

GRADUATE STUDENTS

Diversifying a Discipline

In 2015, Penn State produced an unprecedented number of black, female Ph.D.s in philosophy. Here's how.

By Vimal Patel | MARCH 27, 2016



André Chung for The Chronicle

Ronke Oke earned a doctorate in philosophy from Pennsylvania State U. last year.

Seven years ago, Ronke A. Oke felt as if she no longer belonged in philosophy.

For Ms. Oke, earning a master's degree at the University of Memphis had been difficult, and she considered quitting the discipline and not going for her Ph.D. Her experience at Memphis stood in stark contrast to her undergraduate years at Spelman College, a historically black institution.

At Spelman, Ms. Oke, who is black, could imagine herself as a philosopher. Most of her professors were black women. She was not yet aware of philosophy's reputation as an old boys' club. And she felt free to pursue the types of questions about race and identity she was passionate about without constantly feeling that she had to justify her work.

In graduate school, that changed. She learned "what philosophy is and who it's for," she says. Most damaging, a professor told her she didn't have the writing ability to make it in philosophy. "My morale was completely defeated," Ms. Oke says.

Such feelings of isolation and not belonging in graduate school often take a toll on women and members of minority groups, leading many to drop out or decline to pursue doctoral degrees. In the humanities, these problems are perhaps most acute in philosophy, which as a field has been criticized for being unwelcoming to women. High-profile cases of sexual harassment involving philosophy professors at the University of Colorado at Boulder, the University of Miami, and Northwestern University have deepened those concerns.

According to the latest federal data, of the 370 American citizens and permanent residents who earned Ph.D.s in philosophy and ethics in 2014, just 15, or 4 percent, were African-American. Of philosophy doctoral recipients overall, less than one-third were women. Only one other humanities field, music theory and composition, had a lower proportion of women.

Ms. Oke is among the small population of philosophy Ph.D.s who are both black and female. Despite her doubts, she soldiered on in the discipline, finding the support she needed and a home at Pennsylvania State University.

She wasn't alone. Four other black women earned philosophy Ph.D.s from Penn State's program this past year. It's a striking number, given that only about 40 black women have ever earned philosophy doctorates in the United States, according to an estimate by Kathryn T. Gines, a Penn State faculty member.

For Penn State, the 2015 cohort represents a high-water mark for a department that has made diversity a key goal. The faculty is dedicated to the idea that philosophy needs new voices, has revised recruitment practices, and, perhaps

most important, has revamped the way it teaches the discipline.



Nabil K. Mark for The Chronicle

Penn State is “decolonizing the philosophy canon,” says Professor Robert Bernasconi (right, with William Paris, a Ph.D. candidate). The faculty’s attitude makes the discipline more welcoming to minorities, he says, and gives all students a better education.

The Penn State department is “decolonizing the philosophy canon,” says Robert L. Bernasconi, a professor there who has worked closely with Ms. Oke. That broadly means rethinking the curriculum so it doesn’t gloss over — as the discipline has tended to do — the racist views of thinkers like Locke and Kant. The faculty’s attitude makes the discipline more welcoming to minorities, he says, and gives all students a better education.

Penn State’s department, which has expertise in Continental philosophy, has also added critical philosophy of race as an academic focus, a subfield that’s growing but still seeks broad acceptance.

The experiences of the black female Ph.D. recipients at Penn State offer a glimpse into how graduate programs can recruit, retain, and produce more female and minority Ph.D.s: a priority increasing in importance as universities face calls to diversify their faculty.

The Ph.D.s’ experiences also show how difficult it is to create a wider culture change within a discipline. While the department at Penn State has welcomed and encouraged women, it’s far from certain whether philosophy as a whole will do the same.

"You're struggling against the isolating experience that is philosophy, but also against the reputation of philosophy," Ms. Oke says. "Many people realize they don't have to deal with that pressure, and move on from the discipline."

