

Advice for Philosophy Undergrads from Underrepresented Groups

We asked philosophers...

What advice would you give to underrepresented groups who are considering graduate study in philosophy?

To undergraduates from underrepresented groups who are considering graduate study in philosophy: I want to encourage you to recognize that, while it will not always feel like it, you are in a unique position to do good philosophy. And you can do it! But not only that, you are in a unique position to make socially and morally significant progress in the field. In fact, that progress cannot happen without your participation. Philosophy needs you! And come as you are. Do not shy away from sharing your culture and identity with your colleagues. Learn from others who are successful, but do not emulate them. Do not be afraid of letting your background and experiences drive and inspire your work. Know that your participation is valuable. Stay light-hearted. Work hard. And above all, be yourself.

Tamara Fakhoury, tmf05@live.unc.edu

Fourth-year Graduate Student at UNC Chapel Hill (TA/RA)

*AOS/AOC: Normative Ethics (esp. Kantian ethics), History of Ethics, Political Philosophy, Feminism
Education: BA (philosophy), American University of Beirut; MA (philosophy), University of North Carolina Chapel Hill*

The best bit of advice I have ever received regarding a career in philosophy is to (1) Do the work, and (2) trust the process. I believe this holds especially true for individuals from underrepresented groups in philosophy because it is often difficult to get to the first step because of the walls built in front of us. Know that you always have someone out there in the field that will support you. Most importantly: don't be afraid to contact philosophers whose work you are interested in. Contacting people is the best way to get your foot in the door and realize that you can be supported.

Rebecca Victoria Millsop, rvm@mit.edu

Doctoral Candidate at Massachusetts Institute of Technology

Visiting Research Fellow at Brown University

*AOS/AOC: Aesthetics & Philosophy of Art, Philosophy of Logic & Mathematics, Metaphysics / Social & Political Philosophy, Ethics, History (Esp. Kant)
Education: Two years at San Francisco Art Institute; studied philosophy at Community College of San Francisco before transferring; BA (philosophy), University of California Berkeley*

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In the field of philosophy, a person from an underrepresented group often times has to prove or provide evidence that they are not philosophically inept. This is one result of the systematic exclusion of those groups from the philosophical tradition. Therefore, underrepresented students will not mesh like other students because the system in place created and continues a type of systematic division.

With this system in place, underrepresented students have to attack graduate school with an athletic vigor to combat the system. Contesting the system means, (1) You cannot sit back and wait for things to happen like other students you have to search for a mentor, find an advisor, consult a writing specialist, etc. (2) You will always be a minority (i.e. Black, Spanish, LGBTQIA) and people will believe that is why your university accepted you and why they gave you a scholarship, fellowship, or teaching assistantship. (3) Know that hard work is not enough. Go to a school where you can study and research alongside at least one professor that is a 'giant' in your area of focus. This will greatly aid in your development and future aspirations. Since the focus of most underrepresented students is not seen as essential to the philosophical tradition, you will need this giant's help to propel your career. (4) Goal setting is essential. Graduate school is long and without small goals you can get bogged down, depressed and/or dropout. Here are some examples of small goals: read 1 extra article per class each week, visit each of your philosophy professors in their office twice a semester, schedule something fun at least once a week. (5) Try to find other minorities to share your experiences with. Knowing that you are not alone is key to success. (6) Buy and read Dr. Hawley's book *Being Bright Is Not Enough*. It is *the* guide for future graduate students.

Dwight Lewis, [dwightlewis@mail.usf.edu](mailto:dwrightlewis@mail.usf.edu)

Third-year PhD Student, University of South Florida

AOS/AOC: Race, Religion, Social Philosophy, Earlier Modern (centered around the Reformation time period), Black philosophers in the Third Republic of France

Education: BA (religious studies & spiritual thought), Wheaton College; taught theology and coached football at The Master's Academy preparatory school in Florida

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I think it's important for undergrads from underrepresented groups to know that they will face challenges inside academia that are akin to those they are used to facing outside of it. Many come in thinking that the profession is full of liberal-minded individuals who have evolved beyond the race and gender issues that plague the general populace. Unfortunately, this is not the case. So having an awareness of that can help many of them prepare mentally (and spiritually) for this.

I also want to stress the importance of building up networks. Students from this demographic often experience feelings of alienation from being the only person of color, for example, in classroom or conference settings. Thus, building a strong network can help to counteract some of those experiences, or at least provide a support system.

Lastly, I would encourage them not to confuse philosophizing with activism. A sound piece of advice my colleague Bill Lawson always reiterates to minority students is to think of philosophy as a job. If we weren't working as philosophers we would most surely have to work as something else to make ends meet. Thinking of philosophy in this way, rather than as ground-zero for changing the world might provide members of this demographic with more realistic, more manageable expectations of the discipline.

Luvell Anderson, Indrsn14@memphis.edu
Assistant Professor of Philosophy, University of Memphis

AOS/AOC: Philosophy of Language, Philosophy of Race
Education: BA (philosophy), University of Missouri St. Louis; PhD (philosophy), Rutgers University

Don't be hesitant to reach out to potential mentors that may share a social identity or background that is similar to yours in relevant ways, even if they are not at your university.

Joseph Stramondo, jstramondo@sdsu.edu
Assistant Professor of Philosophy, San Diego State University

AOS/AOC: Bioethics, Feminist Philosophy, Disability Studies, Social-Political Philosophy, Normative Ethics, Moral Psychology
Education: BA (philosophy), Trinity College (Hartford, CT); MA (public policy studies), Trinity College (Hartford, CT); PhD (philosophy), Michigan State University

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It's crucial to start building your community—in your graduate program, your local neighborhood or city, and in your discipline. Graduate school can be very insular and demanding. You might be tempted to do armchair philosophizing, by yourself, in your apartment. But it is really the relationships you develop at conferences, workshops, social events, and local outreach initiatives that nourish you—especially for those of us who are underrepresented. So get involved. Talk to people about your work. And allow yourself and your thinking to be supported and transformed.

Perry Zurn, pzurn@american.edu

Assistant Professor of Philosophy and Religion at American University

*AOS/AOC: Social & Political Philosophy, Ethics, Contemporary Continental Philosophy, History of Philosophy
Education: MA (philosophy), Miami University; PhD (philosophy), DePaul University*

Putting together a group of mentors early on in your graduate career can be a good strategy for everyone, but especially graduate students who are members of one or more underrepresented groups. Sometimes it can be isolating and overwhelming to be the only member of a particular under-represented group in your department or cohort, and it may not be possible before you start graduate school to know what the particular issues might be at your institution. Talking to graduate students and faculty in the department before enrolling is often helpful, but many times people may not want to fully disclose what it is like to be a member of an under-represented group in that department. Cultivating mentors with a variety of perspectives and vantage points from within your discipline is helpful, of course, but it is also useful to consider mentors outside of philosophy, especially if you are a member of an under-represented group that has very small numbers in philosophy. Finding others who have managed to navigate similar challenges and frustrations can be helpful not just in affirming that it is indeed possible to become a philosopher despite obstacles and frustrations (you knew this!), but for learning approaches that have borne success, as well as what hasn't worked as well.

Teresa Blankmeyer Burke, teresa.burke@gallaudet.edu

Associate Professor of Philosophy, Gallaudet University

*AOS/AOC: Ethics, Philosophy of Disability
Education: BA (biology/philosophy), Mills College; MA/PhD (philosophy), University of New Mexico*