



What Do Beginning Students Think about Philosophy before Their First College Course?

ABSTRACT: *In this article, we present the results of an original study identifying the perceptions of beginning philosophy students at the start of their first introductory course. We surveyed over 1,100 students representing over 40 universities and colleges in the United States regarding their initial perceptions of gender bias, inclusivity, value, understanding, similarities, and enjoyment of philosophy. We analyzed the results based on gender, first-generation status, and student of color status. This work represents the perspectives of a more diverse range of students, reflecting far more first-generation college students (40 percent) and students who identify as people of color (43 percent) than in previous work. Additionally, this study provides novel data as we were able to collect data on the first day of classes, in most cases before students were exposed to syllabi or content that could inform their views about philosophy. Understanding what beginning students think about philosophy before formal exposure to the field might help us to identify concerns, misconceptions, and areas for improvement. Many results are striking, and our project offers insight into the initial perspectives of philosophy students.*

KEYWORDS: pedagogy, teaching, feminist philosophy, first-generation students, student perceptions

Introduction

Unlike many fields, philosophy is neither required nor frequently offered in K-12 schools. Given the lack of exposure before their first college philosophy course, students often express views demonstrating a lack of awareness of the discipline, its content, and its methods. Additionally, students unfamiliar with philosophy may be unsure about the benefits and applications of philosophy, while also lacking awareness of the persistent challenges that the field faces with respect to the representation and support of women, financially disadvantaged people, and people of color. For those unfamiliar with these issues, the American Philosophical Association's 'Resources on Diversity and Inclusiveness' page, is a good starting place (www.apaonline.org/page/diversity_resources). It is, therefore, valuable to assess students' initial perceptions before they have

We received approval from our university's Institutional Review Board (#1478114-1) and gratefully acknowledge support from HEERF II CARES Act Funding for Research, Scholarship, and Creative Works.



completed their first college course. For example, if we can determine whether or not students enter with the impression that philosophy is valuable or whether they imagine the field to be exclusionary or open, these answers can provide a starting point for efforts to make changes.

Our study aims to add to the growing body of literature addressing issues related to diversity, inclusion, and student retention in philosophy. To better understand the impact of various identities, we analyzed our data to explore potential differences in response among our demographic groups. Unlike previous work, our study focused on reaching first-generation students to include and better understand their perceptions of philosophy. These students made up 40 percent of respondents. We were also able to survey and therefore represent the opinions of a larger number of students of color, who comprise 43 percent of respondents. The reason that we have greater representation of first-generation students and students of color is that more participants from socioeconomically and geographically diverse institutions replied to our call for participants. This article reports the results of our original study, which assesses students' initial perceptions of the field within several categories. Later work will compare the baseline results reported here to a follow-up study conducted at the semester's end to determine what changes occur after students complete their first course.

1. Study Design and Implementation

We collected data at the start of the 2021 fall semester by distributing our survey to over 1,100 beginning philosophy students from 41 universities and colleges in the United States. Instructors were asked to provide the survey as early as possible during the first day of the course in order to record uninformed opinions. Our full survey is included as an appendix.

Our survey consisted of statements that measure student perception on six scales: understanding of philosophy, similarity with philosophers, enjoyment of philosophy, the value of philosophy, the presence of gender bias in philosophy, and inclusivity in philosophy. These categories are represented by carefully chosen statements that measure perceptions of philosophy in each of these areas. To assess their perceptions, we asked participants to agree or disagree (on a 5-point Likert scale) with statements that measured their perceptions in these categories.

Our results reflect the views of 798 students. As per exclusion criteria, the study did not include students with a previous college-level philosophy course. This was important to ensure that our research reflects the views of the inexperienced.

In addition to evaluating the baseline perceptions of college students taking their first college philosophy course, our study seeks to identify whether these perceptions vary due to demographic factors. These factors include gender, student of color status, first-generation status, and high school philosophy coursework. Students included in the survey identified as male or female.¹ Students of color were

¹ Note that gender was initially measured in five levels: male, female, transgender, nonbinary, and other/do not wish to answer—through self-report. However, we later focused only on comparing male-identified and

identified through self-report. First-generation students were students whose parents or guardians had not earned a four-year degree, also identified through student self-report. We also asked students whether they had completed high school philosophy coursework and whether this was their first semester taking college philosophy courses. Demographically, 56 percent of respondents were female, and 40 percent were male. A total of 40 percent of respondents identified as first-generation students, and 60 percent did not. Roughly 57 percent of participants identified as White and 43 percent as students of color. The percentage of students who reported completing at least one philosophy course in high school was 9 percent.

