

External Evaluation of Lehman College's Philosophy Department

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Introduction

External Reviewers Professors Lewis Gordon and Max Pensky visited the Department of Philosophy at Lehman College, CUNY, on March 24, 2022, in conjunction with the Department's Self-Study. In preparation for our visit, we carefully reviewed the Department's Self-Study Document. During our daylong visit, we met with all the current tenured faculty in the Department. In addition, we met with James Mahon, Dean of Arts and Humanities and Department member; Lehman College Provost Peter Nwosu, two current adjunct faculty members, and five current undergraduate Philosophy majors.

All our meetings with this spectrum of students, faculty, staff and administrators were cordial and informative. On the basis of the Department's Self-Study and these extensive readings, we are well positioned to offer both observations and recommendation in conjunction with the Department's larger self-study. The observations and recommendations below focus primarily on the distinctive aspects of the Department's curricular mission and its context in the larger mission and distinctiveness of Lehman College; the areas of promise and opportunity for retaining and expanding the quality of the Department's curriculum, and specific recommendations in response to some challenges that the Department will encounter as it begins a process of urgent faculty expansion.

Our overall strong impression of the Department, its faculty and students, and its curriculum is very positive. In a nutshell, the Department, while markedly under-staffed at its current level of no assistant professors, two associate professors, three full professors (one of whom is the Dean of Arts & Sciences), and twenty-one (AY 2020) recurring adjunct faculty, is able to deliver a high quality curriculum, across an impressive range of different courses, programs, and areas, to an equally impressive number of students (sixty-five majors and fifty-one minors as of AY 2021 - 2022).

In our conversations with undergraduate majors, we heard consistently positive endorsements of the faculty's dedication, accessibility, energy, and commitment to undergraduate education. Students were excited about what they were learning in their classes, compared their Philosophy classes very favorably to other courses, and were articulate and thoughtful about why among Lehman's many majors they had chosen Philosophy and how they considered their choice of major to be a good strategy for their postgraduate plans for professional preparation. They were engaged by their courses – and, notably, volunteered information about several courses and experiences that had been formative for them, experiences that referenced every one of the current departmental faculty. While a small sample, this conversation enforced our impression of a hardworking and dedicated faculty. We were also expressed by the age range of

the students and their demographic profile, which reflects the continued mission of Lehman as serving particularly the ever-transforming Bronx communities, although there continue to be students from nearby boroughs and counties.

The Philosophy Curriculum, Major, and Minors

Notable here is the Department's success in sharply increasing the number of majors it serves, with particularly sharp growth since 2015, when Professor James Mahon initiated changes before becoming Dean of Arts & Sciences in 2018. Chairperson Professor Julie Maybee's innovations continued this upward trend. The number of majors, attracted by the department's initiatives over the past seven years, are important measurements of the Department's effectiveness in its mission and its ability to attract and retain students for its curriculum.

In the case of the Department, several features of the approach toward expanding majors are noteworthy. While we reserve specific recommendations for a later section of this report, some of our observations of these features will anticipate those recommendations.

The increase in majors has resulted largely from a planned expansion of the Department's curricular offerings in support of a very wide array of college-wide course and program requirements, including Flexible Common Core GENED requirements, LEH courses, Honors courses, Freshman Year Initiative, College Now, and others. These contributions will likely soon include curricular support for a School of Business as well. This very broad contribution across multiple programs augments what are already broad and complex arrangements for the Major. The Department offers two tracks or "options" for the major; "Knowledge and Reality," and "Ethics and Public Policy." While recent revisions to the major have addressed some discrepancies in how these two options are fulfilled, they remain quite distinct.

Lehman is by no means the only Philosophy department to increase the coverage and appeal of its major(s) by offering two tracks, with one of them (roughly) recreating a more traditional (formal) form of undergraduate major, while the other concentrates on value theory, applied philosophy, and philosophy and public policy in particular. Noteworthy here is that the Department maintains these two tracks with (currently) only five full-time tenured faculty, a notably small team for maintaining the coverage and quality of two distinct curricular paths to the major. (In our experience, two-track Major options such as these are more familiar in departments with two or three times the number of faculty that Lehman's Department maintains at present.) It may be valuable for the Department, in conjunction with its upcoming expansion, to talk through the pros and cons of maintaining a two-track model, identifying the specific advantages that this model produces along with the associated challenges for coverage, recruiting and retaining majors, increasing FTEs across the broad range of courses, etc.

