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## Using Focus Groups to Explore the Underrepresentation of Female-Identified Undergraduate Students in Philosophy

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# Using Focus Groups to Explore the Underrepresentation of Female-Identified Undergraduate Students in Philosophy

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### Abstract

This paper is part of a larger project designed to examine and ameliorate the underrepresentation of female-identified students in the philosophy department at Elon University. Here, we provide a description and analysis of our focus group research. We ran three focus groups of female-identified undergraduate students: one group consisted of students who had taken more than one philosophy class, one consisted of students who had taken only one philosophy class, and one consisted of students who had taken no philosophy classes. We find evidence that: (1) one philosophy class alone did not cultivate a growth mindset among female-identified students of philosophy, (2) professors have the potential to ameliorate (or reinforce) students' (mis)perceptions of philosophy; and (3) students who have not taken philosophy are likely to see their manner of thinking as being at odds with that required by philosophy. We conclude by articulating a series of questions worthy of further study.

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**Keywords:** underrepresentation, female-identified students, focus groups, philosophy

## Introduction

This paper is part of a larger project designed to examine and ameliorate the underrepresentation of female-identified students in the philosophy department at Elon University.<sup>2,3</sup> Our two-year project was conducted by a research team consisting of three faculty members of our philosophy department and three undergraduate philosophy majors.

Elon University is a private, mid-size (approximately 5,000 students), primarily undergraduate university located near Burlington, North Carolina. Elon's class of 2019 is 19% nonwhite and has roughly 60% female-identified students and 40% male-identified students (Elon University 2016a). Elon is socioeconomically homogeneous, with only 9% of students receiving need-based Federal Pell Grants (Groves 2015a). Additionally, most of the students identify as heterosexual. Elon also has a high percentage of students in fraternities or sororities (about 40% of the student body, [*Pendulum* 2015]). In our experience, Elon's student body has a very polite culture; students often hesitate to take public positions on issues, and fitting in socially is valued enormously. There is very little activism or student protest (Groves 2015b); further, student activities are closely monitored by university staff—for instance, at the time of our conducting this study, all flyers must be submitted by a university-recognized student organization and then approved by university staff (Elon University 2016b). Our department consists of seven full-time faculty members who, despite adopting a variety of approaches, are united by their commitment to philosophy as a lived practice.

We began investigating our department as conversations about the underrepresentation of women sprang up in philosophy departments worldwide (see Baron, Dougherty, and Miller 2015; Goddard et al. 2008; and Beebee and Saul 2011). That women have been wildly underrepresented in philosophy in the United States at every level at and above introductory classes is beyond dispute.<sup>4</sup> Paxton,

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<sup>2</sup> For more information about our project, procedures, and findings, see [http://www.elon.edu/e-web/academics/elon\\_college/philosophy/DIP.xhtml](http://www.elon.edu/e-web/academics/elon_college/philosophy/DIP.xhtml).

<sup>3</sup> Throughout this paper, we use the term “female-identified” to mean students who self-identify as female. When referencing the work of others, we adopt their terminology (often, “woman”).

<sup>4</sup> Despite being more likely to earn a bachelor's degree (Bureau of Labor Statistics 2016), women comprise only about 40% of the enrollment in introductory

Figdor, and Tiberius find that “the proportion of females reliably decreases as one moves through each level in the academy, from introductory courses through the faculty population” (2012, 952).<sup>5</sup> Much of the drop-off of female participation in philosophy occurs between the introductory course level and the decision to become a philosophy major. Kathryn Norlock, citing the work of Paxton, Figdor, and Tiberius (2012), calls this the “intro-major cliff” (Norlock 2012, 347).

The Elon philosophy department is no exception to this international trend of female underrepresentation. A numerical breakdown of Elon’s intro-major cliff from 2011 to 2014 reveals that while our introductory classes are 48% female-identified students, only 38% of our majors identify as female.

Before undertaking efforts to recruit female-identified students, we wanted to ensure that our department was a space where female-identified students felt well-served and respected; without such assurance, we would run the moral risk of increasing the proportion of female-identified students in an academic context that could potentially harm them. To learn more about female-identified students’ experiences, we first surveyed a large, gender-diverse sample of Elon’s student body about their perceptions of the philosophy department (Cahill et al., in preparation). Using the data we gathered from the survey, we then conducted focus groups (hereafter FG) with female-identified students, the results of which we discuss in this paper. With these FGs, we hoped to (1) expand upon what we learned from the survey and (2) find new, more specific, and detailed information that might explain low recruitment and retention of female-identified students that we could not have gleaned from our survey.

Though the literature on the underrepresentation of women in philosophy has been growing recently, much of it offers theoretical frameworks to explain the gap (Antony 2012; Calhoun 2009; Dotson 2012; Haslanger 2008) or quantitative evidence to explore the severity of the gap (Baron, Dougherty, and Miller 2015; Paxton, Figdor, and Tiberius 2012; Thompson et al. 2016). Qualitative data has only

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undergraduate philosophy courses and about 30% of undergraduate philosophy majors (Paxton, Figdor, and Tiberius 2012, 952–953). Further, the percentage of women in full-time postsecondary instructional positions was a mere 16.6 percent as of 2003 (US Department of Education 2008), and the percentage of tenure/tenure-track faculty at 98 of the top graduate programs for philosophy (as rated by the Philosophical Gourmet Report) includes only 23 percent women as of 2015 (Van Camp 2015; see Haslanger 2013 for further discussion on these final two statistics).

