

# **In defense of the progressive stack: A strategy for prioritizing marginalized voices during in-class discussion<sup>1</sup>**

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## **ABSTRACT**

*Progressive stacking* is a strategy for prioritizing in-class contributions that allows marginalized students to speak before non-marginalized students. I argue that this strategy is both pedagogically and ethically defensible. Pedagogically, it provides benefits to all students (e.g., expanded in-class discourse) while providing special benefits (e.g., increased self-efficacy) to marginalized students, helping to address historic educational inequalities. Ethically, I argue that neither marginalized nor non-marginalized students are wronged by such a policy. First, I present a strategy for self-disclosure that reduces the risk of inadvertent, unwanted disclosure while respecting marginalized student autonomy in a manner analogous to accommodations provided under the Americans with Disabilities Act. Second, I argue that non-marginalized students are not wronged because such students are not silenced during discussion and because non-marginalized students benefit from the prioritization of marginalized voices.

## **1. Introduction**

Western philosophy is dominated by white males. This domination includes both the makeup of the Western philosophical canon (Beaney 2018; Cherry and Schwitzgebel 2016; Van Norden 2017) and the racial and gender identities of the overwhelming majority of professional

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philosophers (Dacey Jennings et al. 2017; Schwitzgebel and Dacey Jennings 2017). To our credit, we have become increasingly interested in solving this problem via the development of tools like the Diversity Reading List<sup>2</sup> and the implementation of hiring practices seeking to attract underrepresented candidates. Within the classroom, we may wish to add salutary pedagogical techniques to further address our discipline's 'white male problem.'

Progressive stacking, first employed as part of the Occupy Wall Street protests but now beginning to make its way into academia, is one such technique. Progressive stacking prioritizes simultaneous desires to contribute to a discussion—in this case, in-class discussion—roughly by marginalized status. Essentially, students who are members of marginalized groups are given priority over non-marginalized students when determining speaking order.

I argue that progressive stacking is both pedagogically and morally defensible in the philosophy classroom.

Progressive stacking is pedagogically defensible for two reasons. First, prioritizing marginalized voices significantly expands the range of views expressed during in-class discussion, which leads to better philosophical outcomes for all students. Second, prioritizing marginalized voices leads to better outcomes for marginalized students resulting from increased self-efficacy. In other words, allowing marginalized students to see themselves as successful philosophical practitioners leads to better educational outcomes for said students.

Progressive stacking is morally defensible because it addresses social inequalities that permeate higher education in a way that does not unfairly disadvantage students whose voices

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<sup>2</sup> The list "collects high quality texts in philosophy, written by authors from under-represented groups. Its aim is to promote the work of such authors and facilitate finding and using their texts in teaching." See <https://diversityreadinglist.org> (Fokt, Toop, and Blomqvist, n.d.)

are not prioritized.<sup>3</sup> This includes both non-marginalized students and marginalized students who do not wish to be identified as such. Indeed, as I shall argue, progressive stacking not only avoids unfairly disadvantaging such students, but it also provides beneficial effects for all students regardless of status.

My discussion proceeds in four parts. First, I present an overview of progressive stacking in Section 2. Section 3 outlines how progressive stacking can be implemented in the philosophy classroom. Sections 4 and 5 present the pedagogical and ethical cases, respectively, for progressive stacking. The former discusses the beneficial effects the technique has on both marginalized and non-marginalized students, while the latter examines the potential negative effects of progressive stacking. In this section, I argue that marginalized students who do not wish to be identified publicly as such can be provided with a level of plausible deniability and, in the rare cases where obtaining the benefit associated with progressive stacking would require disclosure, are not wronged by drawing an analogy with accommodations provided under accessibility laws like the Americans with Disabilities Act, which unproblematically place responsibility for self-identification on the student in order to gain a benefit to which they are entitled. I also argue that non-marginalized students are not wronged because the progressive stacking strategy can be easily modified on the fly to prevent such students from being silenced.

