

Proposal to the SLA Faculty Assembly to Change the Thesis Requirement for the Philosophy MA Program

Approved by the SLA Graduate Curriculum Committee: January 19, 2007

The Philosophy Department faculty recently agreed that it would be desirable to replace the MA thesis *requirement* with a thesis *option* and the SLA Graduate Curriculum Committee voted to approve this change. We now present the following items to the SLA Faculty Assembly for your consideration:

- (1) the Graduate Executive Committee's recommendation to the Philosophy Department;
- (2) a comment concerning the recommendation;
- (3) considerations that favor changing the thesis requirement.

(1) Recommendation:

The Graduate Executive Committee of the Department of Philosophy unanimously recommends that the thesis *requirement* be changed to a thesis *option* that students may select in consultation with the appropriate graduate director and faculty advisor. Graduate students who elect not to write a thesis will be required to take six additional credits of graduate coursework in the Philosophy Department. More specifically, (A) students in the bioethics track will take two additional three-credit graduate philosophy courses of their choosing; and (B) students in the American philosophy track will take two additional graduate philosophy courses from the list of specialized electives.

(2) Comment Concerning Recommendation:

The reason for treating the two tracks differently is that the American philosophy track already allows for six credits as open philosophy electives. Currently, this is not the case for the bioethics track. To see this go to <http://www.iupui.edu/~philosop/ma.htm> and click on the two tracks. American philosophy graduate students, but not bioethics graduate students, may take six credits of "open electives." See specifically module 2, part 3, of the American philosophy track.

Allowing students in the bioethics track to take more non-bioethics philosophy courses also enables us to tailor the program better to those students who, because of their background or career goals, want or would benefit from taking more philosophy. The lack of parallelism between the two tracks is thus designed to compensate for a lack of parallelism currently built into the program. On this recommendation any graduate student who opts for the non-thesis option will have the following requirements:

- two required core philosophy courses;
- six specialized electives (in his or her concentration);
- two further philosophy courses of any type he or she chooses.

(3) Considerations that Favor Changing the Thesis Requirement:

1. A fact that has emerged since we began our MA program is that nearly all of our graduate students and prospective graduate students are "non-traditional." Instead of going to school full-

time, they have jobs, families, and other obligations. And of course those things can interfere with writing a thesis. Such students often finish their coursework and then go back to their busy work schedule, family routines, etc., raising the risk of unfinished theses. Others complete their coursework and go off to PhD programs, again raising the risk of unfinished theses. Put briefly, a *thesis-MA* combined with mostly *non-traditional* graduate students is not conducive to a healthy graduation rate. We believe that we can remedy this problem, i.e., we can retain the rigor and intellectual integrity of our MA program while decreasing the risk of unfinished theses. We can do so by replacing the thesis requirement with a thesis option, and then requiring, of those students who do not write a thesis, additional graduate courses (all of which include research and plenty of writing) in place of the thesis.

2. Worth noting is that if we do this, our program will be in line with some of the best MA programs in our discipline. Prof. Brian Leiter of the University of Texas at Austin lists the ten best terminal MA programs in the U.S. (see <http://www.philosophicalgourmet.com/maprog.asp>). This list is from his web-based “Philosophical Gourmet Report,” which is the most widely known web-based reference source on graduate programs in philosophy and which boasts a large advisory board consisting of internationally recognized philosophers. Of the ten MA programs listed, only one has a thesis requirement: Georgia State University, which encourages its students to keep their theses short. Another program—Tufts University, which is the top-ranked of the lot—lacks not only a thesis requirement but even a thesis option. This fact is important because it shows that having a thesis requirement is not necessary for having a highly respected MA program in philosophy.

3. Another fact that has emerged is that most of our graduate students, especially those in the bioethics track, pursue this degree not to learn to do research in philosophy but to enhance their work in a health-related field. Not only does concurrent full-time employment affect their ability to successfully complete a thesis, but most of these students would benefit far more from broader course experience than from a focused research project. In particular, they would come away with a broader knowledge of their discipline and of their specialty within it. This would also be true of many of our combined-degrees students in law (JD/MA) and medicine (MD/MA).

For additional information, please contact either of the two co-directors: Cornelis de Waal (American philosophy) cdwaal@iupui.edu; Jason Eberl (bioethics) jeberl@iupui.edu.