<sup>5</sup> For a broader review of the literature on female underrepresentation in philosophy, specifically regarding the two common models for conceptualizing this problem, see Antony 2012.

been gathered by one other researcher we could find: Crystal Nicole Lilith Aymelek conducted one-on-one interviews with women who were philosophy majors or had recently graduated with a philosophy major. Her goal was to identify the factors that encouraged them to stick with the subject (Aymelek 2015). Our paper, like Aymelek's, seeks to understand the gender gap "from the perspective of the actual experiences of women in philosophy" (8). Furthermore, since there is no published literature on FGs being conducted by other philosophy departments exploring female-identified students' underrepresentation, we thought this method of investigation would be especially fruitful and helpful to other philosophy departments as they continue their investigations.<sup>6</sup>

We begin this paper with a description of our methodology, including our strategy for recruiting participants, the structure of our FGs, some of the questions we asked students, and our method for coding the data. Next, we summarize the results of our coding procedure. Third, we discuss our results in relation to existing literature. We find evidence that for female-identified students, (1) one philosophy class alone did not cultivate a growth mindset among female-identified students of philosophy, (2) professors have the potential to ameliorate (or reinforce) students' (mis)perceptions of philosophy, and (3) students who have not taken philosophy are likely to see their manner of thinking as being at odds with that required by philosophy.

## **I. Methods**

Our FG methodology was informed by the survey we conducted, which was addressed to a gender-diverse sample of Elon's undergraduate student body. The survey data, to our surprise, did not reveal many significant differences in responses between gender groups or any reports of sexism or misogyny (Cahill et al., in preparation). Given this lack of significant gendered differences, we were interested to see if any new themes would emerge in student-guided conversations with female-identified students. We decided to have our FGs consist of only female-identified students because we were particularly interested in uncovering new insights into their experiences. Moreover, we thought that female-identified students would be more likely to speak candidly and frankly regarding their gendered experiences in a setting that did not include male-identified students or facilitators.

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<sup>6</sup> Although there is no published data on philosophy departments using focus groups, we know of one other department currently conducting them: Allyson Scott and Sidney Rodgers of Centre College have recently presented their findings from student-led FGs with female and male undergraduates in order to gauge women's perceptions of philosophy (Scott and Rodgers 2016).

The two female-identified, undergraduate members of our research team recruited for and facilitated the FGs. The exclusion of the faculty members (including one female-identified faculty member) of our research team in this phase of our research project was also intentional: we felt that FG participants would be more likely to convey forthright opinions about philosophy and our department with female-identified researchers whom they considered as their peers.<sup>7</sup>

### *Participants*

To recruit FG participants of all levels of undergraduate study, we asked instructors of general education classes if we could speak to the female-identified students in their classes. With the instructors' approval, we asked the non-female-identified students in each class to exit the room before beginning to recruit for our study. We recruited:

1. Five female-identified students who had taken more than one philosophy class or were currently taking their second philosophy class at Elon;
2. Four female-identified students who had taken only one philosophy class or were enrolled in their first philosophy class at Elon; and
3. Three female-identified students who had not taken a philosophy class and were not currently enrolled in a philosophy class at Elon.

While this is a lower participation rate than we had hoped for, the qualitative nature of this study allowed us to proceed; qualitative studies are intended to highlight participant voices, rather than draw statistically significant conclusions about a population (Gibbs 1997). Of course, it is possible that the samples were skewed; for instance, two students in FG 2 were in the same philosophy class and thus may have been more likely to agree with one another's experiences than if they had not been in the class together. Or students who had more positive experiences with their philosophy class may have been more likely to want to participate in the conversations. We hope to mitigate some of the effects of biased sampling by putting the FG results in conversation with extant departmental data on enrollment and grades, the survey results, and the existing literature on the underrepresentation of female-identified students in philosophy. Each method of research that our department undertook (data mining, surveying, and conducting

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<sup>7</sup> As Mills argues, oppressed groups might feel compelled to appease their oppressors: "Members of subordinate groups may judge it imprudent, given the power relations involved, to give an honest account of how they feel about things" (Mills 1998, 29). We hoped to avoid such power imbalances (and receive honest feedback) by having female-identified students conduct the FGs.

focus groups) offers a different type of knowledge, which, when combined, form a more coherent picture of the department's climate for female-identified students.

### *Procedure*

The FGs began with an introductory activity in which we asked participants to write down or draw what came to mind when they thought about philosophy, and then share their responses with the group. Next, we engaged them in a "Think-Pair-Share" activity, where participants first respond individually on paper to a set of questions, then discuss their responses with another participant, and, finally, share their combined insights with the entire group (originally developed in Lyman 1981). Following these introductory activities, we facilitated a large group discussion by asking participants a number of open-ended questions about their experiences in and perceptions of philosophy. While we tried to maintain consistency across groups for comparative purposes, we tailored some questions to specific groups.<sup>8</sup> Overall, the FGs were semi-structured (Longhurst 2010, 103)—though we had specific questions to address, casual conversation about these questions was encouraged.

### *Data Analysis*

Audio recordings were transcribed and then redacted of all identifying information in order to maintain confidentiality for participants. Further, any identifying information that students mentioned about their professors, classes, and/or peers was redacted from the transcripts.

We began our coding process by developing analysis questions (which are distinct from the questions we asked during the actual FGs; see the results section for our analysis questions). We then turned to the transcripts, searching for comments made by participants that related to our questions. To make sense of all the comments, we used *in vivo* coding, a qualitative data analysis technique that allows researchers to use participants' own voices to develop codes.<sup>9</sup> Codes are short descriptions of ideas present in a single data set; in our case, a single FG transcript. Codes capture the way data (that is, participants' comments) relate to analysis questions.<sup>10</sup> From these codes, we developed categories and themes through an iterative process involving constant comparison of data and discussion among our research team members (Glaser 2002). Categories consist of codes that

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<sup>8</sup> For a full list of our questions for each group, see the Appendix.

<sup>9</sup> While we acknowledge the impossibility of preventing preconceived notions from affecting our data analysis (especially because we are familiar with the literature), we followed the practice of using participants' own words to stay closer to the viewpoints presented during the FGs.