## **2. The Progressive Stack**

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<sup>3</sup> There is a further case to be made that techniques like progressive stacking can also have longer-term positive effects on philosophy as a discipline, for example, addressing the so-called ‘pipeline problem’ by encouraging a wider range of students to become majors or (eventually) faculty. While I think this is an excellent reason to engage in a range of projects—including the progressive stack—addressing philosophy’s diversity issues, I shall not argue explicitly for this advantage as a reason to implement progressive stacking.

Teaching a philosophy class requires attending to many seemingly mundane logistical details. One of these details regards how to handle instances where multiple students wish to simultaneously contribute to a discussion. There are several techniques one might employ, for example calling on students in the order they raised their hands, prioritizing students who wish to follow up instead of those who wish to initiate a new line of discussion, or favoring students who have not yet spoken. What matters for the purposes of our current discussion is that, unless we call on students randomly, we are prioritizing students' contributions based on some sort of value claim. Prioritizing new voices or follow-ups explicitly reflects a preference for such contributions; some students are given the opportunity to speak before others *because* new voices or a continued focus on a particular line of questioning is judged to be *better* than the alternatives. Even policies prioritizing students based on the order in which they raise their hands may count as valuing some sorts of contributions (e.g., snap judgments or pre-conceived views) over others.<sup>4</sup>

Progressive stacking prioritizes contributions from marginalized voices by allowing them to speak before other, non-marginalized participants. As one member of the Occupy Wall Street movement, where the progressive stack was widely employed during discussions, put the point, “The most oppressed get to speak first” (Quattrochi 2011).

Marginalized status is worth taking seriously as a criterion for prioritizing student contributions precisely because the effects of marginalization are especially pernicious in an educational context. Marginalization occurs when one's group membership prevents them from fully engaging in their society—in this case, the classroom—because such membership causes them to be “ignored, trivialized, rendered invisible and unheard, perceived as inconsequential, de-authorized, ‘other,’ or threatening” (Tucker 1990, 7). Gannon (2017) notes that a student's

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<sup>4</sup> I owe consideration of this particular point to Aaron Bruenger and Lavender McKittrick-Sweitzer.

marginalized status can have “a dramatic effect on classroom interactions.. that often prevent[s] full participation or equitable treatment.” There is plentiful evidence that gender identity, for example, plays a significant role in both who participates in academic discussions and how such participations occurs (Carter et al. 2017). Similarly, race plays an inescapable role in in-class participation (Howard, Zoeller, and Pratt 2006; Saufley, Cowan, and Herman 1983). As Packard (2013) notes, “Race works not only to the detriment of non-white students in the classroom, but provides an advantage for white students. When white students get more attention or higher grades, it serves to reinforce preconceived culturally based stereotypes” (156).

It goes without saying that underrepresented groups’ participation in philosophical discussion is not the result of some inherent inability to philosophize at the level of straight, white men. Instead, there exist dynamics that unfairly impact marginalized students’ abilities to simply be equally engaged members of the classroom community. By prioritizing marginalized voices, these dynamics may be countered.

### **3. Implementing the Progressive Stack**

The aim of this discussion is not merely to note that diversity and inclusiveness are good things that we should strive for in our classroom, but rather that progressive stacking is a practical, beneficial, and defensible strategy that can make one’s classroom more effective and inclusive, regardless of what strategies are also being implemented. Thus, some details regarding how progressive stacking can successfully be implemented are in order.

Before turning to these details, however, it may be useful to note that this section discusses how to implement progressive stacking in fairly broad strokes. The goal in so doing is to provide an overview of how one may incorporate the strategy in their classroom in a way that informs one’s pedagogical choices without being overly prescriptive; while progressive stacking and the

promotion of marginalized voices generally are beneficial pedagogical practices generally, the particulars of each classroom are unique. Thus, the precise details of progressive stacking are left for the reader to incorporate into their own classrooms as practicable.

