External Program Review

Philosophy Department

Sonoma State University

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On February 8, 2024, I visited the Sonoma State University campus to meet with faculty, students, and administrators regarding SSU’s Philosophy Department, which I had been asked to review. I have also read the available pertinent materials, including the most recent self-study conducted by the department, and numerous sample syllabi for courses offered by the relevant faculty. I am happy to be able to report that my research and experiences have left me with a very strong positive impression of the philosophy department—an impression that seems to be generally shared among the people I met and talked with on my visit. I was especially struck by the positive sentiments expressed by SSU’s philosophy students, who regard the department as a whole, and the individual faculty members, very highly indeed. These students clearly take themselves to be having a high quality educational experience, and are not only satisfied with but enthusiastic about the department and the instruction they are receiving.

A bit of background regarding the department. SSU’s philosophy department has five full-time tenured faculty members and a number of lecturers. In 2017 the department overhauled its program, having made the decision to focus specifically on ethics, justice, and values. This did not mean that other areas within philosophy, including the history of philosophy, would be entirely omitted; rather, they would be covered in as much as they were taken to be relevant to the topics the program would now center on. But the program would have a clear and specific focus, rather than attempting to offer instruction in all areas of philosophy on an equal basis. This choice was a strategic one, driven largely by the realities of available resources, and by the interests, specialties, and capabilities of the faculty members. In a broader sense, it seems to me, it also serves as a way of establishing a clear identity at a time when many members of the general public, and a not inconsiderable number of higher education administrators, find themselves feeling somewhat uncertain regarding the value of the humanities.

When I first read about this strategy I was surprised, and perhaps a bit skeptical about how effective such a program might be. At this point, however, having familiarized myself with the program, and having spoken with the faculty and a number of students, it is clear to me that this strategy was well chosen and has borne considerable fruit. SSU’s philosophy department is offering its students a robust and admirable education in philosophy, and I have no doubt that the quality of what they offer is higher than it would be if they were to spread themselves thin in an attempt to cover every aspect of philosophy as currently studied and practiced in academia at large. Moreover, the particular set of topics focused on—again, ethics, justice, and values—coincide strongly with the interests of a very large number of contemporary students. Finally, one can hardly doubt the intrinsic significance of the questions and issues this program has chosen to address. Perhaps I am a bit biased, being an ethicist myself, but it has always seemed to me that it is simply impossible to become a genuinely educated person without addressing, in a serious way, the pressing ethical issues of one’s time, and learning to think intelligently about those issues.

The departmental website does a good job of identifying the department’s focus and of providing a concise and persuasive student-oriented rationale for such a course of study:

“At Sonoma State University, the philosophy department specializes in the study of ethics and values.  Students critically examine life's deepest questions, and learn how to evaluate solutions to vital problems and debates in contemporary society.  If you are curious about the origins of value, or what makes life worth living, or how to promote the public good, then majoring in philosophy is a smart choice.”

As part of the 2017 revision / overhaul, the department established four Program Learning Outcomes:

(1) Analyze and Evaluate Arguments

(2) Develop ability to argue persuasively for a thesis based on scholarly research

(3) Apply philosophical theory and methods to daily life

(4) Articulate and argue for core values (moral and non-moral)

These outcomes seem well selected and entirely appropriate to serve as guidelines for a program of this nature. Moreover, my conversations with faculty and students instilled confidence that the program in its current instantiation—and with its current focus on ethics, justice, and values—was designed and was being implemented in a manner that was very likely to effectively and successfully achieve these goals.

Part of this success is due to the decision to organize the philosophy program into four concentrations. Social Justice addresses issues regarding gender, race, and power. Pre-Law and Applied Ethics emphasizes intersections of law, politics, and ethics. The Good Life is oriented around concepts of well-being and the foundations of value. Science, Technology, and Ethics emphasizes issues arising in connection with artificial intelligence while also addressing broader ethical concerns related to technology and science.