<sup>10</sup> For a more detailed explanation of coding, see Saldaña 2009.



appear within two data sets (two different FG transcripts, in our case) and themes consist of codes that appear within all data sets (all three FG transcripts, in our case). These unifying threads enable the researchers to interpret the data.<sup>11</sup>

## II. Results

We coded our transcripts for each FG (see Table 1) using three analysis questions:

1. With what mindset—fixed or growth—do students approach the topic of philosophy?
2. What are students' perceptions of the climate of
  - a. the classroom (professors, students, coursework)?
  - b. the major(s)?
  - c. the department?
  - d. philosophy in general?
3. What are factors (past and present) that influence students' decisions to take or not take philosophy?

With our first analysis question, we sought to explore the extent to which students in each FG demonstrated a fixed or growth mindset. Carol Dweck defines a *fixed mindset* as “believing that your qualities are carved in stone” (Dweck 2006, 6), whereas a *growth mindset* is “based on the belief that your basic qualities are things you can cultivate through your efforts” (7). That is, someone who exhibits a fixed mindset will believe that their qualities, such as doing philosophy well, are caused by genius or a given disposition toward critical thinking, as opposed to a process of learning and practice. We were curious about fixed versus growth mindset approaches to philosophy because there is some evidence in the literature to indicate that this is a gendered phenomenon (Buckwalter and Stich 2010, 32; Dweck and Gilliard 1975; Leslie et al. 2015).<sup>12</sup> That is, female-identified students are more likely to have a fixed mindset about whether they can succeed academically.

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<sup>11</sup> For further details on our methodology, see [http://www.elon.edu/e-web/academics/elon\\_college/philosophy/DIP.xhtml](http://www.elon.edu/e-web/academics/elon_college/philosophy/DIP.xhtml).

<sup>12</sup> It is worth noting that while the literature finds that women are more likely than men to exhibit a fixed mindset, in this FG, we could not investigate these differences as we did not interview male-identified students (and the FG methodology would not allow for such comparisons even if we had). Rather, here, we hope to investigate mindsets and their effects among female-identified students' experience with philosophy.

With our second analysis question, we investigated what students thought about the climate of various aspects of philosophy/our department, broadly understood. Haslanger, in a reflection on the culture of philosophy, writes that, in her experience, “it is very hard to find a place in philosophy that isn’t actively hostile toward women and minorities, or at least assumes that a successful philosopher should look and act [and talk] like a (traditional, white) man” (2008, 212). Specifically, Haslanger makes the point that the “schema”—that is, the common, intersubjective mental construct—of the discipline of philosophy and the figure of the philosopher align themselves against femininity (2008, 212–214). Building on Haslanger’s work regarding schemas, Calhoun (2009) argues that it is likely that undergraduates enter philosophy with conflicting woman/philosopher schemas. Calhoun suggests that this conflict makes it difficult for female-identified undergraduates to envision themselves as philosophers, even if they are interested in philosophy. Indeed, Calhoun (2009, 220) speculates that due to this conception of philosophy, even a single, not particularly egregious experience of sexism within an introductory class might lead a female-identified student to interpret that experience as “normatively representative” of philosophy as a whole (whereas students within more “feminine” disciplines might interpret similar experiences as exceptions within the discipline).

The third question gave us insight into the factors relevant in students’ choices to take, not take, or continue taking philosophy. This question interested us because it related to other studies addressing the intro-major cliff and retention rates of women in philosophy (Paxton, Figdor, and Tiberius 2012; Norlock 2012). When we considered the students who had never taken philosophy, this question gave us insight into the “pre-university effect,” described by Baron, Dougherty, and Miller (elaborating on Calhoun 2009) as an effect of many influences prior to university experience that contribute to a gender schema that makes it hard for women to see themselves as philosophy majors (2015, 468). The “pre-university” aspect of this effect is key since it highlights that even though many students do not have formal experience with philosophy prior to enrolling in their university, female-identified students are nevertheless likely to have a perception of themselves as incompatible with philosophy even before entering university. Though this phenomenon is framed in the literature as “pre-university effects,” we will also be thinking about these effects as extra-philosophic (see discussion section below).

The following analysis will be organized by analysis question. Each analysis question will be subdivided by FG and will end with a cross-FG analysis.

<b>Focus Group 1</b>	Five female-identified students who had taken <i>more than one</i> philosophy class or were enrolled in their <i>second</i> philosophy class
<b>Focus Group 2</b>	Four female-identified students who had taken <i>only one</i> philosophy class or were enrolled in their <i>first</i> philosophy class
<b>Focus Group 3</b>	Three female-identified students who had taken <i>no</i> philosophy classes

**Table 1: Focus Group Demographic Information**

**Question 1: With what mindset—fixed or growth—do students approach the topic of philosophy?**

*Question 1, Focus Group 1*

The students of FG 1 frequently expressed growth mindsets; of the 30 total statements coded as mindset statements, 25 (83%) indicated a growth mindset and five (17%) indicated a fixed mindset. In many cases, these statements expressed a conception of philosophy as requiring continual learning in order to be successful. For instance, students commented that the “learning never stops really for philosophy,” that you must “continue challenging yourself,” and that if “[you keep asking questions, then] you will succeed.” Students also indicated a belief that they had improved their philosophical skills, in comments such as, “[In philosophy, I] learned to defend my own positions,” and “I’ve had philosophy so I understand the reading.” Likewise, students saw their personal development as connected to their study of philosophy: “[I am] more open to critique and opposing arguments [after having taken philosophy]”; “[Philosophy] made me a more thoughtful person.”

Of the five instances in which students indicated a fixed mindset, most were oriented toward being innately good at philosophy. In one of these instances, a student mentioned her professor’s comment that she “had a knack” for philosophy and that she should keep taking philosophy classes. (We interpret “having a knack” as designating a student’s innate abilities.) In another case, a student saw her success as inevitable because she saw herself as a “curious person.” Overall, however, statements such as “anyone can succeed if they put their minds to it” are characteristic of FG 1.