For the Penn State philosophy department, the past decade represents a rebirth. In 2005 a former department head claimed in a federal lawsuit that he had been removed from his post for reporting the harassment of female graduate students. The suit was settled out of court, several senior faculty members left around the same time, and university officials decided that the department wouldn't accept doctoral students for two years as it regrouped. That period allowed faculty members to take stock of what kind of department they wanted. One priority, they decided, was a more diverse graduate-student body.

After the moratorium on new graduate students, the department made three key hires: Mr. Bernasconi, Ms. Gines, and Paul C. Taylor, all respected philosophers, whose focuses of study included philosophy of race. In addition, Ms. Gines had founded the Collegium of Black Women Philosophers, a national network, now based at Penn State, that helps connect doctoral students with mentors.

"Having the support of the administration to do that hiring in critical philosophy of race and to diversify the faculty are key for successfully recruiting a diverse set of graduate students," says Amy R. Allen, who began as department head in July. "Not all graduate students of color want to study critical philosophy of race, and not all who study critical philosophy of race are students of color. But there's overlap between those two groups."

Those changes, as well as more-active recruiting efforts, are a crucial part of what attracted the recent influx of black women.

Lindsey L. Stewart, one of the five recent Ph.D. recipients, was not considering a philosophy doctoral program until she visited Penn State when she was a senior at Calvin College. She went for a weeklong philosophy program that was started in 2006 for underrepresented-minority students. Amid the sessions, which resemble graduate seminars, faculty members assured her that questions of race and gender that interested her had a place in philosophy.

"It gave me a feel for what graduate school might be like," Ms. Stewart says.

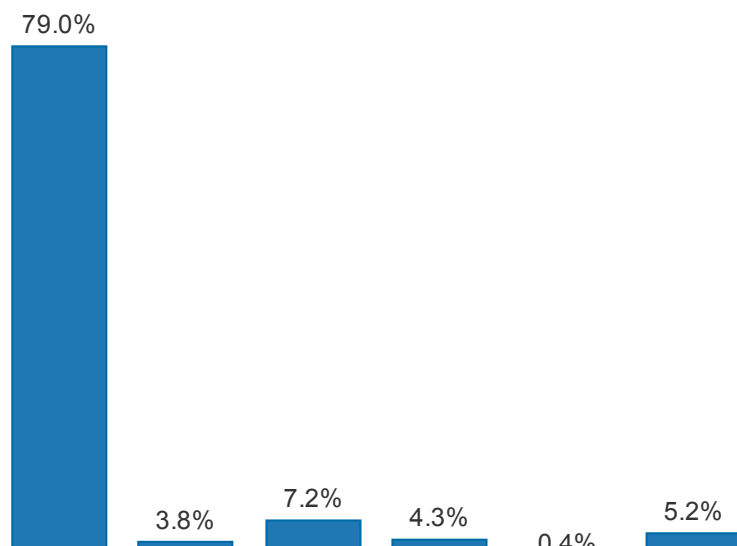
"What stuck with me from that week is that I was surrounded by women who were doing philosophy. It changed my mind a little bit about whether I could do the sort of stuff I wanted to do in philosophy."

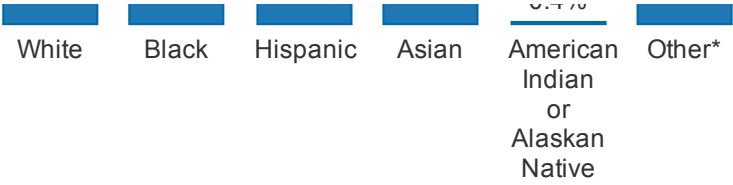
Penn State faculty members continued to develop the relationship after the week ended. A professor asked Ms. Stewart for writing samples and gave her feedback. The department head emailed her. "You really can't underestimate the importance of having an authority figure tell you that you have great ideas and have the potential to do some good in the field," Ms. Stewart says.