These four concentrations constitute a group that is not only coherent, with just enough common themes and overlap to avoid the risk of fragmentation and programmatic isolation, but also comprehensive: it is not easy, that is, to think of a major area of philosophical ethics that could not be comfortable connected with the core concerns of one of these concentrations. Moreover, in as much as I am positioned to make such a judgment, it seems to me that all four of these concentrations are skillfully and thoughtfully designed, and that each offers its students a high-quality educational program. The department’s faculty possess the relevant and necessary expertise to successfully and effectively teach the requisite courses. The 2018 addition of Megan Burke should perhaps be specifically mentioned, as it was clearly a boon to the department, particularly with respect to the Social Justice concentration. I talked to several students who were very enthusiastic about the Science, Ethics, and Technology concentration, and about the instruction provided by John Sullins, the central faculty member with respect to that concentration, who is clearly enthusiastic and deeply engaged with his students. I suspect that, given current social and technological developments, this concentration will continue to be a very popular and attractive one to many students, and seems likely to provide its graduates with very interesting career prospects.

In addition to the concentrations described above, all philosophy majors, regardless of concentration, are required to take five classes: Introduction to Philosophy, Becoming a Philosopher, Applied Ethics, Ethics and Value Theory, and Senior Seminar. Moreover, two of the courses that are required for students in all concentrations (“Becoming a Philosopher” and “Senior Seminar”) are service learning courses that call on students to apply their philosophical knowledge and training to real world situations. Altogether, the organization of the program achieves an admirable balance between courses that establish knowledge of basic and central philosophical knowledge and that build core philosophical skills, most centrally critical thinking and analysis; concentration-specific courses that enhance the student’s understanding and capabilities within the contours of a more defined focus; and courses that emphasize what is sometimes neglected in philosophical education, the practical side of philosophy.

It is, then, a well-designed program being taught by faculty who possess the skills and expertise to teach it well, and their success in doing so is reflected in the engagement and palpable enthusiasm of the students—an enthusiasm a number of students were more than willing to share.

There are very few negatives to counterbalance these positives. I did talk to one student who was a bit disappointed in the department’s specific focus on ethics, and felt that his personal philosophical interests were broader then the department’s. Since these feelings were expressed by *only* one student, out of the several I talked to, and given that the others clearly were very happy with this focus, this did not strike me as a cause for alarm; particularly given the strength of the reasons that lay behind the decision, and the economic and other pragmatic realities that lay behind it. Only one of the department’s part-time lecturers showed up to meet with me, and he provided a mixed review of the department; while he had some positive things to say about the program and his colleagues, he was somewhat frustrated at not being able to teach some courses he strongly desired to teach. I do not think I have enough familiarity with the situation to comment further on this, and I certainly recognize that departments are always limited in terms of the specific teaching assignments they are able to offer their faculty, particularly their part-time lecturers. Moreover, having only met with one part-time lecturer, there was no way for me to achieve anything resembling a general view of such matters.

One issue, though, does call out for some attention. It is not a weakness within or of the program or department, but rather a potential danger facing it. It appears that Sonoma State is about to undergo an administrative reorganization, and that one outcome of this will be that the Philosophy Department will no longer have its own internal chair; rather, it will have a figure to be known as a ‘coordinator.’ The department will be to some degree combined with the English Department and the Women’s and Gender Studies department, and that group of three departments, if I understand the situation correctly, will have a chair.

Several of the department’s faculty members expressed grave concern about this change, and it is not difficult to see why. At present, it sems difficult to reach anything resembling a precise estimate of the impact on the department, as details of just what the change will amount to seem to be somewhat elusive. But this itself is, of course, a cause for concern, and make it difficult for members of the department to plan accordingly. It seems highly likely, at any rate, that the resulting configuration will means somewhat less autonomy for the Philosophy Department, and will have the result that important and at times crucial decisions will likely be made by someone whose primary expertise is not in philosophy. It is hard to imagine such a situation being an advantage to the department. And symbolically, such a change seems to express, on the part of the administration, a failure to properly appreciate the value of the department and the work that it does. It is not clear, of course—or at any rate, not to an outsider like myself—that anyone in the administration actually feels this way. But from the perspective of those affected, it is almost inevitable that it will be perceived in such a way, and this is in itself unfortunate. It would be a shame if this sort of administrative change got in the way of the valuable and important work the department is currently engaged in, or diminished their ability—which is, at the moment, admirable and impressive—to provide their students with what is clearly a high quality educational experience.

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