### Question 1, Focus Group 2

The students of FG 2 expressed a mix of statements that indicated both growth and fixed mindsets. There were 15 statements coded as mindset-related, with six (40%) statements coded as growth mindset and nine (60%) coded as fixed mindset. Regarding growth mindsets, a few statements acknowledged that one could succeed in philosophy if one puts in significant effort (“Maybe if I *really* tried [I could succeed at philosophy]”; “If you're willing to at least think more broadly, you can succeed [in philosophy]”). Other statements alluded to similar sentiments, though the students suggested that their particular conditions made them not want to pursue philosophy (“If I [had] started over . . . in a lower level class [I could have seen myself continuing with philosophy]”).

The majority of codes for FG 2, however, indicated a fixed mindset. Two students remarked that they do not think in philosophic ways (“I’m just not a person who thinks in that way”; “I don't think in a religious or philosophical way”), whereas another said that she “just [doesn’t] tend to think as broadly or challenge critical thoughts as much.” A few statements made by FG 2 participants indicated a fixed mindset in favor of their philosophic ability. For instance, one student commented that she was “one of those people who will have discussions about [philosophy] and [who thinks] about it a lot,” indicating her predisposition towards philosophic thinking. Another commented that she “can succeed in philosophy because [she does] think about big things.” Lastly, a student suggested that there were insurmountable challenges to her success in her philosophy class saying, “There was no way I was going to succeed in the class I took.” On the whole, students of FG 2 conveyed a pessimistic attitude regarding their prospects for success in philosophy, even as they acknowledged that philosophy might be something that they could get better at.

### Question 1, Focus Group 3

The students of FG 3 expressed both fixed and growth mindsets regarding philosophy. Of the 12 statements that were coded as indicative of mindset, seven were fixed (58%) and five were growth (42%). Statements coded as growth mindset generally characterized philosophy as an activity that helps one think more critically or makes one smarter. For instance, one student recalled that when her friends took philosophy, it “really raised [her friends’] critical thinking levels.” Another suggested that philosophy would help her “intellectually” to be able to “understand how [other people] think and being able to . . . argue without losing.”

Statements that expressed a fixed mindset had varied themes. Some students simply commented that they would not succeed in philosophy, noting, “I like logic well enough too, I just don’t think I could wrap my head around so many different viewpoints and argue about each one.” Others believed that philosophy

required a type of thinking that they were simply not “capable” of. Another student had the “impression that maybe [philosophy is] not the right thing” for her.

An interesting distinction between “logical” and “intuitive” thinking emerged in FG 3. In particular, one statement, expressive of a fixed mindset, reads, “[My roommate] is very logical, which is why philosophy appealed to her, [whereas I am more of an intuitive thinker].” Another code, characterized as growth mindset, reveals a similar distinction: “I don’t think you’d have to work very hard to [persuade me to take a philosophy class]. I mean, I’m half-convinced to take one at some point, *simply because I want to be smart and be able to use logic rather than intuition*” (emphasis added).

#### *Question 1, Cross-Focus Group Analysis*

Across groups, it seems that the students of FG 1 were more likely to express growth mindsets (83%) than the students of FG 2 (40%) and FG 3 (42%). In particular, there were noticeably more references made to a certain “type of person” who thinks philosophically in the latter FGs than in the first FG.

### **Question 2: What are students’ perceptions of the climate of philosophy?**

#### *Question 2, Focus Group 1*

Overall, perceptions of philosophy’s climate among participants of FG 1 were quite positive. Students of FG 1 viewed philosophy and our department as a whole as being inclusive and welcoming, and/or taking steps toward becoming more inclusive and welcoming. For instance, when asked to give her general perceptions of philosophy during the icebreaker activity, one student thought of the words “creativity, inclusiveness, discovery, and truth,” explaining that “philosophy is very welcoming to a lot of different ideas and ways of approaching things,” while another participant thought of the words “ethics, community, challenging the norm, discussion, sharing of experience and argument.”

Likewise, when asked about the department, students spoke of feeling comfortable and welcome. One student said that she “never felt like anyone will judge [her],” while another mentioned that “as a first year, [she] met so many people in the philosophy department who were majors or who worked there . . . and [she] admired them.” Students further commented that “the [philosophy] professors . . . are really good at being inclusive,” and that they found the classes within the department to be egalitarian and democratic.

While perceptions of philosophy and the department were favorable, students reported finding the department’s curriculum and their peers in lower level classes to be unwelcoming, exclusive, and frustrating. One student said, “On a curricular level, inclusive is not a word I would choose,” and another noted that in

the many philosophy classes she had taken, aside from her feminist theory class, she had “only learned about male philosophers.” This was echoed in the icebreaker activity by one student who cited “Kant, Locke, Descartes, Hume, Aristotle, Plato, Socrates, Nietzsche, Buber” as the philosophers she thought of when she thought of philosophy. Students did report, however, that professors were encouraging to female-identified students, citing several times that specific professors encouraged them to pursue the topic further or asked to hear more women in the class speak.

Additionally, students in FG 1 reported feeling frustration in lower-level philosophy classes due to the perceived ignorance and apathy of their peers. There were four comments made to this effect, including, “There were lots of ignorant things that were said [in my lower-level class],” and “It’s really frustrating when [other students] didn’t care.” In contrast, they felt comfortable in upper-level classes and expressed dissatisfaction when they had to move from upper-level to lower-level classes.<sup>13</sup> One student, agreeing with another, described this transition as “the worst situation.”

Lastly, students of FG 3 mentioned three times that gender dynamics were *not* noticeable in the classroom. They reported that the sexism they did experience was exhibited by “other students in the class [not the professor],” and that often it is those students’ first experience with philosophy. Another student commented that “men tend to dominate the discussion to a point where it makes it, not purposefully, but [inadvertently] uncomfortable for other people.” Additionally, students wished that gender was a topic of conversation even when the material was not explicitly about women or gender.

