How Data May (Mis-)Represent Outcomes for Philosophy Majors and What You Can Do About It -- NOTE: time-sensitive action item below, Dec. 30, 2014 deadline

Philosophers need to respond quickly to inaccurate statistical data concerning the success of philosophy majors (Action Items after a short explanation).

Significant sources of data used by researchers studying U.S. higher education and outcomes for undergraduate majors are

- **National Center for Education Statistics (NCES)**
  distinguishes "philosophy" as a subfield within a general category "philosophy & religious studies." But, often the aggregated general category is used in research.

- **American Community Survey (ACS)**
  ACS uses NCES codes and may or may not combine philosophy and religious studies majors. (If I get explanation on this, I'll post update on my website.)

- **National Survey of College Graduates (NSCG, conducted by NSF)**
  NSF combines philosophy and religious studies majors in NSCG.

Even when a data set distinguishes philosophy and religious studies majors, for consistency (comparing apples to apples) researchers working with multiple data sets aggregate data, combining philosophy and religious studies.

A more detailed explanation of the different data sources and their uses is available on my website [http://www.kathwallace.com/institution.html](http://www.kathwallace.com/institution.html)

Take-away point:
Research on student outcomes is widely disseminated, reported on publicly, and affects both student (and parent) perception of desirable or acceptable major and how university administrations decide funding and program priorities.

If we want researchers to use disaggregated data and treat philosophy as a distinct major, then data collectors need to consistently process philosophy and religious studies as distinct majors. (See Action Items for how to contact them about this.)

Many suspect that philosophy majors do better than religious studies (and many other) majors. But as long as the data is aggregated, we have no idea.

Action Items:

1. **Contribute a comment about ACS: DEADLINE of December 30, 2014!**
   ACS is proposing to eliminate Question 12, the question that asks for the respondent’s undergraduate major.
The Public Comment Period **ends on Dec. 30, 2014.** Tell ACS to process and report Question 12 with *disaggregation* of philosophy and religious studies; the majors should be processed, coded and reported as distinct majors.¹

**Here’s where you go to comment on ACS Question 12:**

2. **Contact NSF** about distinguishing philosophy as a field of study from religion and theology. *The NSCG project director is John Finamore, jfinamor@nsf.gov* Maybe even ask your science colleagues to do the same.

3. Ask the APA how you can help it, as a national organization, to address the issue of accurate and meaningful categories of information with the agencies that collect and distribute the source data

4. Counter reports in the media. Comment on the article or write to the reporter or a letter to the editor of the local newspaper. Contact the researchers mentioned in an article, etc. to raise a question about or point out the potential problem with aggregated data

5. Talk and/or write to social science and higher education researchers about the issue; maybe there are researchers at your own institution who work on higher education; maybe your institution has an institutional research office -- how does it collect data, e.g., how are surveys of alumni worded to distinguish between majors? how does it aggregate (or not) data that it collects and reports? Is your institution, your department doing a good job of accurately gathering, compiling and disseminating data?

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¹ See Mervis, Can Question 12 Survive? at AAAS’s Science Magazine, 13 November 2014
http://bit.ly/1y5gXIP