In Philosophy, a Dearth of Female and Black Ph.D.s

Like the rest of the humanities, the vast majority of doctoral recipients in philosophy are white. And the discipline falls behind other humanities fields in gender equity. Below are the racial, ethnic, and gender breakdowns for those who earned Ph.D.s in 2014, the latest year data are available.

Humanities, by race



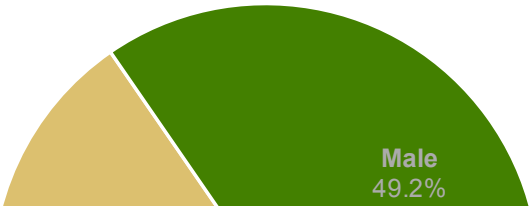


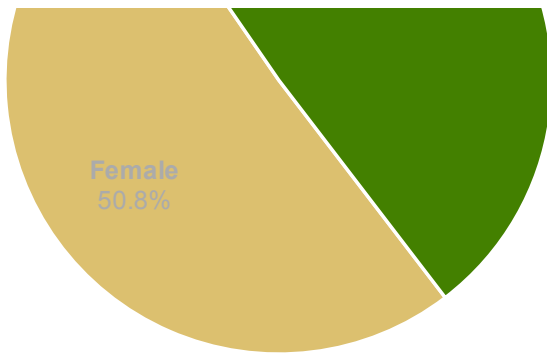
[Get the data](#)

Philosophy, by race



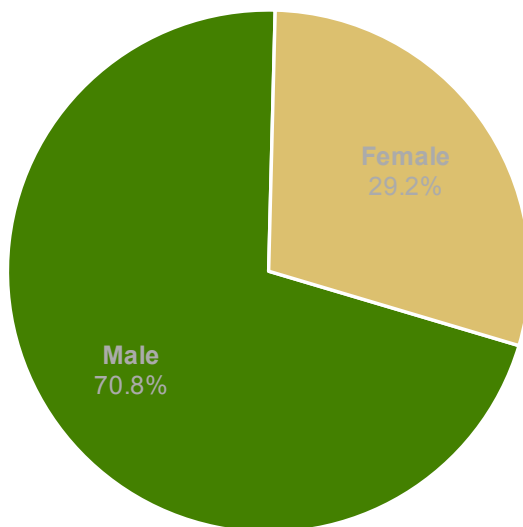
Humanities, by gender





[Get the data](#)

Philosophy, by gender



Note: Includes only Ph.D. recipients who are American citizens or permanent residents
Source: National Science Foundation and other federal agencies. [Get the data](#)

Ms. Stewart did consider other programs on philosophy of race, including ones at American University and at Memphis. The others, however, couldn't match Penn State's financial support. "My main concern at the time," she says, "was figuring out how I was going to pay for graduate school." The stipend at Penn State, plus a

fellowship for underrepresented students, provided her with about \$22,000 a year. It was a tight budget, to be sure, but enough to avoid taking on debt for all but two years.

Getting more women and underrepresented-minority students to enroll in a graduate program, of course, is only a first step. Keeping them enrolled and on the path to a Ph.D. is no less difficult.

Several of the Penn State women said the key to retention was faculty commitment to widening access to the discipline. For Ms. Oke, that meant Mr. Bernasconi, who has long dedicated his career to racial inclusion in academe.

Mr. Bernasconi moved from England to the University of Memphis in 1988, mostly because he loved jazz and blues.

But after some time in the United States, he says, he saw how racial disparity affected his social circle: Nearly all of his friends were black, while nearly all his university colleagues were white.

"I realized the level of racism in America," he says, "and I was scandalized by it."

He considered changing careers but decided to change the discipline instead.

Mr. Bernasconi began developing a pipeline of black philosophy Ph.D.s. He visited historically black colleges, pitching the master's program at Memphis, sitting in on undergraduates making class presentations, and building relationships with professors who could serve as talent scouts. That's how he met Ms. Oke, at Spelman College.