### *Question 2, Focus Group 2*

In contrast to FG 1, perceptions of climate in FG 2 included positive perceptions of their peers and negative perceptions of their professors. There were nine comments made about pleasant interactions among students in the classroom, connoted by the use of words like “nice” and “respectful.” However, students also reported noticing that men dominated the class conversations “except for a selected couple [of women]” and that there were more men than women in their classes.

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<sup>13</sup> Within our department, there are no prerequisites for upper-level classes. Indeed, many students’ first philosophy class is upper-level. This seems to be the case with most of the students of FG 1. Yet, once these students decided to major in philosophy (after taking upper-level classes), they had to fulfill the major requirements by later moving “down” to lower-level classes.

Students' perceptions/experiences of their professors in FG 2 were either neutral or unfavorable.<sup>14</sup> Students reported seven times that professors did not allow disagreement with the professor's own opinions ("if it wasn't [professor's] opinion, it was wrong"), four times that professors were vocally opinionated (implying this was an undesirable quality with statements such as, "[My professor] was very opinionated and wasn't afraid of showing that"), and two times that professors dominated the conversation ("[My professor] always said it was student-led [discussion, but it was not]"). There were also seven comments made about professors playing favorites. One student hypothesized that her professor's favorites were "based on major" and made class "tough" for others. One student reported that she would not have called her professor sexist, but that she did feel that "the girls at the beginning of the semester had to have a little more weight behind what they said."

When asked about philosophy in general, students had a mix of positive and negative responses. Three comments were made about philosophy being intellectually stimulating, but two comments were made about it being confusing and difficult, and two comments were made indicating that philosophy was unfamiliar to the students even though they had taken a class. When asked during the icebreaker activity about philosophy, students said philosophy was "thought provoking and open to interpretation" but that it was also "confusing and difficult." The philosophers they cited included Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Hume, Machiavelli, Descartes, and Kant. No students expressed a desire to take more philosophy classes and one student even said that she had been planning to minor in philosophy, but that taking one class had dissuaded her from taking more.

### *Question 2, Focus Group 3*

Overall, participants of FG 3 made fewer comments about their perceptions of philosophy's climate than did the participants of the previous two FGs. Students were not familiar with the discipline or the department. Some comments indicated that students would be open to doing philosophy in the future (one student said that you "wouldn't have to work very hard" to persuade her to take a philosophy class), but some students felt that philosophy "wasn't for [them]." When asked about philosophy in general, students offered a range of responses. Three comments were made about philosophy being intellectually difficult and undesirable because of this difficulty (one student commented that when she thought of philosophy, she thought of "mind-screwings"). Two students talked about philosophy not being welcoming to them (one said it was because philosophy is

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<sup>14</sup> There were two students from the same class, which may have fueled this topic of discussion in ways that caused more codes about professors to emerge.

intimidating, and one mentioned that she thought men could relate better to the topic). When asked to cite some philosophers they knew during the icebreaker activity, the students in this FG replied with Socrates, Aristotle, Plato, and “those ancient Greek dudes” more generally.

Students did not have particularly strong perceptions about the philosophy majors except to say that they were good at arguing. The knowledge students did have about philosophy classes at Elon came from their friends who had taken philosophy before and had had positive experiences.

### *Question 2, Cross-Focus Group Analysis*

While common threads emerged throughout each individual FG, a cross-FG comparison did not yield many similar codes/code categories. Inclusivity was the most prevalent code in the first group. Positive perceptions of professors in the first FG contrasted with negative perceptions of professors in the second FG; and general unfamiliarity was most often mentioned in the third FG. One connection we found was that in both FGs 2 and 3, students perceived philosophy as difficult and confusing, but not in a way that was intellectually rewarding. Each FG did mention that philosophy is a male-dominated field, though it is worth noting that students were primed to consider gender (see Methods section).

### **Question 3: What are factors (past and present) that influence students’ decisions to take or not take philosophy?**

#### *Question 3, Focus Group 1*

Given recent discussion regarding pre-university factors that influence students’ decisions to take philosophy (Baron, Dougherty, and Miller, 2015), we were interested in what, if any, prior experience women in our FGs had with philosophy before taking their first class. Female-identified students of FG 1 equally reported having and not having pre-college experience with philosophy. One woman noted that she was not sure why she wanted to take philosophy, but that she “just felt it.” Other participants of FG 1 enrolled in their first class to fulfill either general studies or other requirements. Once in their first class, they reported being drawn to philosophy, either by the course material (one student) or the professor (three students). Interestingly, two students reported being drawn in by the same professor, who encouraged them by saying things like, “You have a knack for this,” or “Keep plugging away.” Nearly a third of our codes for why women were drawn to philosophy from our first FG refer to the influence of a single professor.

The female-identified majors of our first FG reported coming back for more philosophy because they “love it.” They found philosophy useful for their life goals, saying, “It was the only thing I felt was useful to me in many ways,” and “You come



back [to philosophy] when you learn why it's helpful." Two comments were made about the worth of philosophy: "I wanted to have more from a class than just a grade," and "I like that I'm spending my money on this [philosophy class]," indicating that students found philosophy worth much more than the money they pay for the class or the grade they receive at the end. One student reported that it encourages "the other side of [her] brain," while another said that "philosophy really encourages a much higher level of thinking and being creative." Two students related that philosophy left them with more questions "than when [they] came in and that interested [them]." One student in FG 1 spoke about the community established within the department, saying that "philosophy is kind of like a hidden gem on campus, and the people that are in it seem to be so much more like myself than anybody else on campus."

### *Question 3, Focus Group 2*

Of the codes describing why the women of FG 2 took their first philosophy class, 33% related to fulfilling requirements. Alternatively, one student reported enrolling because her friend enrolled, while another reported enrolling because she "was considering minoring in philosophy." Two reported being randomly placed in philosophy, and one student commented that she "ended up getting it because freshmen don't get good classes."

