Form E-1-A for Boston College Core Curriculum

Department/Program: Perspectives Program

1) **Have formal learning outcomes for the department's Core courses been developed? What are they?** (What specific sets of skills and knowledge does the department expect students completing its Core courses to have acquired?)

   As an interdisciplinary program providing core credit in philosophy, theology, arts, literature, social science and natural science, the learning outcomes of the Perspectives Program are developed by the departments in those core areas.

   However, each of the four Perspectives courses adapts these core learning outcomes to the Perspectives mission of

   - providing a humanist context for professional and scientific education;
   - educating the whole person and forming students who are intelligent, responsible, reasonable, and attentive;
   - aiding students in the developing the skills of critical thinking and practical living; and
   - bringing faculty and students into conversation with the ancient, modern, and contemporary thinkers who have shaped our intellectual and spiritual heritage

2) **Where are these learning outcomes published? Be specific.** (Where are the department's expected learning outcomes for its Core courses accessible: on the web, in the catalog, or in your department handouts?)

   The learning outcomes of the various core areas served by Perspectives can be found at the Core Requirements and Courses web page, as well as the web sites of the relevant departments. The mission of Perspectives, as well as narrative descriptions of the contents of the four Perspectives courses, can be found at the Perspectives Program web site (https://www.bc.edu/bc-web/schools/mcas/departments/philosophy/undergraduate/perspectives-program.html). Descriptions of the Perspectives Program are also included in Core Office documentation connected to "Schedules of Distinction" courses.

3) **Other than GPA, what data/evidence is used to determine whether students have achieved the stated outcomes for the Core requirement?** (What evidence and analytical approaches do you use to assess which of the student learning outcomes have been achieved more or less well?)

   Every year, Perspectives Program assessment is collaboratively undertaken by the Perspectives Program faculty interpretations in workshops organized by the Director and Associate Director of Perspectives. This year the workshops were held May 18 to May 20.

   In addition, at the end of AY '21-'22 faculty were asked by the Perspectives Program Director to contribute to a program assessment of *Perspectives on Western Culture* (Perspectives I) by gathering a randomized selection of class essays written during the second semester by three students. In order to provide a genuinely random selection of assignments, faculty were asked to

submit anonymized essays by students #5, 10 and 20 from their rosters (or some equally randomized group, depending on class size). Accompanying assignment prompts were also requested. Assignments related to two core aims of the course were to be highlighted:

- Students will be able to understand the historical origins of values and principles that ground and are questioned in contemporary culture

- Students will be able to relate philosophical and theological inquiry to the enduring questions animating the broader liberal arts tradition.

The request for essays was sent in May of AY 22 to all twenty professors teaching Perspectives I in AY 21-22, consisting of full and part-time faculty from both Theology and Philosophy. Essays from five instructors, representing seven sections of the course (two instructors taught two sections; one instructor's second class was quite small so did not submit a full complement of papers), were submitted for a total of 19 essays. The group of faculty who provided essays for the assessment included three members of the Theology Department and two members of the Philosophy Department, including two tenured or tenure-track faculty, two professors of the practice and one part-time faculty member. Essay prompts were provided by only four of the instructors, thus three essays were not connected to a specific paper prompt.

The 19 essays used for the assessment represent an array of assignment types and essay formats. Assignment types included 1) exposition or basic analysis of a text, 2) application of a course text or theme to analyze a contemporary ethical issue, 3) open-ended research into the work of one author, using primary and secondary sources, and 4) exploration of a major course theme through the lens of a text or author. Essays varied in length from 1100-2200 words (generally 3-4 or 6-8 pages essays).

4) **Who interprets the evidence? What is the process?** (Who in the department is responsible for interpreting the data and making recommendations for curriculum or assignment changes if appropriate? When does this occur?)

The Director (Chris Constas) and Associate Director (Kerry Cronin) of Perspectives reviewed the submitted assignments.

5) **What were the assessment results and what changes have been made as a result of using this data/evidence?** (What were the major assessment findings? Have there been any recent changes to your curriculum or program? How did the assessment data contribute to those changes?)

