Stating our goals as a department was both productive and illuminating: it was clear that despite some of our differences, we are in agreement. One of the things we had noticed as a department is that our students come to us with weaker skills in reading difficult theoretical texts than they used to. Since teaching skills in the close reading of philosophical arguments and in presenting those arguments is one of our departmental goals, we chose this goal for our assessment project in the fall of 2013. We decided to assess this goal by evaluating papers written over the course of all our introductory courses. We wanted to see the kind of skills students—both those who never take another philosophy course, as well as those who do—had coming into the introductory courses and how effective we were in teaching them these skills by the time they wrote the final papers in their introductory courses.

I therefore, in consultation with the Philosophy Department and with the help of the Teagle team, designed a rubric that addressed the following departmental goal drawn from a list of our departmental goals:

**Departmental Learning Goal**: Students should learn to discern distinct arguments in philosophical texts and effectively present them in written work.

The objectives involved in this goal are listed on the rubric and are as follows:

**Departmental Learning Objectives**:
1. Isolate a line of argument from the text.
2. Show a good grasp of the problem to which the argument is a response.
3. Distinguish the crucial points of the argument from less important points.
4. Communicate distinct points of the argument in precise, concise prose.
5. Present the distinct points of the argument in an effective order.
6. Present the argument in light of the paper’s thesis in a fair and effective manner.
7. Evaluate the cogency of the argument and present clear reasons in support of her evaluation.

All members of the department who were teaching an appropriate introductory course in the fall of 2013 filled out the rubric for each paper they graded that was five pages or longer. Appropriate courses included Introduction to Philosophy courses and First Year Seminars. Each instructor used the rubric to mark off whether a given paper had achieved each of the above objectives “With Excellence,” “Very Well,” “Satisfactorily,” or “Not At All.” Each rubric had the course number, the student’s name, and the date of the paper listed so that we could track information such as the type of introductory course, the point in the semester the paper was written, and the progression of improvement (or lack thereof) for first year as opposed to upper class students.

**Strategies For Achieving Goal/Objectives**

All members of the philosophy department teach a number of courses that fulfill the Swarthmore College’s “writing” requirement. This means that we have developed new methods over the years this requirement has been in place for teaching writing in an explicit and self-aware way. Although philosophy as a discipline demands a writing style that is clear, precise, and concise, the institution of the criteria for courses that could count toward the writing requirement have encouraged us all to use shorter writing assignments with more frequent feedback, explicit statement of goals and objectives students should work toward, the submission of rewrites and multiple drafts, and explicit discussion of how to improve their writing.

Teaching reading skills is also something that we have always done, but in keeping with the more explicit strategies we have been developing in teaching writing skills (which of course are intertwined with reading skills), we may need to develop further the strategies each of us already uses for teaching students how to read more closely and deeply. Some of the strategies we
already use include assigning short papers that “translate” a specific passage of text, very precisely focused and graduated assignments that work a student through a particular text, and, of course, giving traditional feedback on papers and classroom participation where we draw their attention to what they’ve missed in reading a philosopher’s position.

How Direct Assessment was Used
The first step in our chosen assessment project was to articulate the specific objectives that fell under the larger goal of teaching students “to discern distinct arguments in philosophical texts and effectively present them in written work.” We found it helpful to articulate these objectives as well as useful to find out how in agreement we were about them despite the widely different styles and topics in philosophy that we teach. In fact, several of us made use of the objectives we had agreed upon as a department in order to be more explicit with our students about what we were looking for in their work.

We applied the rubric in the fall of 2013 and, after some minor tinkering with the rubric, in the spring of 2014. Although we had found it very useful to articulate with such precision the various aspects we looked for when evaluating a student’s skills in the discernment and presentation of a philosopher’s position, the rubric we had agreed upon proved to be both cumbersome to put into use and unhelpful in providing us with the kind of feedback we needed to pinpoint change.