In regards to why they did not come back for more philosophy classes, nearly a third of the participants' responses indicate being deterred from further philosophy by their first professor and/or class. They commented that their professor was "very opinionated and [was not] afraid of showing that" and that "the professor sort of played favorites, which was tough." One further noted that had she "started at a lower level with a different professor, [she might] have taken more classes." Another third of students' responses indicated that if philosophy overlapped with their major more, they would take more classes. Lastly, one student commented that "as a communications major, I'm all for thinking differently and things like that, but I also like to have more concrete answers."

### *Question 3, Focus Group 3*

Participants of FG 3 reported not having thought about taking philosophy (four comments, or 29% of the codes), saying, "I guess I've never really thought about it. It's never been a conscious decision," and "I didn't consciously avoid it but I didn't consciously seek it out either." They otherwise noted not having time in their schedules for philosophy (six comments, or 43%). Others noted that were philosophy to fulfill more requirements or more directly relate to their courses of study, they might enroll in more classes. Lastly, one student noted that she has the perception that philosophy is "not the right thing for [her]."

### *Question 3, Cross-Focus Group Analysis*

There was only one category of codes that came up in all three FGs: philosophy's relation to Elon's general studies requirements. A small number of majors reported taking their first philosophy class to fulfill a requirement while some students who had never taken philosophy noted that if philosophy fulfilled more requirements, they might take a class.

There were several categories of codes that appeared between two of our three FGs. The first and second FGs revealed the influence of professors in either recruiting or deterring students. Many of our majors reported that they came back because a professor encouraged them to take more philosophy, while the students who had only taken one class reported that their negative experience with their professor deterred them from philosophy. Philosophy majors reported liking being left with more questions than answers, while students who took one class reported not enjoying the same experience. One woman in our first FG reported just "feeling" philosophy, while another in our last FG reported knowing intuitively that it is not right for her. Many participants of our second and third FGs noted that if philosophy related more directly to their major (such that they could receive credit toward their major requirements), they might have taken more philosophy.

### **III. Discussion**

In the following discussion, we contextualize our FGs by positioning what participants said within the existing literature on the underrepresentation of female-identified students in philosophy. We find evidence that one class alone did not cultivate a growth mindset in female-identified students, that professors have the potential to ameliorate (or reinforce) extra-philosophic effects, and that students who have not taken philosophy are likely to see their manner of thinking at odds with that required by philosophy.

#### *One class alone did not cultivate a growth mindset.*

Many members of Elon's philosophy department adopt a growth mindset-oriented approach to doing and teaching philosophy. For example, to cultivate a growth mindset, professors often assign drafts or scaffold paper assignments, and several faculty members explicitly describe philosophy as something students can (and likely will) get better at. Thus, it was our expectation (or perhaps our hope) that as students took more philosophy classes and were more exposed to this growth mindset approach to the subject, they would view philosophy as something at which they could improve. We consequently expected to encounter a few growth mindset responses from FG 3 participants, more growth mindset responses from FG 2 participants, and even more growth mindset responses from FG 1 participants.

Our data, however, showed that this was not the case. Although FG 1 had almost all growth mindset responses, this pattern did not hold for FGs 2 and 3. Participants of FG 3 made 42% growth mindset statements and participants of FG 2 made 40% growth mindset statements. In this case, there was not a significant mindset shift after students took a single philosophy class, suggesting that mere exposure to our philosophy classes is not enough to remedy a fixed mindset approach to philosophy. Of course, we cannot know what encouraged a growth mindset in the students who continued with philosophy; perhaps those who already had a growth mindset were more likely to continue on, for example.

A number of studies have discouraged the use of fixed-mindset messages (even as praise) in an effort to ensure that female-identified students do not develop a brilliance-based conception of philosophy (Benétreau-Dupin and Beaulac 2015; Haslanger 2008; Leslie et al. 2015; Thompson et al. 2016). However, our data suggests other possibilities. Students from FG 1 reported several ways in which they were encouraged by professors to continue taking philosophy classes. One student reported a professor encouraging her with a fixed mindset approach, saying, "You have a knack for this." Another student reported a professor making comments more characteristic of a growth mindset, like "keep plugging away." We are curious about ways in which faculty members in philosophy departments can deploy fixed or growth mindset frameworks. Perhaps positive fixed mindset statements are the most effective way to encourage female-identified students since they are already more likely to think with a fixed mindset. Or perhaps it is most useful to undermine their fixed mindsets as frequently as possible, consistently framing students' successes as the result of hard work and careful thinking. All we can offer here is that faculty should be careful and strategic with how they encourage female-identified students to continue on with philosophy.

*Professors have the potential to ameliorate (or reinforce) extra-philosophic effects.*

Data from FG 3 support the claim that students who have never taken philosophy classes can nevertheless have an idea of what philosophy is. In this case, participants of FG 3 considered philosophy to be uncomfortably difficult, male-dominated, and argumentative. Indeed, students held these perceptions despite claiming to know very little about the particular department, the philosophy majors, or philosophy as a whole. Although it is unclear whether these perceptions actually played into students' decisions to not take philosophy classes, and whether students identify these perceived traits as masculine traits, these perceptions nevertheless affirm Calhoun's (2009) argument that students enter college with what Haslanger (2008) terms a "schema" of the philosopher. Indeed, this hypothesis is supported by Baron, Dougherty, and Miller (2015), who found that the comfort level of women was lower than the comfort level of men during their first philosophy lecture.

To be sure, not all students in FG 3 were first-year students, so we cannot be sure if these student's perceptions were solely formed before entering university (as "pre-university effects" [Baron, Dougherty, and Miller 2015]), or if they developed these perceptions in their non-philosophy classes while in college (in what would be more correctly understood as "extra-philosophic effects," to the extent that these perceptions were not formed in philosophy classrooms).<sup>15</sup> For this reason, we avoid using the term "pre-university effects" in the remainder of this paper, despite its usefulness as a distinction, in favor of "extra-philosophic effects."

