**General Education Annual Course Assessment Form**

Course Number/Title: Philosophy 61: Moral Issues  
GE Area: C2

Results reported for AY 2014-15  
# of sections: 12  
# of instructors: 8

Course Coordinator: Carlos Sanchez  
e-mail: carlos.sanchez@sjsu.edu

Department Chair: Janet Stemwedel  
College: H & A

**Instructions:** Each year, the department will prepare a brief (two page maximum) report that documents the assessment of the course during the year. This report will be **electronically submitted**, by the department chair, to the Office of Undergraduate Studies, with an electronic copy to the home college by September 1 of the following academic year.

**Part 1**

To be completed by the course coordinator:

1. **What SLO(s) were assessed for the course during the AY?**

   SLO 1: “recognize how significant works illuminate enduring human concerns.” In studying various moral issues, both theoretical and practical, students in the course read important work by both contemporary philosophers and great historical figures, such as, Aristotle, Kant, and Mill, and respond to them through homework assignments, journal entries, or written in-class exercises and through argumentative research papers. In the latter, they are required to explain clearly the issues at stake, to show an understanding of the arguments or philosophical approach of the writers they are discussing, and to assess those arguments and defend their own position.

2. **What were the results of the assessment of this course? What were the lessons learned from the assessment?**

   Most of the course’s activities are geared toward assessing SLO 1. Thus, Lisa Bernasconi’s course was shown a film on the gay marriage debate and students were asked to reconsider the arguments in light of John Stuart Mill’s Utilitarianism; Nathan Osborne asks his students to view Alan Moore’s *The Watchmen* and instructs them to analyze the stances that the characters take on the disaster that happens at the end of the film. He asks how the ethical theories they have studied embody themselves in the characters and whether the characters’ actions are ethically justified; and Casey Smith asks the students to consider a case study, “Destroying Wildlife to Save It,” and take a position on the main ethical issues. In all cases, students are required to write their responses in short-essay format. These are then graded and returned.

   In measuring attainment of the SLO, instructors consider: (1) students’ understanding of the moral issue(s) in question, (2) their understanding of competing ethical or philosophical approaches to that issue, and (3) their argumentative skill in assessing those approaches and arguing for their own position. Results show an increased awareness of the ethical issues in question, an ability to articulate those theories, and a willingness to take an educated position on the issue. Whereas pretests at the beginning of the school year showed that students had some trouble even identifying a moral issue, by the time of the assessment most of them (90% according to the instructors) are
able to use the concepts they had acquired from the philosophers they had read to develop and defend their own views.

(3) What modifications to the course, or its assessment activities or schedule, are planned for the upcoming year? (If no modifications are planned, the course coordinator should indicate this.)

The assessment results were favorable, showing that students made significant improvement in writing and in their understanding of, and engagement with, significant texts. The results do not indicate any obvious way to improve the course; variations in results did not correlate with any differences in reading selections or writing assignments among different instructors. So, we plan no modifications in the course or in its assessment. However, the instructors will continue to mentor each other and to meet to discuss various pedagogical issues in the course.

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 (SLOs), Content, Support, and Assessment? If they are not, what actions are planned?

Yes - Janet Stemwedel

(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 SLOs for writing.

The instructor of record provides feedback and grades all writing assignments. The instructor of record, welcomes, if not requires, first drafts of all writing assignments and provides feedback on drafts. If sections are exceptionally oversized they are graded by the instructor of record with the assistance of an Instructional Student Assistant. The Instructional Student Assistant 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 Instructional Student Assistant (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.
Date: November 13, 2015
From: Janet D. Stemwedel, Chair, Department of Philosophy

In AY 2014-2015, PHIL 61 had one section that exceeded GE enrollment limits by 10 students. All of the faculty members teaching PHIL 61 require more than 1500 words in written work from their students, write extensive comments on papers, and provide sufficient time before the end of the semester for students to benefit from the comments. Some faculty allow students to rewrite papers for a better grade, or encourage students to turn in a rough draft before the final paper. In addition, faculty with a load of over 130 students total for the semester are provided with ISAs, graduate students or senior philosophy majors, to help with grading. ISAs are trained by the faculty members in best practices of grading written work. Faculty often go over ISA work themselves to keep an eye on quality, and provide additional comments in the process.

Sections of PHIL 61 are interactive and allow plenty of room for student involvement and class discussion, both in Socratic dialogue with instructor and based on small group work in class. Frequently the instructors provide feedback in the class by holding up examples of student work as models or by raising writing issues of general concern. There is often class discussion of student answers to exam and other questions. In addition, it is departmental policy that students be made aware of our “Guidelines on Writing Papers in Philosophy,” a shared set of guidelines made available on our department website. Instructors of larger classes as well as the GE coordinator for PHIL 61 compare assessment results with those in smaller sections to see whether there are discrepancies that need to be addressed.

In addition to all of this, we have an office room set aside as a Writing Center, which is staffed by ISAs for three days a week with the sole function of providing students who come in with feedback on writing. This is a supplement to faculty office hours, which themselves are devoted to providing writing feedback among other things.