There were two problems with the rubric:
1. It was confusing to use because it was overly specific in what it was trying to measure. We had broken one aspect of paper-writing down to such a fine level of detail, that it was hard to apply the rubric: the grade for the paper reflected evaluation of other aspects of paper-writing as well which made it hard to apply the rubric in an intuitive way.
2. Once we had some rubrics collected from various intro classes, it was hard
to know how to use the information we had thus obtained in a way that would suggest specific changes we could make. Student performance on papers varies as the content and difficulty of the material they're writing about varies, so it's tricky to measure a student's improvement from paper to paper. In addition, we were unable to collect enough data to warrant action in the two semesters we used this rubric (given the number and size of intros each semester).

Findings
At the beginning of the Teagle project we came up with a list of goals fairly easily. Philosophers are used to breaking things down and making precise distinctions that others might find overly subtle. It may be that we broke things down further than was useful for us in assessing our effectiveness. In the Fall of 2014, after discovering some problems with the way we had broken down our goals, we made some minor changes. Our goals are now the following: We feel that students completing our courses should, with varying degrees of competence depending on the number and levels of the courses they have taken, be able to:
1) discern philosophical questions and problems as well as understand their significance.
2) discern distinct arguments in philosophical texts and effectively present them in written work.
3) know how to clarify a question, claim or argument.
4) think independently and creatively about a well-formed philosophical question or problem.
6) distinguish between good arguments and fallacies.
7) think of arguments for and against a given claim and weigh them against each other.
8) closely read complicated and difficult texts, interpret them, and reconstruct specific claims or arguments in a clear, organized, and effective manner.
9) write in a clear, intelligible and reasonable way.
10) bring together the skills cited in (1) through (9) in order to write a well-organized paper with a strong thesis that presents a viable interpretation of a philosopher’s position along with a fully developed response to that position.

11) come up with their own questions and topics, views and arguments.

12) demonstrate some understanding of the historical dimension of philosophy as a discipline.

13) listen to and understand what others are saying in a discussion.

14) respond to the views expressed by others in an intelligible and constructive way.

15) be intellectual team-workers in their philosophical investigations.

16) conduct their own research on a given topic (how to use the library, the web, etc.).

Using the Results
We have now designed another rubric that we will use this year to evaluate all the final papers of all our intermediate courses. It lists specific objectives of goal (10)—the goal of teaching our students “skills cited in (1) through (9) in order to write a well-organized paper with a strong thesis that presents a viable interpretation of a philosopher’s position along with a fully developed response to that position.”

The rubric has been redesigned to cover all the aspects of a paper that together should be reflected in the grade given to the paper. Instead of a one-page rubric per paper, there is a one-page rubric per course with the columns lined up so that we can tell at a glance what particular area more of our students are having trouble with (or which area they, on the whole, seem to be better at). This should be able to flag for us areas we need to get together as a department to discuss strategies for addressing that area.

Our new rubric suggests that final papers in intermediate courses should:

I. Demonstrate a good grasp of a philosophical problem and its stakes.

II. Demonstrate skill in presenting a strong thesis.
III. Demonstrate skill in organizing her paper around her thesis.
IV. Demonstrate the ability to discern and present arguments that reflect a close and well-supported reading of a philosophical text.
V. Demonstrate skill in defining a philosopher’s terms.
V. Demonstrate skill in developing and presenting her own position.
VI. Demonstrate prose written clearly, precisely, and straightforwardly.

It may be that some of our “goals” are actually “objectives” that could be reorganized under more broadly stated goals. In any event, we feel that the new rubric will be more effective in helping us to target problem areas in a way that would help us to pinpoint problems in synthesizing some of the important skills required to achieve excellence in writing philosophy papers.
Appendix I - Philosophy: 2013-14 Student Learning Goals

The attempt to reach a clearer understanding of issues important to human life, to think about them critically and independently, and to weigh different reasons for and against specific claims and arguments are at the core of philosophical activity.