As I see it, there are at least three issues demanding special attention when implementing the progressive stack. First, we must have a reliable method for determining which students are members of marginalized groups, since not all marginalization is visible. Second, we must have a method that allows us to fairly implement progressive stacking in classes of varying sizes. Finally, we must be able to balance progressive stacking with other in-class aims, especially as they relate to in-class discussion.

### *3.1. Determining marginalized status*

In order to prioritize marginalized voices, we must first know whose voices are marginalized, especially when many marginalized statuses like LGBTQ status, disabilities, and gender identities may not be visible or immediately obvious. Perhaps the most straightforward way to make such a determination is simply to ask our students via a survey on the first day of class. This survey need not go into detail regarding precisely *why* a student is marginalized, but may rather simply ask students to answer a single question: Do you identify as a member of a marginalized group?

To answer this question, students (and the instructor) would need to know what counts as a marginalized group within the particular classroom environment. As Ferguson (1990) puts the point, “When we say marginal, we must always ask, marginal to what?” (9) What is marginalizing in one context may not be marginalizing in another. For example, status as a first generation college student may not count as marginalized outside of a college context, but may count as marginalized within a college context because members of the educational community may discount, ignore, or trivialize the impact being a first generation student has on that student’s ability to succeed academically. Conversely, cisgendered women are marginalized in a

number of social and academic contexts, but if the gender makeup of a particular classroom is such that 90% of the students identify as cis women, this status may not be one that one wishes to take into account when determining which voices to prioritize in class.

Regarding which voices to prioritize, I would suggest that one ought to cast as wide and inclusive a net as possible, incorporating both cultural and academic identities that are marginalized. Further, I suggest a great deal of caution when determining whether a normally marginalized voice ought to be counted as non-marginalized because of in-class demographics, since the effects of cultural marginalization can easily extend into the classroom regardless of an individual class's demographic make-up. To return to the gender example from the previous paragraph, it can be very easy for men to dominate discussion even when drastically outnumbered precisely because of the marginalizing effects gender has within our culture.

One might wonder why marginalized status ought to be determined by a single question, especially if the original goal of progressive stacking was to allow the *most* marginalized voices to speak first. I suggest there are three reasons why a single question is appropriate. One is a practical concern dealing with implementation, essentially that requiring instructors to keep track of more than merely whether a student is marginalized may place too much of a cognitive burden on the instructor to be practical. I discuss this concern in somewhat more detail in the next subsection. Second, providing the benefits of progressive stacking does not require us to know *why* a student is marginalized; it only requires knowing *that* they are marginalized. Finally, determining a fine-grained analysis of intersectional marginalized statuses is difficult—perhaps impossible—under idealized conditions, to say nothing of the conditions we encounter in a typical philosophy class where we lack the time to make precise judgments about relative levels of marginalization.

As an analogy on this final point, we might consider a sort of rough-and-ready utilitarian calculus. While there may exist gradations of goodness or badness that are difficult to parse, we nonetheless remain able to confidently assert that murder is worse than assault or that a \$1,000 donation to charity is better than a \$100 donation. Similarly, we may not be in a position to say that membership in one marginalized group makes one more or less marginalized than membership in a different group, but we can confidently claim that racial minorities are more marginalized than white students or that LGBTQ students are more marginalized than straight students. However, provided we are able to appropriately allow students to self-identify as marginalized, we can at least roughly prioritize marginalized voices as a whole.

### *3.2. The impact of class size on progressive stacking*

A second obvious concern raised by progressive stacking is how class size impacts an instructor's ability to employ the strategy. Essentially, successfully implementing a progressive stack requires the instructor to have an immediate way to determine which students, if any, are members of a marginalized group when determining who should be called on; if Smith, a marginalized student, and Jones, a non-marginalized student, wish to contribute, the instructor must be able to immediately identify that Smith has priority over Jones. An instructor may be able to keep such details easily sorted in a ten-person seminar, but this task becomes increasingly difficult as class sizes and teaching loads increase.

