MADISON INITIATIVE FOR UNDERGRADUATES

PROPOSAL
DEPARTMENT OF PHILOSOPHY
(COLLEGE OF LETTERS AND SCIENCE)
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ABSTRACT

The Department of Philosophy proposes two hires in the history of philosophy, to be filled in the areas of ancient philosophy and Kant. This will fill very significant gaps in the department’s coverage of the history of philosophy and thereby enhance our undergraduate curriculum, including courses required for all philosophy majors. The recruitment and hires would be made over a two-year period. Moreover, by reducing the strain on our capacity to serve majors well, it will also enable to the department to offer more small-format classes for undergraduates led by faculty members; in particular, it will allow us to maintain (and possibly increase) the number of philosophy-based First Year Interest Group (FIG) courses offered each year—which have proven especially popular among students—and to offer them more consistently than we have been able to in the past.

Background

The study of philosophy is a foundation of a liberal arts education. This includes not just exposure to the basic problems and methods of philosophy, but also reading classic works of philosophical thought and engaging with the great philosophical thinkers of our collective past. Moreover, all Philosophy departments recognize the importance of the study of the history of philosophy for training undergraduate philosophy majors. A thorough grounding in the history of Western philosophy is generally deemed to be of the highest value for a proper philosophical education, and absolutely essential for anyone contemplating going on to graduate school in philosophy. It is the rare department that does not require its majors to take at least two, and often three courses spanning the extended period from antiquity through the twentieth century, in addition to whatever other courses they may require in philosophical topics (e.g., metaphysics, ethics, epistemology, logic). The UW-Madison department requires majors to take both Philosophy 430 (History of Ancient Philosophy) and Philosophy 432 (History of Modern Philosophy, i.e., early modern philosophy, in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries).

The present curricular situation in our department is as follows: There is currently no course on Kant on the books, despite the great importance of the study of Kant for philosophy today. Kant is unquestionably the most important philosopher of the modern period. We have not had a specialist in Kant and eighteenth century German philosophy since the retirement of Donald Crawford in 1990; thus, Kant is taught only occasionally, when some member of the department is interested enough to do so. Kant gets a few
weeks of attention in the History of Modern Philosophy (432) course. For many of our majors, this is almost all they ever hear about this important philosopher.

Turning now to the other requested position (in ancient philosophy), a bit of departmental history. For many years, the department had two specialists in ancient philosophy: Terry Penner, a Plato scholar, and Paula Gottlieb, an Aristotle scholar. Because of the requirement and the popularity of Philosophy 430, this course has to be taught every semester. Since Professor Penner’s retirement in 2003, Professor Gottlieb has had to teach this course every single term. And in every one of those semesters, we have had to turn away a great many students who have wanted to take this course. Moreover, with Penner’s retirement, the department has not been able to offer upper-level undergraduate courses on Socrates or Plato on a regular basis.

Three people currently teach Philosophy 432, which is offered every semester: Professor Steven Nadler, a specialist in early modern philosophy (especially the works of pre-Kantian seventeenth century rationalists), Professor Keith Yandell, and Senior Lecturer Martha Gibson. Professor Yandell’s primary focus is in the philosophy of religion and epistemology; Dr. Gibson’s primary focus is in the philosophy of language. Both Yandell and Gibson are often called upon to teach other service courses in their primary areas of specialization. Nadler’s range is very broad; as a result, he is often asked to teach service and upper division courses other than 432. Though we always do manage to teach this course every term, as it is so essential for our undergraduate majors, it often means that one of these three faculty members is teaching two service courses per semester.

On the whole, these curricular gaps in our current slate of offerings represent a very unfortunate, even embarrassing situation. For a department of this caliber at a university of this stature not to be teaching courses focused on Plato and Kant on a regular basis means that our undergraduates do not have the opportunity to study absolutely central figures in the Western philosophical tradition. This is akin to an English department not being able regularly to teach Shakespeare, or a Classics department unable to cover Virgil. The study of the history of philosophy may be a pillar of a liberal arts education, but frankly this is not something we can provide in a very thorough way right now. Not only do Philosophy majors need these courses, but so do undergraduate students whose interests are in literature, area studies, education, cognitive science, the history of science, and other areas. We regret greatly that our required history of philosophy courses cannot accommodate more non-majors who feel that they need a proper grounding in the history of philosophy, or in the work of philosophical geniuses such as Plato or Kant. Because of numerous retirements and departures, our hiring in the past ten years has had to focus on core areas in systematic philosophy, replacing faculty working in metaphysics, epistemology, and logic.