All the assignments were well-constructed instruments with respect to the identified learning goals. Student responses were variable in quality, of course, but all reflected at least a satisfactory understanding of the material.

The submitted essays all demonstrated the high level of engagement with texts and ideas we would expect to find in a rigorous, 12 credit course. It is clear that students were attempting to develop robust theses and sought to make clear use in essays of both overarching course themes and specific text references.

Most, though not all, students made regular and thoughtful use of texts to support their central arguments, illustrating clearly the course's goal that students "will be able to relate philosophical and theological inquiry to the enduring questions animating the broader liberal arts tradition." For instance, one essay engages Girard's scapegoating mechanism in an analysis of Jim Crow laws in the US and later Civil Rights activism:

> While Girard doesn't speak of scapegoating in the context of the Civil Rights Movement, he does in regards to religion, stating "...the scapegoating mechanism was accepted and justified, on the basis that it remained unknown. It brought peace back to the community at the height of the chaotic mimetic crisis" (Girard, *Evolution and Conversion*, 83). Clearly, scapegoating was occurring through the subjugation of the Black population, but the reasons as to why it was occurring were not known by the Whites, a central need for scapegoating for it to work. The White leaders of the confederate states needed to exercise their anger over the loss of the war, and instead of blaming each other or their leadership, they were able to persecute the population of Black people living in their state.

Another student connects the work of Rousseau with contemporary issues in biotechnology:

> Rousseau's Discourse on the Origins of Inequality considers just how mankind evolved from an equal state of nature to the very much stratified society that exists in modern times. Rousseau explains that in a state of nature men are equal because they cannot specialize:
>> Is there a man with strength sufficiently superior to mine and who is, moreover, sufficiently depraved, sufficiently lazy and sufficiently ferocious to force me to provide for his subsistence while he remains idle? He must resolve not to take his eyes off me for a single instant, to keep me carefully tied down while he sleeps, for fear that I may escape or that I would kill him. (Discourse on the Origin of Inequality)
> Rousseau's theories about the basic equality of men in nature, however, fall apart when the problem of genetic engineering is applied. Indeed, it may very well be possible to create an individual through genetics that can, without any societal support, establish dominion over a man. How would Rousseau contend with a genetically engineered supersoldier dropped into his environment of savage men? He would likely conclude that equality between two things that aren't fundamentally the same is impossible.

Many of the essays included very successful and high-level assessments of the central arguments of texts and ideas from the course, thus addressing a core aim of the course: Students "will be able to understand the historical origins of values and principles that ground and are questioned in contemporary culture." For instance, one essay includes an analysis of Locke's assertion of the proper limits of judicial powers:

> Individuals derive their judicial power "by the right…of preserving all mankind" and exercise it solely for restraint and reparation (Second Treatise of Government 2, 11), differentiating between punishments for murderers – criminals whom Locke thinks "noxious" to mankind (Second Treatise of Government 2, 10) – and lesser offenders, whose punishments are designed merely to "give an ill bargain to the offender, cause him to repent, and terrify others from doing the same" (Second Treatise of Government 2, 8). The community even recognizes the particular right of the victim to seek restitution for his/her loss (Second Treatise of Government 2, 10). In other words, Locke establishes a state of nature in which individuals have an innate notion of not only whether they should exact justice, but of the ways in which they should and of the criminals on whom they

should. Because of this view, Locke challenges the notion that government improves upon the natural conception of justice.

Several prompts invited students to bring thinkers from the course into conversation, identifying interdisciplinary points of connection across eras. Student essays illustrated students' remarkable capacity for thinking flexibly through the curriculum:

> In the following paragraphs, I will illustrate why Marx's communism is unsustainable according to Fred's theory of the displaceability of the libido and Thanatos.

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> According to philosopher Thomas Hobbes, the state of nature for humans is the state of war. Since humans are innately selfish, naturally humans will be against each other and will compete with one another. This overlaps with Girard's mimetic crisis in society, in which a state of distrust and a state of all against all will ensue. According to Hobbes, the state of nature consists of a violent competition where humans have the right to everything and they do not have to consider the interests of others. In this sort of society, the only way humans can peacefully coexist is if there is a common superior power that can control them all. This type of view regarding human nature is cynical yet realistic. As a result, adopting a Hobbesian mindset will result in a more effective solution than the scapegoat mechanism because it will prevent further scapegoating from emerging.