Yet, if we bridge our observation about FG 3's schemas with data from FGs 1 and 2, a more complicated picture emerges. Data from FG 1 and FG 2 suggests that students' classroom experiences, or "classroom effects" (Baron, Dougherty, and Miller 2015), might be a more pronounced factor in students' overall assessments of philosophy rather than any sort of "extra-philosophic effects." In particular, the only two "classroom effects" that participants mentioned were (1) their experiences with professors and (2) their experiences with other students in the class. We found that these "classroom effects" can either (further) push students away from the discipline or ameliorate many negative preconceptions that students might have had. For instance, students from FG 2 reported not returning to philosophy almost exclusively because of classroom effects, while students from FG 1 reported returning to philosophy almost exclusively due to classroom effects.

In terms of the specific "classroom effects," the experiences of participants of FG 1 and 2 are somewhat reversed. Whereas FG 1 reported mostly positive interactions with professors, and occasionally negative interactions with other students (especially in introductory classes), FG 2 reported positive interactions with students, and negative interactions with professors. This is worth highlighting because it suggests that participants' experiences with professors were more impactful than participants' experiences with students.<sup>16</sup> Thus, if it is true that classroom effects may ameliorate extra-philosophic effects, our data also suggests that professors have a more significant role in determining these classroom effects

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<sup>15</sup> Indeed, two students within the FGs acknowledged having read and discussed texts by philosophers in non-philosophy classes, which is no surprise—according to the Open Syllabus project, philosophy texts are some of most frequently assigned readings across all disciplines (see <http://explorer.opensyllabusproject.org/>).

<sup>16</sup> We recognize that these mixed results could be due to the differences between the populations probed by FGs 1 and 2. Further FGs are necessary to clarify these mixed results.

than some other classroom factors. Overall, this suggests professors have a significant degree of influence in mitigating extra-philosophic effects.<sup>17</sup>

*Female-identified students who have not taken philosophy classes see themselves as intuitive thinkers but view philosophy as a discipline for logical thinkers.*

As noted above, students in FG 3 maintained a distinction between “logical” and “intuitive” thinking. In at least two codes, students identified philosophy and philosophical thinking with the former, and their own mode of thinking with the latter. For instance, one code reads, “[My roommate] is very logical, which is why philosophy appealed to her, [whereas I am more of an intuitive thinker].” Another code expressed a similar attitude: “I don’t think you’d have to work very hard to [persuade me to take a philosophy class]. I mean, I’m half-convinced to take one at some point, simply because I want to be smart and be able to use logic rather than intuition.”

The importance of this distinction lies in how it might inform Haslanger’s (2008) theory of conflicting schemas and, in particular, Calhoun’s (2009) suggestion of how this schema conflict impacts female-identified undergraduates. That is, it may be that some people—in particular, female-identified people—are more likely to see themselves as “intuitive thinkers,” whereas they see philosophy as a discipline more suited for “logical thinkers.” That these students each made these assumptions about the discipline without having taken a philosophy class indicates that extra-philosophical (and possibly pre-university) effects are at play. These statements also indicate that female-identified students are at least implicitly choosing to not take philosophy classes due to a conflicting schema between the philosopher (including philosophic modes of thinking) and themselves.

#### **IV. Conclusion and Recommendations**

Overall, our FGs revealed three central insights about female-identified students’ perceptions of philosophy. We found that: (1) one philosophy class alone did not cultivate a growth mindset among female-identified students of philosophy, (2) professors have the potential to ameliorate or reinforce students’ perceptions of philosophy, and (3) students who have not taken philosophy are likely to see their manner of thinking as being at odds with the kind of thinking required by

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<sup>17</sup> This finding is corroborated by research done at Hamilton College that indicates that one of the most significant factors in an undergraduate’s decision to major in a field is the perceived likeability of their initial professor within that field (Chambliss and Takacs 2014).

philosophy. In light of these findings, we propose several action steps<sup>18</sup> as well as some avenues for future research.

### *Action Steps*

First, after hearing from FG 3 that students were learning about philosophy from departments across campus, our research team held a workshop with non-philosophy faculty regarding teaching philosophic works/authors in a more inclusive fashion. It is our hope that conversations about female underrepresentation with other faculty teaching philosophical texts, philosophers, and philosophic ideas can help change how students perceive philosophy, even when they are not in a philosophy class. We recommend that other departments do the same, as this can build philosophic alliances across academic disciplines, teach faculty across the university about philosophy's efforts at combating sexism and gender inequality, and hopefully help students encounter a more gender-just way of teaching and doing philosophy wherever they encounter it.

Second, our FG data indicate that professors should take seriously the impact they can make on students simply by encouraging them to take more philosophy classes. While it is true that the instructor of a class does not have complete control over how a class goes (and perhaps has less control than students often assume), it seems that since students *perceive* that faculty have a high amount of power/influence, this influence can be used in ways that encourage female-identified students to take more classes.

Third, since several participants in our FGs seemed to contrast their intuitive thinking with what they perceived as philosophy's more logical methodologies, departments can work to show students that logic-based arguments or ways of thinking are not the only ways of doing philosophy. Instructors (particularly those teaching introductory-level classes) could include readings by philosophers who students are less likely to perceive as using logic-based arguments. This might include readings by canonical philosophers like Nietzsche and Kierkegaard, Chinese philosophers like Lao Tzu and Chuang Tzu, feminist phenomenologists like Iris Marion Young or Sandra Bartky, or more contemporary theorists like María Lugones, Sara Ahmed, Lisa Guenther, and Alexis Shotwell. Exposing students to various methodologies that they might classify as more intuitive could help students who consider themselves more intuitive thinkers have a more pluralistic understanding of the discipline, and their potential place within it.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> While we offer some general recommendations, we urge departments to investigate which strategies will work best for them based on their own departmental culture.

<sup>19</sup> Thanks to Jackie Scott for suggesting some of these authors.