Rationale

Two hires in the history of philosophy would fortify an area of great potential strength in our department. The Philosophy Department at UW-Madison is already widely
recognized as having prominence in three areas: philosophy of science (4 faculty), ethics
(6 faculty), and early modern philosophy (1 faculty). Strengthening its profile and
offerings in the history of philosophy generally is the natural next move for the
department to make. It is already ranked as one of the top nine departments in North
America in the category “early modern philosophy” by the Philosophical Gourmet
Report, by far the most prominent internationally recognized ranking of philosophy
departments. The only other field in which the department achieves a top-ten ranking in
that report is philosophy of science (in particular, philosophy of biology and philosophy
of social science).

The hires we seek would immensely enhance our department’s undergraduate curriculum
and the College of Letters and Science’s core liberal arts offerings. They would allow us
to do what we are currently struggling to accomplish (meeting the demands for 430 and
432) much more efficiently, and to fill in egregious gaps in our courses. In particular, the
two positions would enable us to:

• Continue offering 430 every semester (but with Professor Gottlieb having to teach it
  only once per year).
  Expected enrollment: 80-100.
• Continue offering 432 every semester (and expanding the Yandell-Gibson-Nadler
  rotation, so as to enable them to teach other undergraduate courses of interest).
  Expected enrollment: 80-100.
• Begin to once again offer two versions of the variable content course Philosophy 454
  (Classical Philosophers), one focused on Socrates, the other on Plato. Neither course has
  been offered since 2003.
  Expected enrollment: 40.
• Offer Philosophy 552 (Aesthetic Theories: Kant’s Aesthetics).
  Expected enrollment: 40.
• Create an undergraduate course on Kant’s metaphysics, epistemology and ethics.
  Expected enrollment: 40.
• Create an undergraduate course in eighteenth-century Continental philosophy.
  Expected enrollment: 40.

These are all specialized courses that should be taught only by faculty. In our search for new
faculty to fill these positions, we would be especially seeking exceptional teachers, since a
course on Socrates, Plato or Kant, when taught well, can truly inspire a love of philosophy.
Our department is known for its fine teaching, and we will hold whomever we finally hire for
these positions to the same high standards we expect of anyone teaching our courses. These
two positions would be transformative for our department. Along with current faculty
members Paula Gottlieb (an Aristotle scholar) and Steve Nadler (a specialist in 17th
century philosophy), we would have a deep and strong undergraduate program in the history of
philosophy—perhaps one of the strongest in the country.

Moreover, last summer the department became the home for the Journal of the History of
Philosophy, without question the most prestigious journal in the field of history of
philosophy. Professor Nadler is the Journal’s editor. This would be a fitting occasion for
the department finally to become one in which the history of philosophy is given the prominence it deserves, especially for the sake of undergraduate education. To achieve this, however, and to round out the undergraduate curriculum, certain obvious gaps have to be filled: the absence of both Plato and Kant represent very serious gaps in our course offerings—gaps that have been allowed to grow through a combination of retirements and greater priority being given to other central fields threatened by recent departures (particularly in metaphysics, logic and epistemology). Developing a program in the history of philosophy is thus, at this time, a natural and wise move for the department to make.

The positions proposed would have great cross-disciplinary interest on campus. The Plato position would supplement courses in ancient thought offered by the Department of Classics (Prof. Gottlieb has affiliate status with that department, while Prof. Alex Dressler in Classics has affiliate status with our department), and strengthen ancient studies on campus generally. A new Plato scholar would also be doing work that complements topics covered in courses in ancient science offered by the History of Science Department. The person hired to fill the Kant position would be a natural collaborator with faculty in the Department of German, which has traditionally been strong in the area of early modern German aesthetics, as well as with some faculty in the Dept. of History who specialize in modern intellectual history.

Accountability

The most important, and easily accessible, measure of success will be enrollment numbers in the courses listed above. We expect high enrollments; when we were able to offer some of these courses in the past, they were always filled and had substantial wait lists. Courses in Socrates, Plato and Kant tend traditionally to be in very high demand. We also expect to see an increase in the number of senior theses and independent studies undertaken on these figures, something we are currently unable to support. The yearly benchmarks would be enrollment figures, and they will be closely monitored.