Options for determining which students have priority can be divided into those that place the onus on the instructor (e.g., simply memorizing which students have self-identified as marginalized) and those that place the onus on the student (e.g., bringing some kind of placard that designates one as marginalized, perhaps with different numbers or symbols designating degrees of marginalization). In the case of progressive stacking, it seems relatively straightforward that the onus ought to be placed on the instructor. This is for two reasons. First,



this expectation is not an unreasonable one for us to have of ourselves as instructors, and second, placing the onus on students would place an unfair burden on them.

It is not unreasonable in most settings to expect instructors to know basic information about their students, like how to pronounce their names or their preferred pronouns. Asking instructors to know which students are members of marginalized groups does not ask them to have a catalog of disparate information at their fingertips; it merely adds a binary bit of information to what we as instructors ought to know about our students.

For example, suppose an instructor teaches a fairly standard 4:4 ‘teaching load’ with 30 students per section. In such a case, the instructor would need to learn 120 names, 120 pronouns, and which of 120 students self-identifies as marginalized. This is not an unreasonable request.

Of course, things might be different if one taught a 5:5 with 40 students per section or taught two large lectures with 350 students each. Knowing which students self-identify as marginalized may become impossible, as might knowing each student’s name or preferred pronoun. In such cases, if progressive stacking cannot be implemented fairly or consistently, it may be advisable to abandon the strategy altogether. But such cases are not a shortcoming of the progressive stack. Rather, they are a shortcoming of institutional educational priorities that prevent instructors from being successful educators. Classes and loads of this size will have structural problems that extend well beyond one’s ability to prioritize marginalized voices; essays will not be able to be graded in a reasonable time with meaningful commentary, names will not be learned, meaningful discussion will be more difficult, et cetera. We may, in such circumstances, be forced to abandon certain pedagogical practices, but it does not follow that these practices are somehow bad or ineffective.

Regarding the potential burden placed on students to constantly signal their membership in a marginalized group, such a strategy would have to involve some sort of public disclosure, perhaps constant, of membership in a marginalized group. For example, one might begin discussion by asking if there are any marginalized students who wish to contribute or have student placards that identify (and perhaps quantify) marginalization. We should not do this, I hasten to add, and I take the moral case against such a strategy to be obvious. However, considering something like identifying placards as a hypothetical allows us to more closely examine the detrimental effects such a strategy would have on students.

For one, such strategies remove any sense of plausible deniability for students who may identify as marginalized but not wish have such status publicly confirmed. When the onus is on instructors, such students could conceivably claim that there must not have been any marginalized students who wished to speak or, depending on the instructor's strategy, that their speaking first was one of the times where the instructor decided that progressive stacking was inappropriate for the circumstances. While there may be circumstances in which such disclosure is unavoidable in order to gain speaking priority, discussed in the next section, it is certainly advisable to provide as many opportunities to avoid such forced disclosure as possible.

Additionally, strategies like student placards would constantly identify students as marginalized, even when such identification is irrelevant for the present purposes. If marginalization causes individuals to be prevented from full participation in activities, causing students to be reminded of marginalized status during other portions of class, such as group activities, may cause students to (perhaps inadvertently) marginalize their fellow students during such activities because of the constant reminder. Such a strategy might also lead to attempts to more precisely quantify marginalized status or requests to justify one's marginalized status. If Alpher, Bethe, and Gamow have some public indication that their levels of marginalization are

1, 2, and 3, respectively, one might speculate what the difference between the three is. This might especially be the case if what makes them marginalized is not immediately apparent.

Finally, such a strategy seems especially problematic for marginalized students who do not wish to contribute to discussions; it seems inherently problematic for a student to be forced to declare their perhaps invisible marginalized status for the purposes of facilitating in-class discussion if said student does not wish to be an active participant.