We are not able to identify from the Self-Study what the breakdown of major enrollments is between these two options. (In comparable divisions in other Philosophy

departments, the track associated with value theory broadly, and in particular incorporating applied ethics, tends to be far more popular with students than the “traditional” track.)

In addition, the Department maintains several distinct options for the Minor, including a general minor. The Department also houses, and serves, two interdisciplinary minors: one in Disability Studies and one in Reasoning and Exposition. It was not entirely clear from the Self-Study what role the latter of these, Reasoning and Exposition, is meant to play in the Department’s plans. While the Self-Study comments that the Department intends to revise and rebuild this minor program, it offers no rationale for doing so. Absent such a rationale, the Department may wish to reflect further on what role this minor is meant to play in the Department’s larger work, and whether investment in rebuilding it is warranted.

Our general impression is that the growth of the Department’s major is impressive, the outcome of sustained and creative strategies, which should be welcomed. At the same time, this success does come with some costs, which the Department may wish to consider as it plans its upcoming faculty expansion.

Among the explanations offered for the expansion of the major, one connects directly with the rationale for the major’s lower credit requirement in comparison with comparable majors. A 24 credits requirement makes a Philosophy major an attractive option for students interested in double majors; offers a lifeline of sorts for students who have been academically unsuccessful in majors with more requirements and content and offers a path for timely completion of the degree for students with multiple demands on their time.

These rationales are sensible and have contributed in large measure to the Department’s success in expanding the major. At the same time, however, the Department must be sensitive to the prospect of the major being perceived as “easy,” an option when more demanding studies become unattractive, or a less rigorous and demanding choice than other majors in the Liberal Arts curriculum. This is a perception that will likely have a self-fulfilling function as students are drawn to the Department for reasons that may have little to do with the intrinsic interest of the discipline. It will also have knock-on effects across the Department’s curriculum, in particular its need to address the differentiation in content and workload in upper-division courses, as it is articulated in the Self-Study’s future curriculum goals.

We would encourage the Department to promote the position that the attractiveness of the major, and in particular for students interested in double majors, has less to do with its lower number of requirements and more to do with the creative, practical, and world-expanding possibilities opened up by combining rigorous philosophical studies, especially philosophical approaches to a range of relevant contemporary issues, with other majors.

The Department is also considering adding a range of undergraduate certificate programs. We encourage faculty to continue their conversation on the purpose, value, and effects of such new programs. While we also see how such initiatives may prove attractive and widen the doors to the Department's courses, the Self-Study does not make a detailed case for why the resources and work that would be required to design, operate, and assess multiple certificate programs will be in the long-term best interest of the Department, its faculty, and students.

Much of the lower division courses in the Department, and some of their upper-division courses as well, are covered by a quite large number of adjunct faculty. Reliance on adjuncts in this number and for this proportion of a departmental curriculum usually carries familiar risks: lack of investment by occasional adjunct faculty in the core mission of the Department and a corresponding challenge for departmental administrators to ensure quality instruction across the full range of its curriculum. Though we only spoke with two adjunct faculty, both were strongly of the view that the Department is deeply supportive of their work and their role; they felt valued and acknowledged by the Department and the Chair regarding their essential contribution to the Department's mission, and they were appreciative of the support and encouragement they received in the difficult transition from in-person to online instruction. The Department Chair was outspoken in articulating policies that valued, supported, and rewarded adjunct faculty. As budgetary constraints point toward (modest) reductions in the Department's capacity to retain its current complement of adjunct faculty, these informal practices of promoting solidarity, continuity and support will become even more valuable.

Hiring Plan

As related both in the Self-Study and in conversations with faculty and the Dean, the Department is poised to receive much-needed and much-deserved additional faculty lines. Already confirmed are two junior, tenure-track lines and one permanent lecturer position. These three positions will go a long way toward replacing losses that the Department has experienced with the departure of junior faculty and the loss of teaching load due to one member becoming Dean and another assuming directorship of the Center for Human Rights and Peace Studies.

