differences and the relation between the two for the purposes of improving critical thinking overall.

Part 2

To be completed by the department chair (with input from course coordinator as appropriate):

(4) Are all sections of the course still aligned with the area Goals, Student Learning Objectives (GELOs), Content, Support, and Assessment? If they are not, what actions are planned?

All sections of philosophy 57 are currently aligned with the Goals and SLOs for A3:

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(5) If this course is in a GE Area with a stated enrollment limit (Areas A1, A2, A3, C2, D1, R, S, V, & Z), please indicate how oral presentations will be evaluated with larger sections (Area A1), or how practice and revisions in writing will be addressed with larger sections, particularly how students are receiving thorough feedback on the writing which accounts for the minimum word count in this GE category (Areas A2, A3, C2, D1, R, S, V, & Z) and, for the writing intensive courses (A2, A3, and Z), documentation that the students are meeting the GE GELOs for writing. Instructors evaluate oral presentations in class over the course of 4-5 days. Philosophy department courses typically have an enrollment of 35, 10 students over the new cap of 25 for A3 courses. 8 minute presentations for 35 students takes 280 minutes. Each class session is 75 minutes. So, an instructor needs roughly 4 days to complete evaluation of oral presentations. Feedback on writing is given through peer review from other students and from the instructor through individual meetings, and office hours. Some
instructors comment extensively on written drafts, others comment, as well as meet with students that may need further help. Instructors who have more than 100 students in all of their sections are provided with Instructional Student Assistant (ISA) help with grading. Faculty work closely with ISA to assure quality. The ISA must be approved both by the Instructional Assistant Coordinator and the Philosophy Department Chair for their excellence in both composition and their expertise in the field of the philosophy at issue. Whenever an ISA aids in the grading of a large course, s/he provides feedback along with grading. In all cases, when the help of an ISA is employed, the instructor of record must explicitly notify the students of the class that some writing assignments have been graded and feedback has been provided by an ISA. The instructor of record then, if so requested by a student, must reread, provide additional feedback, and regrade the written assignment, if a grade revision is warranted.