To determine the appropriate sample size for inference on the baseline results, we performed an a priori power analysis using G*Power (Faul et al. 2007) to test the difference between two independent means, in this case, two groups. Specifying a two-tailed test, a small effect size ($d = .23$), and a significance level of .05, we determined that a total sample of 682 participants was required to achieve a power of 85 percent with an allocation ratio of 1. Our sample size ($n = 798$) exceeds this mark. Participants were college students across the United States, so we have a representative sample for generalizing about students taking their first-year philosophy course in this country. Note that we restricted participation to US students because our demographic groups may be understood differently in other countries. For example, we are relying on the US Department of Education's definition of first-generation, as used for TRIO programs (<https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ope/trio/index.html>). This definition may not apply in other countries or may not reflect the same cluster of factors that impact US first-generation students.

We sampled students from standard introductory philosophy courses. Our goal was to include introductory-level philosophy courses primarily taken by students without significant prior experience with philosophy. We did this to promote uniformity because 100-level courses are taught in two- and four-year colleges and are directed at beginning students without prerequisites or prior work. Students were recruited from 41 universities and colleges across the United States. The most significant number of responses came from the University of Northern Colorado, Appalachian State University, and the University of Saint Thomas. The range of participants overall covers both public and private institutions from many regions of the United States and a smaller number of students from two-year institutions. Given the wide range of institutions, our results are likely to provide a general sense of the views that an average beginning student in the United States holds upon entering their first philosophy course. Our study is unique in that we recruited far more first-generation students and students of color than previous studies of this type did. This is due in part to the high number of participants from more socioeconomically diverse institutions who replied to our call for participants. Nonetheless, the range of participants overall covers both public and private institutions and a small number of students from two-year

female-identified students, for several reasons. First, nearly all respondents selected either male or female on day one, and everyone who completed our follow-up survey selected only male or female. Additionally, the existing body of research focuses on differences in perspectives and experiences of female and male students. Future research may include an analysis of the views of transgender and nonbinary students.

institutions. Therefore, we feel that these results are likely to provide a general sense of the views that an average beginning student holds upon entering their first philosophy course.

To generate our results, we conducted a factor analysis of the data to check that the six scales were all identified by the survey items. Although we modified survey items previously employed in other studies, our specific survey was original and, therefore, not yet validated as an instrument to measure the factors we chose.² Only the items that represented the scales were included. We then checked to ensure that the Cronbach's alpha of all items that made up each scale was at least 0.6, as established by Hulin, Netemeyer, and Cudeck (2001). Finally, we conducted multiple independent sample *t*-tests to check whether the difference in averages of respondents' ratings by demographics was statistically significant. After reviewing these assumptions, we observed that the scales were not approximately symmetric, thus failing the normality test. However, due to the large sample size, the results from the parametric *t*-test are similar to those from the nonparametric counterparts. The parametric tests were chosen for more straightforward interpretability.

2. Hypotheses

Because students were from a broad range of backgrounds and lacked prior exposure to philosophy, we limited antecedent speculation regarding the results. However, we did hypothesize that, for example, women may perceive gender bias or a lack of inclusivity from the start (given prior work and the facts surrounding the representation of women in the field; see, for example, Demarest et al. 2017; Paxton, Figdor, and Tiberius 2012; and Thompson et al. 2016). We also hypothesized that first-generation students would report a lower level of understanding since they might be exposed to philosophy less than continuing-generation students. The rationale here was that college is the most frequent place for anyone to encounter the formal study of philosophy. Therefore, parents who have attended college are more likely to share views about the field informally.

We also sought to identify whether the barriers for underrepresented students would be apparent before they began their first course. For example, we wanted to determine whether underrepresented students knew that philosophy faces challenges related to diversity. For example, do first-generation students perceive a lack of inclusivity in philosophy? Are students of color concerned about how welcoming philosophy will be before taking their first course? These questions motivated our study.

3. Results

Our results are striking in many ways. For example, our results indicate that women placed a higher value on philosophy than men and were also less likely than men to

² We modified questions used in Ganley et al. (2018), Jolley et al. (2012), Thompson et al. (2016), and Demarest et al. (2017) and also tested and refined questions in pilot studies conducted in the fall of 2020 and summer of 2021. The final questionnaire is included in the appendix.

assume that there is gender bias in philosophy. This suggests that the sense of gender bias or exclusion women experience in philosophy is not part of a general social understanding but may develop while students study course content. Given the gender gap in philosophy, it is crucial to identify the source of students' perceptions about gender bias to determine whether and how the field can improve. Because professors largely control the content of their courses, there may be opportunities to change student perceptions directly.