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> Kierkegaard's thinking develops in opposition to that of Hegel: Hegel affirms the primacy of essence over existence: essence, concept and thought have primacy over concrete existence. The individual man has value only if he belongs to a whole: he is simply an instrument in the hands of the absolute spirit that guides history. For Kierkegaard the primacy belongs to the individual man: existence comes before essence, concept and thought. The individual is an end in itself, it has its own meaning regardless of belonging to a group, be it the state or history of men in general. Each man is a single, unique and unrepeatable who has value in himself. Hegel's philosophy sees history as necessary events: everything that happens - including wars and crimes - is necessary for the realization of a superior harmony (which also justifies evil). For Hegel what is real is also rational, so that nothing is accidental but everything has a cause. In this perspective, the whole life of man is predetermined to the realization of the absolute spirit: in other words, man, during his life, is not free but follows a script written by others. Kierkegaard doesn't agree with this concept: he places freedom and possibility at the center. Man is free to choose between several options, that is, to freely determine his own life: Hegel's need is thus replaced with the possibility of choice.

Two instructors' assignments required students to engage contemporary scholarship in the fields of Theology, Philosophy and Contemporary Ethics:

> Plato contributed to Augustine's ideas of God as a savior. He theorized that to overcome evil, we must have love and acceptance. However, Augustine developed Plato's idea with the need for faith as a means of overcoming evil (Cary 25). To Augustine, evil is refusing to see things for what they actually are. It is a perversion of the will because humans choose the lesser good. "Bondage comes as one's pride leads to self-love in the form of the pursuit of carnal delights, and one's

curiosity adds to the viciousness of the situation by deceiving the soul into thinking that there is no other alternative" (Lee 58). Augustine's own will betrays him in unknowingly seeking out God in the material world. The only way Augustine could overcome this harmful cycle is by developing humility and admitting that he's compulsive and that he needs God to save him from his will.

Unlike God, who is immutable, these goods, according to Augustine, are mutable and should not be loved in the same way that God is loved. Augustine was guilty of this, and asked himself why he, " approved of the beauty of bodies, whether celestial or terrestrial, and what justification [he] had for giving an unqualified judgement on mutable things" He also claimed that, "My sin consisted in this, that I sought pleasure, sublimity, and truth not in God but in his creatures, in myself and other created beings" As one scholar describes, "We confuse mutable for immutable goods, drawn as we are to objects of beauty that are finite and contingent in our restless quest for enduring happiness," and in this quest for happiness, "evil arises"[7] People have an innate desire to be happy and to seek happiness in their lives, and in doing so, people often confuse goods with material value rather than appreciate where those goods come from, which is God. In that sense, people put love into material goods, mutable goods, instead of the immutable force that enabled those material goods to be, God.

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In the article, they say "they would engineer a bacteria that could insert its DNA into the targeted rice plant embryos"…"this process… would introduce all the genes necessary at once' (178). With that new technology, genes and DNA become irrelevant as any combination can be crafted to create something entirely different. Children no longer would look or act like their parents and people would become nothing more than a science experiment rather than a gift of life. This technology would make society no longer into a human reproductive system but just society all created in a lab erasing diversity and longevity of DNA. Science has long been a topic to philosophers. Philosophers who long question everything, much of what they think about cannot be proven by science but are rather theories. This being said does not mean that science is false or bad. For Descartes, science is a good thing and should be trusted by the public. For him, science is the way to advance and it takes the public's trust for it to work. For Descartes, progress in science would never work if people allow their minds to be clouded by what other people think or have taught.

We anticipate no changes to the curriculum in response to these findings.

6) **Date of the most recent program review.** (Your latest comprehensive departmental self-study and external review.)

Perspectives was last reviewed as part of the Philosophy Department review undertaken in Spring 2010.