Over the past six years, the average number of credits taught per faculty member in our department has risen by nearly 40%. (In Spring 2004, the credits per faculty member were 385; in Spring 2010, 536.) Further, we have grown the number of majors during that time period from 132 to 186—also an increase of 40%, despite a drop in faculty numbers of about 30%. We are working very hard with the resources we have, and anticipate even greater service to undergraduates with any new lines that we are awarded.

Philosophy and the FIG Program

The Philosophy Department has seen a very enthusiastic response to its numerous offerings in the FIG program. We are impressed by the evidence that the FIG program helps with retention of students, helps them graduate faster and with higher GPAs, and does so especially for the various categories of at-risk students who are targeted by the program. Over the past several years, we have been able to offer up to two FIG first-year
core seminars per year, with several additional faculty eagerly awaiting an opportunity to teach one. But in light of our shrinking faculty (27 in 2004; 19 today), and in order to be able to provide for our numerous majors, as well as for the large lecture courses in ethics that we teach so that students might meet requirements for professional schools (especially the Business School), we find that we are unable to continue offering two FIGs per year, much less allow more faculty the opportunity to teach them. For the past two years we have offered just one per year. Philosophy, a naturally discussion-based discipline, is especially well suited to the FIG program and its small class format. It is a good focal point for a FIG in which students take related courses in other disciplines, giving them both something to philosophize about and additional material to bring to bear on the philosophical topics at hand (e.g., Greek tragedy for a discussion of moral dilemmas).

For the vast majority of students, philosophy is a new subject that they have not encountered in high school, and the philosophy FIG introduces critical reasoning skills that will serve them well throughout their undergraduate careers. We regret, enormously, that we cannot devote more faculty time to teaching FIGs. It is a tremendous experience for both faculty and students.

The two hires we propose in the history of philosophy would allow us to continue teaching at least two, and possibly more, FIG seminars each year. We would also do something new for the FIG program: offer follow-up courses, restricted to seniors who have taken a Philosophy FIG, and designated to fulfill breadth and other requirements. One faculty member taught a follow-up course in Fall 2009 for participants in his 2007 FIG class, and did so on a voluntary basis (taking an unpaid course overload). 14 of the original 20 students chose to take the course (2 of the 20 were studying abroad), and the experiment was a great success.

Philosophy, FIGs and Improving Instruction

Our department takes great pride in its commitment to undergraduate teaching, but we are not content to rest at our present level of success. We propose, in association with the expansion of our ability to teach smaller classes, and in particular the FIG program, to develop a program which we believe will enable us to improve our instructional practices. We propose to use the staffing of FIGs to begin a process of teaching improvement that, if successful, we aim to spread to all our faculty and, we hope, beyond. In research universities (and ours is no exception), faculty members often prioritize research over teaching in many ways. One crucial way in which we prioritize research is through constantly trying to improve its quality: we engage, as individuals, in a community of scholars, collaborating in an open environment in which nothing is hidden. That's how we improve, and make breakthroughs. But our teaching is mostly non-collaborative, un-discussed, closed from observation. We may be improving, but we really don't know whether we are because we do not have benchmarks, or observations, by which to judge. Very few faculty members attend to instructional research that would help them to improve. Student evaluations are useful for identifying very unsuccessful
practices, but not for spurring continuous improvement among teachers who are mostly above some threshold.

So we propose to enlist the aid of colleagues from the School of Education, to develop a set of mechanisms through which those faculty teaching the FIG courses in the Philosophy department would learn from observing and discussing one another's teaching. We also intend to extend this opportunity to other faculty members who are teaching small format classes. Faculty who teach 104 courses would have a lighter-than-normal administrative load during the Fall semester in which they are teaching, in order to facilitate their devoting significant amounts of time to observing one another and learning about successful teaching practices. Our model is a program developed by the Change Leadership Group at Harvard for high school teachers. In that program, teachers scrutinize videos of classroom instruction in order to learn those strategies that work well (and those that do not). The precise details of the program will be worked out in consultation with colleagues from the School of Education.