Our results are also compelling in that they indicate only minimal, statistically insignificant differences between respondents grouped by first-generation student status as compared to students who are not first-generation, and by respondents grouped by student of color status when compared to those who are not students of color. Finally, our results suggest an impact on the level of understanding students have of philosophy when they have had a high school philosophy course, which aligns with what we would expect, given that additional exposure and study should lead to increased understanding. Detailed results are set out in the tables below.

4. Tables of Results

Our results are set out in six tables below. [Table 1](#) lists overall averages, and [tables 2](#) through [5](#) compare results by demographic data and report all areas that presented statistically significant differences in the responses between demographic groups.

On average, students engaging with philosophy for the first time in college were unsure about their level of understanding of philosophy, their similarity with other philosophers, the presence of gender bias, and the inclusivity of philosophy. However, most of these students declared they would enjoy philosophy and thought philosophy was valuable. These last two results are promising as they indicate that students do not enter with a specific bias *against* philosophy.

Table 1. Overall Results among Factors (averages for all groups)
Descriptive and Inferential Statistics for all Survey Scales

Scale	Overall	
	<i>(n = 798)</i>	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Understands philosophy	1.93	0.62
Similarity with philosophers	2.39	0.43
Enjoys philosophy	2.48	0.40
Value of philosophy	2.72	0.36
Presence of gender bias	2.15	0.55
Inclusivity in philosophy	2.13	0.32

Note: After adjustment, scales ranged from 1 (*Disagree*) to 3 (*Agree*). *M* represents the average of each scale. *SD* represents the standard deviation of the scales. Average scores closer to 1 indicate participants disagreed with the position of the scale. Average scores closer to 3 indicate that participants agreed with the position of the scale.

As shown in [table 2](#), there were statistically significant differences between male and female respondents on some factors. On average, male respondents reported a higher level of agreement with questions reflecting the level of understanding of philosophy (2.01 for males, 1.83 for females). It is interesting to reflect on the potential impact of the respondent's gender on questions assessing self-perception of understanding, for example, in connection with factors such as stereotype threat (see, e.g., Saul 2013).

Males and females also reported distinct levels of agreement on the enjoyment factor, with women indicating a comparatively lower level of enjoyment (2.44 versus 2.53 for male respondents). Female respondents also reported a significantly higher level of agreement with statements about the value of philosophy (females: 2.75, males: 2.68), indicating that female students seem to perceive a higher value in philosophy. Interestingly, women reported a higher level of value but a lower enjoyment level. This may indicate that they find philosophy valuable even if they do not enjoy it to the same level male students report.

Next, female respondents reported a higher level of agreement with statements indicating that philosophy is inclusive than male respondents (2.17 for female students compared to 2.07 for males). Surprisingly, on our factor indicating gender bias, male students had a higher level of agreement (2.22) compared to female students (2.09) regarding gender bias in philosophy. However, this difference is not statistically significant, as shown in [table 2](#). These results should be considered when questioning what might make female students inclined or disinclined to pursue philosophy beyond their first course.

According to our results in [table 3](#), there are no statistically significant differences between the responses of students of color and those who are not students of color. While there are some differences between students who identified as students of color and those who did not, these differences are quite small, indicating that students from these two groups have similar overall opinions. It is crucial to acknowledge these

Table 2. Results by Gender
Descriptive and Inferential Statistics for all Survey Scales by Gender

Scale	Female (<i>n</i> = 301)		Male (<i>n</i> = 425)		Two-samples test	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Understands philosophy	1.83	0.60	2.01	0.61	-3.92	<.001*
Similarity with philosophers	2.39	0.44	2.42	0.41	-1.05	0.296
Enjoys philosophy	2.44	0.40	2.53	0.40	-3.06	0.002*
Value of philosophy	2.75	0.34	2.68	0.36	2.66	0.008*
Presence of gender bias	2.10	0.61	2.22	0.46	-2.93	0.274
Inclusivity in philosophy	2.17	0.31	2.07	0.32	4.42	<.001*

Note: After adjustment, scales ranged from 1 (*Disagree*) to 3 (*Agree*). *M* represents the average of each scale, and *SD* represents the standard deviation of the scales. Average scores closer to 1 indicate participants disagreed with the position of the scale. Average scores closer to 3 indicate that participants agreed with the position of the scale. Significance level $\alpha = 0.05$, and *p* represents the *p*-value, where those with "*" are statistically significant at the specified significance level.

