To: Task Force on Graduate Education Program Assessments  
Cc: Provost Loh, Dean Keller, Dean Maxson, Dean Curto

The Department of Philosophy is extremely disappointed, and, frankly, puzzled by its ranking of “good” in the Task Force’s assessment of its program. In its description of the department, the Task Force accurately refers to the department’s “excellence in research and teaching,” its “high quality and productive scholars,” the “high quality” of its graduate student applicant pool, and the “strong reputation the department enjoys amongst its peers.” Such praise surely suggests that our program should have been evaluated at least as “high quality.”

The only hint of negativity in the report is its focus on TTD and completion rate. Our TTD compares very well to even the most prestigious philosophy programs in the nation, and most all other humanities programs at the University of Iowa. Even so, since 2005 we have implemented dramatic changes designed to improve TTD. With the support of SIF funds, we now offer summer pre-comp fellowships to all students who have completed their second year. Of the ten students who have received those fellowships, all are currently on track to graduate in 5 years. We have also worked hard to intensify our monitoring of graduate student progress with a view to improving our completion rate of 44% (misreported as 42%, but 55% if a slightly longer time frame is used). The Task Force may have misunderstood the purpose of our sixth-year letter. That letter puts students beyond their fifth year on probation and warns them of impending termination. We also conduct an annual review of all of our students, give them a report each year on their progress, and meet individually with any student whose progress (towards a 5-year degree) is judged to be inadequate.

If the Task Force put an emphasis on the Department’s relatively small size in denying it the evaluation it deserved, the mistake would be truly egregious. The whole point of an unbiased evaluation of graduate programs is to see which have a history of excellence that warrants support of their growth. In this context it would be clearly inappropriate to hold the small size of an excellent program against it in denying it a stronger evaluation.

The Task Force mistakenly characterizes the department’s focus as ethics and value theory, and the history of philosophy. The department has been primarily known for the past 70 years for its influence in the fields of metaphysics and epistemology. It is also perplexing that the Task Force predicts that the department will not have hiring opportunities in the near future. The College of Liberal Arts, in consultation with the Executive Committee, authorized in the Spring of 2008 two searches for the Department (one to take place in 2008-09; the other, in 2009-10). That decision obviously recognized the outstanding quality of the department and its need to counter the retirements of the last several years that have unacceptably reduced its size. This positive evaluation of the Department is reinforced by the fact that in its assessment of Philosophy for the Task Force, the College gave it a 4 on its 5 point scale, an evaluation well above average. Although in the context of the recent economic crisis our searches were put on hold, the Department was told by Dean Curto as recently as December, 09 that when the financial situation of the university improved, we would in all likelihood be reallocated a line.

We know that the Central Administration has an agenda that includes trying to create synergies by combining small departments into divisions. The Task Force explicitly echoes this idea in referring to a “synergy” that might result from Philosophy’s collaboration with Religious Studies and Classics. Philosophy has a long history of working with colleagues across the University (in such diverse fields as Physics, Psychology, Neurology, History, Political Science, Economics, Law, Music, Medicine, Classics, Sociology, Anthropology, and Religious Studies). But these collaborations arise naturally out of individual research programs. Philosophy needs and deserves genuine support. With very few additional resources Philosophy can make impressive gains in its already strong national and international reputation. One cannot substitute for those resources the hope that some sort of synergy would emerge from imposing yet another administrative layer over what could only be a random grouping of Philosophy and other departments with radically different research and teaching missions.

We strongly request that the Task Force reconsider its evaluation of Philosophy’s graduate program.