### *3.3. Progressive stacking and other pedagogical aims*

The final issue regarding successful implementation of progressive stacking relates to how the strategy intersects with other in-class pedagogical aims. For example, we may wish to de-emphasize a particular student voice who has come to dominate the conversation or a student may have been waiting patiently to contribute to discussion for some time without having the opportunity to do so. We may wish to invite non-marginalized students to contribute first occasionally either to vary the starting point of our discussions or to provide some sort of cover or plausible deniability that may allow more students to self-identify as marginalized without forcing a disclosure of such marginalization.

Progressive stacking can easily accommodate such concerns, provided we do not require that the strategy serve as an inviolable first principle of classroom discussion. Fortunately, this is not something that progressive stacking requires, nor should it; aside from basic expectations like respect and charitability, there are few if any inviolable rules of in-class discussion as managed by instructors, and progressive stacking is no different. The point I wish to stress is not that progressive stacking must always take priority or that it is somehow incompatible with any other methods of prioritizing in-class contributions, but rather that whatever our values for prioritization may be, marginalized status ought to be given comparatively greater weight because the goal of the strategy is to counter the tendency for less marginalized voices to

dominate classroom discussion in problematic ways that prevent marginalized students from full participation.

#### **4. The Pedagogical Benefits of Progressive Stacking**

One of the clearest benefits of progressive stacking is that it allows for broader discourse within in-class discussion, which is a major component of successful philosophy classes. To put the point somewhat bluntly, allowing marginalized students to speak first all but guarantees increased diversity in a field overwhelmingly dominated by straight white men. More delicately, we increase the chances of doing good philosophy (i.e., searching for truth) when the range of contributing voices is increased. This is true of philosophy in practice, but it is also true when considering the sorts of intellectual virtues we hope to develop in our students.

If we accept that good philosophy is ultimately about the search for truth, discussions dominated by the same members of the same less- or non-marginalized groups diminishes the range of possible solutions for our consideration. As philosophers, we become a bit like the drunk who looks for his keys under the streetlight in the parking lot; he knows he lost them in the park but looks under the streetlight anyway because the light is better there. For example, consider how the exclusion of marginalized views has narrowed contemporary discussions of the so-called ‘no-self’ view of personal identity. As Oldenberg (2015) notes, such discussions frequently draw from modern scholars like Hume and have historically ignored or downplayed similar and similarly well-developed Eastern accounts predating Hume by thousands of years, offering unique contributions that Hume-style theories miss.

Though truth is the ultimate goal of philosophy writ large, it is often not the primary goal in many philosophy classrooms—especially at introductory and lower levels that take up much of our energy and contain most of our students. At the very least, it shares its primacy with other,

more modest goals like simply teaching our students how to do philosophy. In such contexts, progressive stacking may provide an especially valuable opportunity to beneficially broaden in-class discourse.

As a quick case study, consider goals I have for my introductory students, which I take to be decidedly uncontroversial. I want my students to be able to understand and analyze arguments. I want them to express their views clearly and concisely. They should be able to charitably consider arguments for others' positions. Perhaps selfishly, I want them to see philosophy as vital and interesting and obviously connected to their everyday lives. Progressive stacking has the ability to contribute meaningfully to each of these goals.

For example, when discussing the nature of leadership, I asked students to reflect on what the concept meant to them and to provide examples of good leaders, with 'good' intentionally left unspecified. A marginalized student provided three examples: Larry Hoover, a founder of the Gangster Disciples street gang; Fred Hampton, a political organizer and chair of the Illinois Black Panther Party; and Jeff Fort, a co-founder of the most powerful street gang in Chicago, the Black P. Stone Rangers. Several discussion participants were somewhat taken aback. The standard examples were campus, business, and political leaders who were uncontroversially good both in the sense of being effective and being perceived as moral, while the student's respective examples were—by the student's admission—"not good people." Indeed, Hampton was assassinated in an FBI raid, and Hoover and Fort are currently serving life sentences at ADX Florence, a supermax prison, for crimes including murder, conspiracy and, in Fort's case, weapons charges involving the Libyan government.