Table 3. Results by Student of Color Status
Descriptive and Inferential Statistics for all Survey Scales by Student of Color Status

Scale	No (<i>n</i> = 425)		Yes (<i>n</i> = 324)		Two-samples test	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Understands philosophy	1.91	0.63	1.91	0.59	-0.08	0.936
Similarity with philosophers	2.42	0.42	2.37	0.42	1.54	0.123
Enjoys philosophy	2.47	0.42	2.48	0.38	-0.24	0.809
Value of philosophy	2.71	0.36	2.74	0.33	-1.18	0.238
Presence of gender bias	2.17	0.57	2.12	0.54	1.30	0.196
Inclusivity in philosophy	2.11	0.32	2.15	0.31	-1.79	0.074

Note: After adjustment, scales ranged from 1 (*Disagree*) to 3 (*Agree*). *M* represents the average of each scale, and *SD* represents the standard deviation of the scales. Average scores closer to 1 indicate participants disagreed with the position of the scale, and average scores closer to 3 indicate participants agreed with the position of the scale. Significance level $\alpha = 0.05$, and *p* represents the *p*-value.

results. The later drop-off in students of color as philosophy majors, graduate students, and faculty may depend more on the environment and course content than on the prior public perception of philosophy. Of course, further work is needed here to understand these results.

According to our results, there are no statistically significant changes between responses when we compared first-generation students and those who are not first-generation students. Again, the numerical differences between students in these two groups were minimal, indicating similar opinions. Given that prior studies have seldom focused on exploring first-generation student status (or had few respondents who identified as first-generation students), we find these initial results to be a step in the right direction and also promising as it seems that first-generation students are not entering their first course with deficits in their understanding of philosophy or its value, for example.

Table 4. Results by First-Generation Status
Descriptive and Inferential Statistics for all Survey Scales by First-Generation Status

Scale	No (<i>n</i> = 453)		Yes (<i>n</i> = 299)		Two-samples test	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>T</i>	<i>p</i>
Understands philosophy	1.93	0.64	1.88	0.57	0.99	0.325
Similarity with philosophers	2.41	0.42	2.40	0.42	0.32	0.751
Enjoys philosophy	2.49	0.40	2.45	0.40	1.27	0.206
Value of philosophy	2.72	0.35	2.72	0.35	0.01	0.992
Presence of gender bias	2.17	0.55	2.11	0.56	1.58	0.113
Inclusivity in philosophy	2.12	0.32	2.14	0.31	-0.76	0.449

Note: After adjustment, scales ranged from 1 (*Disagree*) to 3 (*Agree*). *M* represents the average of each scale, and *SD* represents the standard deviation of the scales. Average scores closer to 1 indicate participants disagreed with the position of the scale, and average scores closer to 3 indicate participants agreed with the position of the scale. Significance level $\alpha = 0.05$, and *p* represents the *p*-value.

Table 5. Results by High School Philosophy Completion
Descriptive and Inferential Statistics for all Survey Scales by High School Philosophy Completion

Scale	No (<i>n</i> = 679)		Yes (<i>n</i> = 74)		Two-samples test	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Understands philosophy	1.87	0.60	2.28	0.61	-5.49	<.001*
Similarity with philosophers	2.40	0.43	2.46	0.40	-1.26	0.208
Enjoys philosophy	2.47	0.38	2.50	0.45	-0.59	0.554
Value of philosophy	2.72	0.34	2.73	0.40	-0.17	0.865
Presence of gender bias	2.14	0.56	2.24	0.48	-1.65	0.102
Inclusivity in philosophy	2.13	0.31	2.14	0.39	-0.28	0.783

Note: After adjustment, scales ranged from 1 (*Disagree*) to 3 (*Agree*). *M* represents the average of each scale, and *SD* represents the standard deviation of the scales. Average scores closer to 1 indicate participants disagreed with the position of the scale. Average scores closer to 3 indicate that participants agreed with the position of the scale. Significance level $\alpha = 0.05$, and *p* represents the *p*-value, where values with “*” are statistically significant at the specified significance level.

When compared based on completion of high school philosophy courses, our results indicate that those who had completed a high school philosophy course showed a higher level of agreement in understanding than those who did not, 2.28 versus 1.87, respectively. This is likely explained as a result of increased exposure. Interestingly, other factors were not increased (e.g., students did not see an increased value of philosophy and did not indicate an increased presence of bias despite having more exposure to the field than their peers).

Notably, most participants who had completed high school philosophy coursework were male (approximately 61 percent males and approximately 39 percent females), strengthening or partially accounting for the differences between male and female respondents. We found no other statistically significant differences based on high school philosophy completion status.