In conversation regarding the areas of specialization of the two already-confirmed junior hires, we strongly concur with the view that one of these two should be, either in whole or part, in the area of Latin American and/or Latinx Philosophy. We note that this area of specialization continues to grow and develop, and many younger philosophers with this AOS are engaging in exciting and path-breaking work in combination with other areas of philosophy, ranging from the History of Modern Philosophy to Political Philosophy, Ethics, Philosophy of Race, Feminist Philosophy, Social Epistemology, and more. There are also exciting developments in new areas such as Philosophy of Artificial Intelligence or Philosophy of Technology with a focus on race, gender, and ethnic bias.

For the second of these two junior hires, the preferred AOS must emerge from dialogue, consensus, and compromise on the part of the five current permanent faculty. We understand very well the foundational question that the choice of AOS entails: whether the Department will address lack of coverage in traditional, often formalistic areas of core philosophy, or whether it will continue to adapt and expand its strengths in areas more associated with the emerging landscape of 21st century philosophy. As is frequently the case, the decision for the AOS of a junior hire can quickly become a referendum on the future of the discipline, and the Department. Given our view of the Department faculty as dedicated, skilled, and thoughtful, we offer our encouragement for a process of deliberation that rejects the assumption that such a decision must be an either/or, a zero-sum outcome with clear winners and losers. Given the exciting and innovative nature of emerging fields of 21st century philosophy, we suggest instead that the Department adopt a “both/and” perspective for its deliberations. Emerging specializations at their best engage critically and powerfully with more traditional areas. When they do, they attract young scholars both qualified and motivated to teach and research in ways that move between, and beyond, traditional and emerging subfields. Moreover, the process and outcome for this decision will have direct bearing on the Department’s ability to retain, and not just hire, junior faculty, as we discuss in the next section.

Retaining Junior Faculty

The Department has been unsuccessful in retaining junior faculty (two faculty lines, each occupied and vacated twice) over the past five years. In discussion with faculty members over the context and likely causes of this failure to retain faculty, we do not regard this outcome as reflecting any underlying problems or causes for concern on the part of the Department and its members. Rather, the Department, like so many other teaching-focused departments in Philosophy and indeed across the Liberal Arts, is experiencing (in a particularly sharp way) a phenomenon that we have observed numerous times elsewhere: given the exceptionally competitive nature of the job market and the surfeit of highly qualified candidates for junior faculty positions, the Department has been able to offer junior positions to young philosophers of exceptional promise. However, as a teaching-intensive institution without a graduate program, Philosophy at Lehman College will not be competitive for recent hires who are very frequently pursuing what they regard as more attractive positions as soon as they join the faculty. Despite the very attractive features of Lehman’s distinctive educational mission and demographics, and the draw of its geography, junior faculty hired from top doctoral programs will always be hard to retain given the allure of lower teaching loads, opportunities for working in graduate programs, and extensive support for research agendas.

Given the impending expansion of the Department’s junior faculty, we encourage the Department to continue a wide-ranging and open-minded internal conversation about how they may be able to reduce the risk of junior faculty flight. A few suggestions, by no means exhaustive, for approaches that the Department may wish to consider are:

- Instead of selecting various areas of expertise, which may attract hundreds of applicants, focusing on combinations that may attract a small, committed pool may be a better option. It is fallacious to presume that a candidate who is selected from a large number is “best” when that person’s interest may be better suited elsewhere. If “best” is reinterpreted as “fit,” the result would be a successful, long-term hire.
- Given the combination of certificate programs, disability studies, and the unique social dynamics of the Bronx, a public-oriented philosopher in Latin America/Latinx philosophy, especially one who focuses on immigration studies, would find few institutions that would serve as a perfect fit. Lehman could stand, in that regard, among the best for those candidates.
- There are excellent, productive scholars in the CUNY community college system. Since some are already settled in NYC, an appointment at Lehman would be a move “up” without having to change their lifestyles, and the expectations could afford more productivity. An example of such a scholar is Associate Professor LaRose Parris in Africana Studies. She was an award-winning author before leaving LaGuardia Community College for Lehman, and her productivity continues and she is in high demand for prestigious lectures since joining Lehman’s faculty.
- Applicants with specialization in Philosophy of Education tend to be small. Adding that area as an AOS and coordinating the higher with Lehman’s M.A. and Advanced Certificate programs in Education would assure having a candidate who would have the opportunity to participate in a graduate program, albeit not a PhD program.
- Lehman in the past had faculty who taught at least a course every other year at the Graduate Center. An opportunity of this kind for mid-career and senior faculty who may find it desirable would afford an aspiration for junior faculty who stay.
- Many universities now have in-residence or clinical faculty, who primarily teach. Similar to the point about faculty at community colleges, there is a significant pool of productive researchers in that category, but they have three- to five-year contracts. They would welcome a fast-track tenure-track appointment.
- Lehman—and perhaps CUNY—may wish to consider creating a special Postdoctoral Fellowship similar to the one in the University of California. It builds in a guarantee of a tenure-track offer at the end of the two-year term of the fellowship. As postdocs are always on the market, it doesn’t pose the problem of retention since the postdoc remains for other candidates. It does, however, create an opportunity for a candidate who becomes invested in the institution to petition for a permanent appointment at the end of the postdoc. Given fiscal constraints, the administration could set a clause for conditions subsequent—namely, that should a candidate become tenure-track, the postdoc could only be reinstated when another faculty member departs or retires.
- Finally, though not exhaustively, there is a trend for joint appointments in the Humanities with the Social Sciences, Natural Sciences, and Professional Sciences. Within the Humanities and Social Sciences, joint appointments with

Africana Studies are not unusual. As a Business School is in the works—and the Philosophy Department has a history of cross-listed or shared courses—a joint hire could meet some of the Department’s needs. This observation applies, as well, to Computer Science. A variety of PhD programs are creating postdocs and centers exploring philosophical problems in computer science. There are now graduate students whose training is simultaneously in computer science and philosophy, as there continue to be in linguistics and philosophy. There is also a growing number of Cognitive Science programs in which philosophers, psychologists, linguists, neuroscientists, and computer scientists collaborate. Some of those students may be excited about being hired to create or direct such an initiative at Lehman. Undergraduates with such training would be attractive to a variety of graduate Arts and Sciences and Professional-degree programs.

Conclusion

The Lehman Philosophy Department faculty are carrying far more than their weight. Additionally permanent or tenure-track faculty are needed. The Department reflects one of Lehman College’s historic strengths, which is to provide opportunities for historically excluded or disadvantaged populations. The approach of cultivating multiple skill-sets—through encouraging double-majoring, the minor, and the variety of other program initiatives—is a wise approach for the target population. Moreover, the pedagogical approaches are innovative, which enabled the Department to respond to the demands of exigent circumstances such as the pandemic and economic crisis. As a commuter college, Lehman doesn’t face the financial loss from empty dormitories. It does, however, face different challenges, as the integration of technological resources is often more challenging for older students.

The Department should think through the two-tracks approach. Given the direction in which 21st century Philosophy is headed, there is an opportunity for the Department to distinguish itself through a constellation of areas that could also increase retention of faculty. Our recommendation is to focus on faculty who may be attracted to what Lehman could offer *intellectually* that is unique. The sociological and regional factors—demographic diversity and NYC—don’t always work in the long term, especially since the social conditions of urban areas are constantly changing. An overall unique departmental portrait could present few other options for certain candidates. In short, it could make Lehman Philosophy *the best* option for some candidate’s combination of teaching and research interests.

Relatedly, we recommend the faculty diversifying how it recruits faculty. Looking for rising talent in the CUNY community colleges should not be off the table. The same for teaching faculty at nearby research institutions. Candidates who regard Lehman as moving “up” while they can maintain their domestic or lifestyle conditions would more likely stay and, in the least, reduce the retention problem. Additionally, the Department may consider collaborations with other academic units to create, in similar kind, unique opportunities for recruiting and retaining junior faculty. We also encourage the

administration to create affordable postdocs, perhaps in collaboration with other senior colleges in CUNY, to facilitate a CUNY-specific pool that could be in the long-term interest of the University.

Finally, given how much weight the small number of faculty members are carrying, we are concerned about burnout. The matter is not only regarding teaching load but also service obligations across the college. This makes the distribution of labor through increasing the number of permanent faculty members essential. We are sure the Department and the Administration are already aware of this. We are stating it here as a matter of record.

We hope this report is useful for this Department's constructive set of goals in an already impressive resource in the Bronx community and New York City.