Finally, departments wanting to address gender inequality should consider working with students. This co-investigation allows faculty to gain a more accurate understanding of how students perceive their philosophy classes, instructors, and the department as a whole (Bloch-Schulman et al., in preparation). In fact, the FGs could not have been conducted without the students on the research team, and conducting them has proven essential for our department as we move forward and think about how to change students' perceptions of the department as not necessarily sexist, but also not attractive to enough female-identified students.

### *Future Research*

The results of our study point toward several areas for further investigation. First, future research might explore the most effective ways to utilize fixed- or growth-mindset approaches to encourage promising female-identified students to take more philosophy classes. A number of authors have suggested adopting growth-mindset frameworks in order to retain female-identified students. For instance, Benétreau-Dupin and Beaulac recommend adopting a practice of “explicitly indicating to students that the quality of their study is affected by their work (incremental view) [i.e., growth-mindset approach] rather than emphasizing that their academic success depends on the inherent qualities of a person [i.e., fixed-mindset approach]” (2015). Haslanger also advocates a growth mindset, arguing that to disrupt stereotype threat, philosophers can “encourage [an] incremental view of intelligence as malleable and capable of expanding with hard work” (Haslanger 2008, 218). While our department does, on the whole, treat philosophy as a set of skills at which one can improve, we learned from our FGs that sometimes using more explicit fixed-mindset encouragements when talking with female-identified students can encourage them to come back to the subject. If female-identified students are more likely to approach philosophy with a fixed mindset (as Benétreau-Dupin and Beaulac remind us they are), then perhaps departments can use this to their advantage. While we would suggest a broader study of female-identified students' reasons for persisting with philosophy before developing a concrete set of best practices for encouraging them, we think there might be more promise in certain fixed-mindset encouragement than has been addressed in the literature, especially since our data indicate that fixed mindsets persist in students after they complete a single philosophy class.

Second, future research might expand upon the tension we discovered between intuitive and logical thinking: do female-identified students view themselves as intuitive thinkers, and view philosophy as a logical subject that may not be for them? If so, it might be important (particularly for logic-focused departments) to cultivate growth mindsets among female-identified students, to

emphasize that logical thinking is not a gendered ability but rather a skill one can develop, and to articulate that it is not the only method of producing knowledge.

Third, since some of the participants of our FGs expressed that they felt motivated by lingering questions (especially participants of FG 1) while others expressed that they felt discouraged by lingering questions (especially participants of FG 3), future research might explore this incongruity. Perhaps students are more comfortable engaging in questions that can be answered with certainty (i.e., well-structured problems) rather than those that have no definitive answer and require engaging in various points of view (i.e., ill-structured problems<sup>20</sup>). It might also be important to address the causes of these preferences and their political implications.

Fourth, there is an opportunity for further research on students who had a negative first experience with philosophy but continued with the subject nonetheless. In our first FG, each student who took more than one philosophy class reported a positive and encouraging first philosophy class. But it would also be helpful to know what might motivate students to keep studying philosophy when their first interaction with the discipline is not so positive. Indeed, we wonder about student motivations given that there are no culturally obvious extrinsic benefits to taking philosophy classes as there are with, for example, business classes. (In fact, there are many potential costs to taking philosophy, particularly for female-identified students.)

Fifth, additional research might explore the gendered self-perceptions of students who continue with philosophy. For instance, it could be that these participants considered themselves unusual women, or felt that they had more masculine traits that made them well-suited for philosophy. We did not ask participants whether they considered themselves unusual for their gender, or if they felt that they had masculine intellectual traits, but this could be a topic for future FGs or FGs at other departments—it would be helpful to know whether students' own understanding of their gender impacted their desire to take or continue taking philosophy.<sup>21</sup>

Overall, our department found these FGs to be hugely impactful in our thinking about the underrepresentation of female-identified students in philosophy. Centering student voices has allowed us to develop initiatives we believe speak to their interests and ask new questions about ways to make our classes, pedagogy, and curriculum more inclusive and inviting to female-identified students.

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<sup>20</sup> See King and Kitchener 1994.

<sup>21</sup> Thanks to our anonymous reviewers for pointing out these last two avenues of future research.



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## VI. Appendix - Focus Group Questions

**Key:** • questions for all FGs; † questions for FG 1; ‡ questions for FG 2; † questions for FG 3

### 1. Icebreaker (word association with philosophy)

#### 2. Think-Pair-Share

- What are your perceptions of the philosophy department/ majors on campus?
- How do you think one succeeds in philosophy? Do you think that you can succeed? Why or why not?
- † How did you get into your first philosophy class?
- † Do you think studying philosophy is helpful for your life, career, and/or intellectual goals?
- † What made you take more courses? Why'd you come back?
- ‡ Why haven't you taken philosophy? Do you plan to? What was your decision process like in choosing your courses?
- ‡ If you were to take a philosophy course, what would you hope to get out of it?

#### 3. Group Activity

- Can you imagine yourself being a philosophy major or minor? If you are a major/minor, what made you choose to major/minor in philosophy? If not, under what conditions could you imagine yourself becoming a philosophy major or minor?
- † How have philosophy professors treated the students? How have other philosophy students treated one another?
- † What was your biggest critique of your philosophy class(es)?
- † What sticks? What do you remember most about your philosophy experience?
- † How did you see gender dynamics play out in your classroom? Do you think your gender had any influence in how students were treated in your courses?
- † Tell us how your parents responded to you taking multiple philosophy courses and/or becoming a major/minor.
- ‡ Do you think studying philosophy is helpful for your life, career, and/or intellectual goals?
- ‡ Do you know anybody taking or having taken a philosophy class? What kind of person are they? What do they say about it?
- ‡ How do you think your parents would respond to you taking philosophy courses?

#### 4. End Debrief

- Is there anything else you'd like to share?
- What would persuade you/what should we do to attract more women?

#### 5. Exit Survey

- † How many courses have you taken and which ones?
- Major(s)/Minor(s)?
- Is there anything else you'd like to share?