The Gender Gap Stops Here!

Promoting Women in Philosophy on Campus

Sarah Caputi, Philosophy; Urban Planning · Kimberly Blessing, Ph.D., Philosophy and Humanities

WIP and its Beginnings

Inspired by a 2013 independent study on the underrepresentation of women in philosophy, the goal of this project is to further promote women in philosophy. For various reasons, very few women study philosophy. Only about 16-21% of professional philosophers are women. Additionally, recent publicity has shed light on accounts of sexual discrimination and harassment against women in a number of prestigious philosophy departments. To address these and related issues, a departmental support group for women, “Women in Philosophy” (WIP), was formed in 2013. Women in Philosophy is a faculty-run support group for female students studying philosophy at Buffalo State. WIP is both an academic and social club, with two faculty mentors who are women and professional philosophers. Our official emblem, designed by one of our student-members, is tongue-in-cheek: a woman’s shoe with a stylized Greek phi (Φ) for philosophy) as the heel. WIP provides avenues for women to study and discuss philosophy, but also to share concerns about the challenges related to being a women studying philosophy in particular, or being a woman intellectual in general. The group provides opportunities for female faculty, majors, and minors to gather together to encourage and support one another, network, and discuss their experiences and concerns.

Meeting sessions include mentoring; role-modeling; bonding and encouragement among female majors, minors and faculty; dissemination of information regarding undergraduate research programs, seminars, conferences, and graduate programs in philosophy; documentary screenings discussing women’s rights and portrayal of women in the media; and more. There are other groups and programs similar to WIP on college campuses around the country that have developed to address the underrepresentation of women in philosophy.

Functions of WIP

❖ “To provide the support and mentoring that was not available to us as young women in philosophy, making sure to include plenty of opportunities for women to talk not only about academic, but also non-academic issues such as challenges facing women in relationships, balancing career and family, etc.” - founding member, Dr. Kimberly Blessing
❖ Provide a forum for women to brag about their accomplishments and bolster their confidence as both philosophy students and individuals.
❖ Encourage friendship and camaraderie among women instead of competition and judgment (MissRepresentation, 2010).
❖ Connect students to resources that will better prepare them for graduate school, providing information regarding undergraduate research, conferences, and off-campus seminars.
❖ Recruit new female majors or minors and improve retention

WIP Activities and Events

❖ General meetings over lunch, tea and scones, etc.
❖ Networking and celebratory gatherings on campus or professor’s home.
❖ Four student colloquia presentations, including “Gender in Philosophy.” “What HBO’s Girls Have to Tell Us About the Meaning of Life.”
❖ Field trip for lecture, Susan Wolf, PhD (UNC Chapel Hill), SUNY Buffalo
❖ Women and Philosophy blog: “The Women and Philosophy Project” womenandphilosophyproject.blogspot.com
❖ Dr. Leigh Duffy, who is both PhD in philosophy and a certified yoga instructor, developed a new course designed to recruit new students to philosophy, particularly women, PH 189 Philosophy and Yoga, spring 2014 and fall 2014.

Success?

Has WIP been successful in promoting Women in Philosophy on the Buffalo State campus? Only time will tell us about any long-term benefits of having WIP on campus. In the mean time, success can be measured by student attendance at activities and through a survey given to all WIP members, spring 2014.

Difficulties with scheduling have made it difficult to increase attendance, but most meetings and events have attracted a consistent five to ten students, with as many as 15. For a department with less than 20 female students, this is a respectable turnout.

Surveys asked questions regarding student satisfaction with the group, the benefits of WIP, dissatisfaction with the club, future plans, and more. The benefits were almost unanimous:
❖ Community: “[Provided] the opportunity to cultivate friendships with other women interested in philosophy.” – Rachael Saathoff, 2014
❖ Confidence: “I feel as if I am more confident with...my abilities as a philosopher” – Sarah Johnson, 2016
❖ Direction: “Dr. Blessing and Dr. Duffy have influenced me a lot. Especially with my decision to attend graduate school...” – Samantha Wezowicz, 2014
❖ Awareness: “Made me more aware of issues related to women in the field” – Katie Weiczorek, 2014
❖ Growth: “Interacting with other women, sharing experiences and opinions allowed me to grow as a student and as a woman. I learned being self-confident in [one’s] own achievements does not make one too presumptuous or arrogant, but shows an appreciation of oneself.” – Carissa Handiman, 2014.

The only negatives noted include the difficulty in scheduling, the desire for more events in a semester, and the possibility of including men. Most students would have liked to attend more events themselves, and hoped to see larger turnouts in the future. Also, while most events are open to the public, few men attend. Inviting men to the meetings is something to consider, but perhaps with “caution” as we hope to preserve the current dynamic.

Conclusion

Establishing WIP has positively impacted the women involved, both in their academic experience at Buffalo State and in their personal lives. Women feel more confident in the classroom and more confident to pursue studying philosophy at the graduate level. Additionally, Dr. Blessing noted, “I think our increasing numbers of women are in part the result of WIP.” We hope that the Buffalo State philosophy department will continue to see such progress from WIP and the gender gap will be no more.