Mr. Bernasconi says philosophy doctoral programs, and doctoral programs in general, pay too much attention to a student's résumé and academic pedigree, an attitude that perpetuates privilege.

The question he asks himself while reviewing applications is: With five years of intensive preparation, will the student be as good as any other new Ph.D.?

"I read the writing samples very carefully," he says. "I'm looking for a spark, something that suggests insight."

"You can't teach insight," he adds.

When Ms. Oke, as a master's student at Memphis, expressed doubts about remaining in philosophy, Mr. Bernasconi told her she had that spark. He was convinced that she could land a tenure-track job if she put in the effort.

She told him about how she wanted to explore questions of identity and place, based in part on her own experience as a woman from Nigeria who didn't feel that she fit within any black community in America.

"Robert said to me, 'No other discipline is going to help you understand and move toward answers to these questions like philosophy will,' " Ms. Oke says. "That was the moment I said, 'You're right. You're absolutely right.' "

Instead of quitting philosophy, she enrolled in the philosophy doctoral program at Penn State in 2009, the same year it hired Mr. Bernasconi.

"Professors, and I think it is particularly true for white male professors, often forget just how insecure graduate students feel," Mr. Bernasconi says.

"There are some professors who actually play on students' insecurity to get them to work harder, particularly in a subject like philosophy. You can't do good philosophy out of fear."

While Penn State has built a reputation as supportive of minority and female



Billy Howard for The Chronicle

Jameliah Shorter-Bourhanou perceived an implicit message from other doctoral candidates in philosophy: You don't belong in the discipline. She is now an assistant professor at Georgia College & State U.

philosophers, the recent doctoral recipients say that being a black woman in philosophy remains hard.

Jameliah Shorter-Bourhanou, one of the five doctoral recipients at Penn State, says other students in the program openly asked why there were so many black women around. One white male graduate student once said to her that the only reason she was in the program was that Penn State was trying to diversify. Most such hostility wasn't as overt, and each individual slight could

be explained away. But a collective message emerged: You don't belong in the discipline.

Ms. Shorter-Bourhanou, now an assistant professor at Georgia College & State University, says she has developed rules to help her cope. For one, she limits social gatherings with colleagues to a quick drink, wary that a tipsy colleague might say something he could not unsay.

For some of the new Ph.D.s, it was the classroom, not social events, that was a challenge. The often argumentative, even abrasive tone of philosophy discussions is one reason some scholars say women abandon the discipline.

How a Department Diversified: In Brief

About a decade ago, Penn State's philosophy department decided that it wanted a more diverse graduate-student body. Here's what it has done toward that goal.

Changed recruitment: Instead of waiting for applications to roll in, faculty members search for talent at the undergraduate level and have developed relationships with historically black colleges.

Revamped the curriculum: The department focused on critical philosophy of race, which has helped to make the curriculum more attractive to those who haven't traditionally been represented in philosophy.

Hired a diverse group of professors: Five of the 15 faculty members today are women, and three are members of underrepresented minorities, signaling to graduate applicants the department's commitment to diversity.

Provided extra financial support: Students can apply for additional grants for the summer — a crucial step, some faculty members say, in attracting and retaining underrepresented students, who disproportionately come from lower-income backgrounds than their white counterparts do.

Created an intellectual community: Many faculty members conduct research on critical philosophy of race. In 2013 the department started an academic journal on the topic. Within philosophy, Penn State has become known for this specialty, which also helps with recruitment.

Ayesha Abdullah says she chose to remain quiet in her early years in Penn State's program. Today she would have different advice for a young graduate student. "You have to remember that you earned being there," she says. "Being accepted into graduate school wasn't a gift someone gave you, so you have a right to speak in a way that you feel comfortable. You don't have to imitate that white male over there."

The classroom was a challenge for Ms. Stewart, too, but for her it was as an instructor. Stepping in front of a room full of undergraduates can be nerve-wracking for any graduate student, regardless of race or gender. But the stakes are higher, she says, for black women, who don't fit the usual conception of a philosopher.