5. Conclusions

We hope our results provide promising avenues for further research. While there were slight differences concerning other demographic areas, only gender and high school philosophy course completion indicated statistically significant differences. Strikingly, women enter philosophy courses with an overall positive impression of the field’s value, their similarity to philosophers, and the level of bias or barriers to inclusivity. This supports the hypothesis that the factors discouraging women from studying philosophy may have little to do with their preconceived notions of the field. These feelings may increase when female students take coursework that primarily or exclusively features male philosophers, or they may find it less relevant, valuable, or enjoyable after further study (see, for example, Demarest et al. 2017; Thompson et al. 2016).

We should also reflect further on the result that responses sorted by first-generation and student of color status do not significantly differ from the categories of continuing-generation students and white students, respectively.

Overall, our results indicate that students do not begin with a prior perception that philosophy is intrinsically flawed in terms of inclusivity, gender bias, or value. Again, the reasons less represented students decide against pursuing the field may be tied more strongly to other concerns. Current work regarding first-generation students in philosophy supports the claim that other concerns (such as hostile classroom environments, home and family situations, or a mismatch between professor and student backgrounds) could play a role. It should be noted that students may fall into multiple underrepresented categories, such as first-generation students of color, or women from financially disadvantaged backgrounds. For further discussion of the challenges underrepresented students face, see, for example, the American Philosophical Association's Spring 2021 *Newsletter for Feminism and Philosophy* (Falbo and Stewart 2021), which focuses on issues facing first-generation and low-income philosophers. See also, Jennifer Morton (2019), which elucidates many challenges plaguing students who fall into disadvantaged categories. Given the overall goal of making philosophy a more welcoming field capable of recruiting and retaining more future philosophers, identifying the starting points of negative perceptions should prove very useful.

Although not reported here, our team also interviewed beginning students to generate qualitative results for our project. Interestingly, our qualitative results suggest that rather than a perceived lack of belonging, students view philosophy as less valuable for other reasons, such as a lack of application to career paths deemed worthy of pursuit and family pressure to pursue a career-focused route. These results will be included in future work. We mention this here, as it is likely that these quantitative results are best understood in conjunction with qualitative analysis and a look at the general trends in higher education. However, the starting points here can help researchers, scholars, and instructors understand the views of beginning students which could be helpful for future improvement in the field.

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Appendix – Questions Used in the Survey

1. Before this semester, I had already taken college philosophy at my current college or somewhere else. (Yes/No)
2. What college or university do you go to? (select from list or type response)
3. Did you have a philosophy course in high school? (Yes/No)
4. I am a first-generation college student, meaning that neither of my parents has earned a college degree. (Yes/No)
5. I am a: (Freshman/Sophomore/Junior/Senior/Other)
6. I identify as: (female/male/transgender/nonbinary/other or do not wish to answer)
7. Ethnicity—check all that apply (Latina/Latino/Latinx/Hispanic, Black/African American, Native American/Indigenous, Asian/Pacific Islander, Caucasian/White)

The following questions allowed respondents to select: Strongly Agree, Agree, Neither Agree Nor Disagree, Disagree, Strongly Disagree

8. I feel confident in my ability to explain what philosophy is.
9. I often do not really understand philosophy.
10. I think I can explain to someone what philosophy is.
11. Things that I experience around me often lead me to think about philosophy.
12. I think people like me do philosophy.
13. I think I will have a lot in common with the philosophy instructor.
14. I feel like I will belong in this class.
15. I feel like an outsider in this class.
16. I feel like I will be able to succeed in this class.

17. I feel like I could be a philosopher.
18. I enjoy engaging with philosophical puzzles and ideas.
19. I do not enjoy learning philosophy.
20. I feel like I will be able to learn a lot in this class.
21. I feel that the skills learned in philosophy are valuable.
22. The skills I learned in philosophy could apply to many career paths.
23. I see how I can use philosophy in my day-to-day life.
24. I study philosophy to gain knowledge that will be useful in my life outside of school.
25. I think philosophy will help me grow as a person.
26. I think doing philosophy is important for personal growth.
27. I don't think philosophy is a good use of my time.
28. I think more women than men would major in philosophy.
29. I think philosophy is a female-dominated field.
30. I think that women in philosophy experience discrimination based on their gender.
31. I think that women have a hard time succeeding in philosophy.
32. I feel philosophy is more welcoming to men than to women.
33. I feel that philosophy is more welcoming to students whose parents have completed college.
34. I think that philosophers are more likely to be from wealthy backgrounds.
35. I think that philosophy is open to everyone.
36. I have witnessed or experienced attitudes of elitism in philosophy.
37. I think that anyone can do philosophy, regardless of wealth, income, or family background.