Students completing our courses should, with varying degrees of competence depending on the number and levels of the courses they have taken, be able to

1) discern philosophical questions and problems as well as understand their significance.

2) discern distinct arguments in philosophical texts and effectively present them in written work.
3) know how to clarify a question, claim or argument.

4) think independently and creatively about a well-formed philosophical question or problem.

5) come up with their own questions and topics, views and arguments.

6) distinguish between good arguments and fallacies.

7) think of arguments for and against a given claim and weigh them against each other.

8) demonstrate some understanding of the historical dimension of philosophy as a discipline.

9) listen to and understand what others are saying in a discussion.

10) respond to the views expressed by others in an intelligible and constructive way.

11) be intellectual team-workers in their philosophical investigations.

12) closely read complicated and difficult texts, interpret them, and reconstruct specific claims or arguments in a clear, organized, and effective manner.

13) write in a clear, intelligible and reasonable way.

14) conduct their own research on a given topic (how to use the library, the web, etc.).
**Appendix II - Philosophy: 2013-14 Rubric**

Rubric for PHIL: _______ Taught by: _____________________ Semester: _______

Goal: To learn to discern distinct arguments in philosophical texts and effectively present them in written work.

**Objectives**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student Name and Year:</th>
<th>With excellence</th>
<th>Very well</th>
<th>Satisfactorily</th>
<th>With Emerging Skill</th>
<th>Not at all</th>
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- Is able to isolate a line of argument from the text.
- Shows a good grasp of the problem to which the argument is a response.
- Is able to distinguish the crucial points of the argument from less important points.
- Is able to communicate distinct points of the argument in precise, concise prose.
- Is able to present the distinct points of the argument in an effective order.
- Is able to present the argument in light of the paper’s thesis in a fair and effective manner.
- Is able to evaluate the cogency of the argument and present clear reasons in support of her evaluation.
Appendix III - Philosophy: Revised (2014-15) Student Learning Goals

The attempt to reach a clearer understanding of issues important to human life, to think about them critically and independently, and to weigh different reasons for and against specific claims and arguments are at the core of philosophical activity.

Students completing our courses should, with varying degrees of competence depending on the number and levels of the courses they have taken, be able to

1) discern philosophical questions and problems as well as understand their significance.

2) discern distinct arguments in philosophical texts and effectively present them in written work.
3) know how to clarify a question, claim or argument.

4) think independently and creatively about a well-formed philosophical question or problem.

5) write a well-organized paper with a strong thesis that presents a viable interpretation of a philosopher’s position along with a fully developed response to that position.

6) come up with their own questions and topics, views and arguments.

7) distinguish between good arguments and fallacies.

8) think of arguments for and against a given claim and weigh them against each other.

9) demonstrate some understanding of the historical dimension of philosophy as a discipline.

10) listen to and understand what others are saying in a discussion.

10) respond to the views expressed by others in an intelligible and constructive way.

11) be intellectual team-workers in their philosophical investigations.

12) closely read complicated and difficult texts, interpret them, and reconstruct specific claims or arguments in a clear, organized, and effective manner.

13) write in a clear, intelligible and reasonable way.
14) conduct their own research on a given topic (how to use the library, the web, etc.).
Appendix IV - Philosophy: Fall 2014 Rubric

Final Papers
Course and Semester:

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<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>I</th>
<th>II</th>
<th>III</th>
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<th>Grade</th>
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I. Demonstrates a good grasp of a philosophical problem and its stakes.
II. Demonstrates skill in presenting a strong thesis.
III. Demonstrates skill in organizing her paper around her thesis.
IV. Demonstrates the ability to discern and present arguments that reflect a
   close and well-supported reading of a philosophical text.
V. Demonstrates skill in defining a philosopher’s terms.
V. Demonstrates skill in developing and presenting her own position.
VI. Writes in clear, precise, and straightforward prose.

Scoring:
0: Not applicable.
1: Not at all.
2: With emergent skill.
3: Satisfactorily.
4: Very well.
5: With excellence.