



**PHILOSOPHY DEPARTMENT**

**PERIODIC PROGRAM REVIEW SELF-STUDY**

**2019-2020**

## I. Executive summary

Spinoza ends his masterwork, the *Ethics*, by saying, “all things excellent are as difficult as they are rare.” Philosophy professors seek to make excellent thinkers less rare, by empowering their students to conquer the difficulties that lie in the way of excellent thinking. To this end, the Philosophy Department offer a rigorous undergraduate major whose graduates have achieved impressive success, a set of elective courses designed to foster critical reflection on issues raised by and assumptions underlying science, medicine, religion, politics and other areas, and a menu of basic general education courses designed to open minds and to inculcate critical thinking skills that are essential both in the world of work and (to borrow Benjamin Franklin’s words) in any republic that we can keep. These skills include the abilities to read and to listen critically and to communicate clearly and logically in both written and oral discourse.

Many Brockport students come to the College with significant weaknesses in precisely those abilities, and lacking the corresponding habits of mind. Accordingly, the department’s faculty members have created and experimented with a large variety of pedagogical innovations. To mention only a few examples, Dr. Gordon Barnes uses philosophy textbooks that are written in dialogue form. This form models the activity of effective critical thinking: offering reasons for one’s view; listening carefully to other points of view in order to understand them correctly; responding appropriately to objections to one’s view, etc. These are the skills and habits that our students need to acquire. Dr. Dicker uses PowerPoint in a way designed to combat the passivity that viewing PowerPoint slides can induce. He creates two sets of slides, one consisting mainly of questions that he posts on Blackboard before the class to which they relate, and the other, which he uses in class, repeating the same questions but adding suggested responses to them, but using “animations” to hide those responses until the students have offered their own thoughts. Dr. Dicker also uses some of his own published books in his courses; insofar as these books cultivate a special blend of rigor and accessibility intended to make them helpful to students, they are innovative teaching tools. Dr. Harbin addresses critical reading and critical writing skills in an effectively dovetailing way. First she introduces *reading* philosophy: locating the philosophical problem at stake, locating the author’s solution to the problem (i.e. the thesis), and locating various kinds of arguments. She then discusses why it is important to include all of these elements in one’s own writing. She also uses an original, collaborative method for improving students’ writing. Before grading the students’ papers, she has them engage in a peer review exercise. This exercise is a focused, clear-cut assignment that makes each student accountable to a single partner, as opposed to a group presentation that requires more advanced collaboration and where the accountability structure is more diffuse. It also ensures that all students write a draft in advance. After the peer review process is complete, she strongly encourages students to bring more advanced drafts to her, on which she offers detailed feedback before grading the final draft. Dr. Long has reintroduced Critical Thinking (PHL 104) to the courses that Brockport regularly offers. Indeed, he proposed, and the Department adopted, an important revision in our major whereby not only Logic (PHL 202) but also PHL 104 is required (without raising the total number of required credits). He also looked at a great many critical thinking textbooks and talked to students who had taken critical thinking courses. He became convinced that these courses, as they are often taught, are not very useful to students. So, he created his critical thinking course from the “ground up,” and structured it so that students learn

to think critically in the way that one typically learns any other skill, by being introduced to a few basic concepts at a time and then having considerable opportunity for practice and guidance. To this end, he writes all his own exercises, rather than culling them from textbooks. In his upper division classes, he forwards to the students “calls for papers” for undergraduate philosophy conferences, with the goal of getting students to think in terms writing for audiences outside of the classroom.

Brockport’s Philosophy Department has a long history of productive scholarship, dating back to the late 60s, when it was the academic home of prolific scholars like Justus Hartnack and George J. Stack. This tradition continues. Associate Professor Barnes has authored 16 articles and four book reviews in diverse areas (metaphysics, epistemology, philosophy of religion, and political philosophy), and presented papers at the American Philosophical Association (Eastern and Pacific Divisions), the Minnesota Philosophical Association, the Central States Philosophical Association, and the Creighton Club (the N.Y. State Philosophical Association). Dr. Dicker, who was named Distinguished Professor in 2014, has authored eight books (five of them with Oxford University Press, seven of them on major philosophers and one in epistemology), 24 articles, 13 book chapters on a wide variety of issues and thinkers, and 18 books reviews, and he has made over 80 paper presentations in ten countries. Assistant Professor Harbin, whose research centers on Aristotle and on Kant, has authored three articles and a book review, has a 17,000-word article under consideration and another review in preparation, and has made 13 paper presentations in four countries. Assistant Professor Dr. Joseph Long, whose research focuses on metaphysics, ethics, and philosophy of science, has authored six highly sophisticated articles, has an ambitious research program under way, and has made over 25 paper presentations in six states.