"I'd usually have one or two students in every class period that just tried to contradict everything I said," she says. "It makes you a little angry. You've got two, maybe three, degrees at that point, and this little 18-year-old kid thinks he knows more than you do. It's infuriating."

Ms. Stewart was concerned about more than pride. She mostly thought of other minority students and women in the classroom watching her, and of how their perceptions of the discipline — and their place in it — might be affected if she didn't handle the interaction well.

She gradually learned how to adapt her pedagogy and deal with disrupters. She started classes with a short lecture, establishing her authority, before breaking the students into groups. "If they ask an inappropriate question, or a question that's not in the spirit of trying to understand the material," Ms. Stewart says, "I just tell them we're not going to deal with that question right now."

Having a critical mass of minority doctoral students is key to coping with such stress. Many of Ms. Stewart's phone calls to her peers, she recalls, began with, "You'll never believe what happened to me in class today."

The students, along with supportive faculty members, reminded her not to let bad classroom experiences eat at her. "A major part of getting through graduate school," Ms. Stewart says, "is having people around you who can help you not to internalize these messages. They will wreck you."

Within the discipline, efforts to make philosophy more welcoming to women and underrepresented minorities aren't universally applauded, especially the adoption of a critical philosophy of race and analyses of texts by Kant and other prominent thinkers in terms of race and gender.

Brian Leiter, director of the Center for Law, Philosophy, and Human Values at the University of Chicago and an editor of the blog Philosophical Gourmet Report, acknowledges that philosophers such as Kant held racist views. But Kant also had "some pretty bizarre views on masturbation," Mr. Leiter says, and it might not make pedagogical sense to teach that, either.

Moreover, he says, some diversity efforts reek of consumerism. The discipline shouldn't "try to reshape the curriculum not with an eye to philosophical interest or insight but to 'identity politics,'" he wrote in a 2014 essay. "I hope we can remember that the neoliberal view of education is pernicious, even when it's enlisted on behalf of the consumer demands of minorities."

For Ms. Gines, the Penn State faculty member who founded the Collegium of Black Women Philosophers, the discipline needs to be more inclusive about what counts as philosophy.

"Many times it gets presented as a false binary, like you have to get rid of Plato or Aristotle to accommodate women or people of color," says Ms. Gines, who along with Mr. Bernasconi edits *Critical Philosophy of Race*, a journal that Penn State began publishing in 2013.

"The fact is, our syllabi and our publications are political choices," she says.

"Whom we choose to cite or teach makes a difference in either reinscribing a very narrow, myopic view of what philosophy is, or making it more inclusive and

relevant."

The true test of Penn State's approach may be where the recent Ph.D.s end up. Do they stay in academe? Do they land fulfilling jobs in philosophy? These questions come at a time when the academic job market remains tight and some wonder whether universities should be recruiting graduate students into humanities disciplines at all.

With departments trying to diversify, however, several faculty members say the academic job market for black Ph.D. recipients in philosophy is looking better than for the humanities as a whole.

But Ms. Abdullah, who majored in neuroscience as an undergraduate, decided philosophy wasn't for her. She's applying to medical school. "I felt I needed a career that's more relevant in society," she says. "A large part of my dissatisfaction in graduate school was the feeling that when I was writing or publishing papers or talking about a paper at a conference, I was doing it for me rather than some kind of social cause."

The other four students, however, all plan to remain in academe. Ms. Oke, for example, accepted a job in March as an assistant professor at West Chester University of Pennsylvania, justifying Mr. Bernasconi's belief that she would land a tenure-track job. While she remains committed to philosophy, she still thinks it needs to become more relevant to a broader audience. When the discipline doesn't embrace the ideas of diverse practitioners, she says, it's diminished.

"You don't do philosophy in a box or vacuum," Ms. Oke says. "The most rewarding transition in my philosophical career has been moving away from just studying abstract notions to really committing to answering the pertinent questions in life."

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