The FIGs provide an ideal starting point for a program like this. Although different FIGs involve different material, they have a small-class-format in common, and vary less than most of our courses in terms of the experience the students bring to the class. Professors volunteer to teach them, so there are no issues of people feeling that their professional autonomy is being infringed when they participate in mutual observation, questioning, and criticism. If several professors are involved in these and other small format classes every fall, that is a large enough group for meetings and discussions to bring out a range of expertise and concerns. Along with Greg Smith, who heads up the FIG program, one of our faculty members, Professor Harry Brighouse, is currently leading a proto-version of this within the FIG program as a whole, and is also planning a similar program with a group of Philosophy TAs; our idea here is to make a similar effort within our department, but more formally and with greater intensity. Their experience with the FIG program and the TAs will enable us to get the program up and running relatively quickly, but of course we anticipate a period in which we will need to refine the program in light of student and faculty experience.

We realize that this kind of program requires a high level of faculty buy-in in order to be successful. As a result, our department had a separate discussion and vote on this component of our MIU proposal. It was received very enthusiastically; the vote in favor of including it was unanimous. One of our faculty members, Harry Brighouse, has agreed to coordinate the program, and is not requesting a course release to do so. In order to maximize the impact of the program, we will undertake, at the department's expense, to pay a graduate student to serve as an assistant in the development of this project. The assistant's responsibilities would include developing and managing the program, coordinating meetings, designing a curriculum for our colleagues on research concerning successful instructional strategies, and reaching out to other departments to learn about their practices.

We have secured a provisional commitment from Assistant Professor Erica Halverson in Education Psychology to help devise the program with Brighouse, and help us in refining
it over time. We intend to seek outside funding to help pay for her time. We have also secured a tentative commitment from Harvard professor Tony Wagner, who developed the secondary school program at the Change Leadership Group that inspired us in this part of the proposal. Wagner will provide a brief consultation with us when he visits Madison in mid-January. We will pay for that with existing departmental funds.

In short, we propose to make the Philosophy department a key center for teaching FIGs, but also to make the Philosophy FIGs and other small format courses a crucible for learning about teaching, learning how, in a research university, to make teaching a more equal priority with research and, more importantly, how to continuously improve the quality of our teaching.

Timetable

Top priority, for undergraduate curricular reasons, would be given to the Plato position. Recruitment would begin in the fall of 2011, with the position filled in spring 2012, and teaching beginning in the fall of 2012.

The search for the Kant position would begin in the fall of 2012, with the position filled in spring 2013, and teaching beginning in the fall of 2013.

Identification and recruitment of a diverse pool of candidates would proceed as follows:
1. Advertising the position in Affirmative Action Register, as well as other diversity hiring venues.
2. Contacting senior scholars in the relevant fields and, through them, seek out especially promising women and candidates from under-represented groups.
3. Sending out letters to chairs of the top 50 Philosophy departments in the country, advertising our position and asking specifically to be notified of excellent female candidates and those from under-represented groups whose expertise matches our targeted recruitment areas.

Budget

The budget demands for these hires will involve the usual salary and other expenses involved in filling a position at the assistant professor level. A competitive entry-level salary for an assistant professor would be ca. $70,000 (plus fringes), and supplemented by $5000 in research funds. The department will, of course, provide office space, computer, etc.
MEMORANDUM

December 1, 2010

To: Provost Paul DeLuca

From: Gary Sandefur, Dean

Re: MIU Round 3 proposals

We are pleased to submit proposals from the College of Letters and Science for MIU Round 3. We solicited two page pre-proposals and received over 40. We reviewed these pre-proposals in the Academic Planning Council and in Senior Staff. Based on these reviews, we invited 15 submissions of full proposals. These proposals were reviewed by Senior Staff and we decided to forward these 15 to you for consideration. All are worthy of funding and would help meet critical needs in the University.

The proposals are grouped into three tiers in order of their importance in meeting the goals of the MIU, with tier 1 being the most important. Importance is based somewhat on the quality of the proposals but primarily on undergraduate educational needs. We also took into account losses in faculty numbers prior to the MIU and the success or lack thereof of departments in previous rounds of the competition.

Tier 1: Communication Arts, English, French and Italian, School of Journalism and Mass Communications, Philosophy, Political Science

Tier 2: Anthropology, Chemistry, Math, Sociology, Statistics

Tier 3: Communicative Disorders, Religious Studies, Service Learning, Undergraduate Research Scholars

We did not carefully assess the budgets of the proposals since we assumed that this would be done by the office of the Vice Chancellor for Administration and Finance.

xc: Associate Vice Chancellor Aaron Brower
    Associate Dean Nancy Westphal-Johnson
    Academic Associate Deans
    Associate Dean Anne Gunther
    Sheila Voss, Office of the Provost