The Department also has a history of significant service, only a few highlights of which can be mentioned in this summary. Perhaps the Department’s most important service, which bridges service to the University, the College, the profession, and the community, is that it has operated the Center for Philosophic Exchange (CPE) ever since 1969, when it was founded and housed at Brockport by Dean Howard Kiefer at the behest of SUNY Chancellor Samuel Gould. The CPE, which is currently directed by Dr. Long, brings to campus three or four distinguished philosopher each year, who present lectures that are subsequently published in the CPE’s well-known annual journal, *Philosophic Exchange*. In 2014, thanks to the initiative and vision of then-Director Dr. Barnes, that journal became an online, open-access journal. In February 2014 alone, there were 3,474 downloads of its articles. The following year, Dr. Barnes, in collaboration with the Library, uploaded all of the old articles from the last five decades onto the online journal. There are now over 4,000 papers fully uploaded and easily accessible to the general public. The increased readership and enhanced visibility of the journal benefits the Philosophy Department and the College: it enhances our reputation for academic excellence, and it serves the profession and the community. Another consequential service provided by the Department has been its work in the College Senate, especially though not only in the design and operation of the General Education program. One or another member of the Department has served on the College Senate’s busy General Education Committee almost every year since it was created, and Dr. Dicker chaired the Committee from 1983 to 1985 and from 2006 to 2010. In 2009-2011, he also served on the Academic Affairs Task Force on General Education, and he presented the Task Force’s recommendations to the College Senate. He and Dr. Paul Moyer of the History Department were the chief architects of the program that the Task Force recommended and that is still in place. Other Senate functions performed by the Department’s faculty include membership on the Senate’s Executive Committee, 1982-1986, 1991-1996 and 2006-2010; Secretary of the Senate, 1982-1984; Vice-President of the Senate, 1984-1986 and 1991-1992; Chair of

the Senate's Undergraduate Curriculum Committee, 1992-1994 and 1995-1996; Chair of the Senate's Appointments and Elections Committee, 1994-1995 and 2017-2018; Senator-at-large, 2004-2010. The body of the present Self-Study demonstrates that the Department has contributed in many other important ways to making Brockport a great place to learn and to work. For example, Dr. Long works tirelessly to make known the value and uses of a philosophical education and he proactively handles a host of Departmental matters, and Dr. Harbin generously devotes an extraordinary amount of time to mentoring individual students and effectively teaches upper-division courses for which there is student demand but that fall far outside her areas of specialization, such as Medical Ethics. The Department is small, but it fulfills a large mission.

As the SWOT analysis in this study shows, the Department hopes for stronger administrative support than it has experienced in the recent and not-so-recent past. Some context is germane here. In the 70's, the Department had 12 tenured or tenure-track members and enjoyed ongoing administrative support. Beginning with the tragic retrenchment in 1982, things turned around. Two tenured members of the Department lost their positions in the retrenchment after 12 years of dedicated teaching and service. There followed a 29-year period during which the Department lost six more members, none of whom were replaced. At this juncture in the downsizing, the Department was down to four full-time members. In the next couple of years, it was finally authorized to hire two replacements, which brought it back up to 6 members (for a short time up to seven, because former President Paul Yu was placed in the Department as a University Professor until he retired, thanks to a special arrangement with SUNY Central). Then another member retired and was not replaced, which took the Department down to five. Then, at the start of the 2016-2017 academic year, its most senior member, Dr. Harold Greenstein, abruptly retired. Much to the consternation of all members of the Department, the Interim Provost refused to approve a replacement for him, which brought the Department back down to four. That is where things now stand. The result is that although the Department is able to field a major, it is severely limited in the variety of courses that it can offer in any given year. By rotating its six required core courses, it has managed to avoid delaying anyone's graduation. But since most of the Department's offerings must be general education courses that the College needs, it can offer philosophy majors, philosophy minors, and other interested upper-division students very few electives. Notably, it cannot offer an upper-division course in normative ethics unless that course is taught by a professor whose main responsibility at the upper division is to teach courses in other areas, nor can the Department offer a course in the philosophy of law, since it lacks a faculty member whose main specialty is the *core area* of ethics. Nor can the Department offer courses in recent and contemporary continental philosophy because in 2016 it also lost a valuable, long-term adjunct who was its only faculty member specializing in that area. The first of these two gaps not only limits the Philosophy major, but leaves the Department currently unable to provide a philosopher-ethicist that both the Department of Anthropology and the Department of Criminal Justice have said they need in order to field a senate-approved interdisciplinary major in community justice and to gain accreditation for an existing program. It also belies the fact that so many philosophy majors, including Brockport graduates, go on to law school and to careers in law. The second gap is most unfortunate, because students are often drawn to philosophy by exposure to continental (European) philosophers like Sartre, Heidegger, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche and others who belong to a tradition quite different from the prevailing, analytical tradition in which all the current members of the Department's faculty were trained.

The Department does not expect to return to the days when Brockport could afford to have a 12-member philosophy department. Its faculty is well aware that times have changed. But if the College wants to retain the reputation of offering its students a quality liberal arts education comparable to what is offered at many other comprehensive and liberal arts colleges, then the time has come to restore the Philosophy Department to critical mass. The main objection to doing so seems to have been that the Department does not have a sufficient number of majors. But there is a logical circle here: the Department is not permitted to hire another philosopher because it does not have more majors, but a chief reason why it does not have more majors is that its short-staffing makes it impossible to offer the variety of courses that would attract more majors. This is not to say that the Department's short-staffing is the sole cause of the problem. Another cause is the widespread ignorance and the common misconceptions about the nature and uses of philosophy, which are exposed in the section of this self-study on "Relevance of the Curriculum." The Department is committed to holding up its end by combatting those misconceptions. A recent feather in its cap is that the organization, "Great Value Colleges," included Brockport as #54 in its list of "100 Great Value Colleges for a Bachelor's Degree in Philosophy," stating that it was selected not only for the program's affordability but also for the institution's overall outstanding reputation, its faculty's excellence, and the unerring commitment to providing non-traditional students a high-quality education and in doing so, giving them all the tools that they need to achieve their future career goals." But lacking the ability to offer Brockport students a richer variety of courses than it can do with only four full-time faculty members, growth in the size of the Philosophy program will remain difficult to achieve.