ABOUT THE DEPARTMENT

Philosophy—traditionally at the center of the liberal arts—asks some of the most difficult and searching questions about human existence, the nature of the universe, right and wrong in human conduct, and the basis of our social and political arrangements.

PURPOSE

The courses of the Department of Philosophy and Religion have four main purposes:

- To acquaint the student with some of the great philosophical questions of the past and present and with leading attempts to answer them
- To exhibit the connections between philosophy and such related areas as art, business, law, literature, medicine, science, religion, and the environment
- To develop the student’s capacities for clear thinking, critical analysis, and effective articulation/expression
- To provide the basis for reflecting on right versus wrong and good versus evil in the present-day world

WHAT CAN I DO WITH A PHILOSOPHY MAJOR?

- **Graduate School:** When it comes to Graduate Record Exam scores for admission to graduate programs, philosophy students do notably well. Philosophy majors consistently score the highest of all majors on the verbal as well as the analytic writing portions of the GRE.

- **Law School:** Philosophy and religion undergraduates consistently perform remarkably well on the standard Law School Admission Test. Law professors from top schools have noted a connection between early success in law school and having majored in such fields as philosophy, literature, mathematics, and physics.

- **Business School**

- **Medical School:** For admission to medical school, people often assume that science majors have the run of the field. The American Medical Student Association reports that philosophy majors have the highest medical school acceptance rate among all majors at around 50%, surpassing even physics (42%) and biochemistry (43%), and topping biology (35%) and chemistry majors (39%) by double-digit percentages. (Science majors apply and get into schools in much higher total numbers, but the percentages indicate one’s chances.)

  This, of course, does not mean one gets into medical school by taking only philosophy courses. But it might suggest that philosophy trains (and maybe attracts) people in ways that offer a critical edge in admissions processes.

OXFORD SEMINAR

Students of the Philosophy and Religion Program, in partnership with the Institute for Religion, Politics and Culture, have been going on the Oxford Research Seminar.

Usually revolving around a theme in religion and politics, the seminar takes place over ten days at Oxford University in England at the end of June, while Oxford undergraduates are still in session. The program includes the opportunity to be taught by and work one-on-one with Oxford faculty. Students have obtained ample funding from a variety of sources.

PHI SIGMA TAU

The Club is an umbrella organization for our local chapter of Phi Sigma Tau, the National Honor Society in Philosophy. Membership in “Tau” is open to anyone in the upper 35% of his or her class who has completed any three courses in philosophy or religion with a B+ average in those three courses. Both non-majors and current majors are eligible. Membership is honorary and carries no obligation beyond the application process.

THESIS

In addition to the ten required courses, each philosophy major must complete the Senior Capstone Experience (SCE), which takes the form of a senior thesis. Majors will work in close association with a department mentor; those majors who do successfully complete the SCE will receive four credits toward graduation.
**WHY PHILOSOPHY AND RELIGION AT WASHINGTON COLLEGE?**

1. **Why Study Philosophy?**

   Philosophy comes from the Greek for “love of wisdom” (philosophia). Philosophy—traditionally at the center of the liberal arts—examines life’s fundamental questions. What is ultimately real? Who am I? What can I know? How do I decide right and wrong? Is there an ideal society? Philosophers use creative and analytical thinking to inquire into these foundational problems about reality, knowledge, values, meaning, and society.

   Most students of philosophy enjoy philosophy for its own sake. Life has a way of raising ultimate questions. Philosophy taps into the pleasures of the life of the mind. It is a conversation with the world’s most influential thinkers: Socrates, Aristotle, Aquinas, Locke, Kant, Marx, and Nietzsche. Philosophy affects all other disciplines. It investigates connections among art, literature, law, medicine, business, psychology, science, religion, politics, and the environment.

2. **Why Study Religion?**

   Religion as a field examines spiritual beliefs, teachings, practices, and worship. Courses in religion feature in-depth study of world religions and religious movements.

   Religion opens the mind to a world of possibilities beyond the natural order. The study of religion fosters an appreciation for spiritual inquiry as well as respect for different religious traditions. Religious themes animate much of Western intellectual history, literature, and politics. Students in religion courses frequently use the opportunity to inquire into their own beliefs.

---

**Laura Reiter ’10**

*International Studies and Philosophy majors, East Asian Studies minor/concentration*

Current job: Publishing Technology Specialist, Federal Reserve Board

"As an undergraduate, I never imagined that I would end up going in publishing, but, given my experiences at Washington College, maybe I shouldn’t have been surprised. Where else can an undergrad work on half a dozen different publications before their senior year? After graduation, I went overseas to teach English for a year and, when I was preparing to come back home, I applied for an internship with an association in Washington, D.C. They had several open intern positions and, after one look at my résumé, placed me in publications. Four months later, I had a full-time job in publishing.

Almost everyone in my department has a degree in English, but working for an academic publisher means talking to authors about more than grammar. We publish texts spanning the social sciences and humanities, so, now, I’m helping to create the same kinds of books that were on my syllabi in college. All of those classes in political science, economics, and philosophy, and, more importantly, the skills that I learned from them, have helped me in ways that I did not expect. Then again, is there an industry where being able to read and write critically, ask the right questions, and state your position clearly is not an asset? Those, for me, are the most important takeaways from the Washington College education.”