These examples led to a robust discussion of whether moral behavior was a feature of good leadership. The marginalized student's view was that it was not; good leadership was simply effective leadership, regardless of the morality of the leader's goals and actions. The

class's view, at least initially, differed. As a result, the dialogue asked all participants to stretch themselves in ways that they might not have been asked to, absent these examples. To make his point, the student was required to clearly and coherently explain not only why his interlocutors should adopt his view, but also who the people he used as examples were.<sup>5</sup> His interlocutors were forced to consider and evaluate an argument they, judging by the initial tone of the discussion, had not anticipated. Both sides had to charitably process responses to positions they initially thought obvious. And finally, the resulting discussion was vital in a way that many classroom discussions, sadly, are not.

I should note that such discursive broadening can certainly take place in the absence of progressive stacking; non-marginalized students can just as easily bring up examples of effective-but-immoral leadership, like Erwin Rommel, Robert E. Lee, or Charles Manson. The point of the progressive stack within the context of broadened discussion is that it makes such broadening more likely by offering marginalized students greater access to classroom discussion.

Though the ability to broaden discussion is an important benefit when considering the progressive stack, it is perhaps ancillary to the benefits provided directly to marginalized students. Specifically, implementing a progressive stack provides marginalized students more opportunities to see themselves as successful philosophical practitioners, which will help such students at increased risk of negative educational outcomes succeed academically. For example, the student in the preceding example had the opportunity to engage in a vigorous, successful philosophical debate when defending his view of leadership where his position and arguments were taken seriously despite (and perhaps because of) their comparative heterodoxy. When non-

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<sup>5</sup> The overwhelming majority of students at the University of Minnesota Rochester are from within 90 miles of campus, which is approximately 350 miles from Chicago. Thus, there was no reason to suppose that any of them would be familiar with the student's examples.

marginalized students dominate classroom discussion, it simply takes opportunities to see oneself successfully doing good philosophy away from marginalized students.

Self-efficacy is especially important when considering a student's prospects for academic success. Given philosophy's dominance by white males and philosophers' stereotype *as* white males, marginalized students' ability to succeed in the philosophy classroom is undermined by stereotype threat (Saul 2013). Indeed, there is a great deal of research demonstrating that underrepresented students face unique challenges in the classroom that make them less likely to succeed academically.<sup>6</sup> At least part of the challenge marginalized and underrepresented students face is being made to feel—explicitly or implicitly—like they don't belong in an academic environment.

Not all of those feelings can be directly addressed by instructors. For example, an instructor assigned to teach a specific course cannot guarantee that underrepresented students will see themselves in the instructor. As a straight, cisgendered, white male who was able to identify as first-generation only by the very broadest of definitions, very few marginalized students will be able to see themselves in me, for example. In such cases—perhaps especially in such cases—implementing a progressive stack can provide a valuable opportunity to increase student self-efficacy, allowing marginalized students to see themselves as successful practitioners whose views and philosophical abilities are worth being taken seriously.

Providing students the opportunity to see themselves as successful practitioners has been shown to increase performance in the class itself, in addition to making overall academic success more likely (Chemers, Hu, and Garcia 2001). As noted previously, factors beyond students' control that prevent equal participation and treatment result in marginalized students lowered

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<sup>6</sup> See (Peltier, Laden, and Matranga 1999) for a review of the relevant literature.

self-efficacy. Such negative impacts on students' academic success are quite different from cases where students' academic failures can be traced to actions for which they are responsible. There is a clear difference between students who fail because structures are not in place to help overcome structural inequalities beyond the student's control and students who fail because they simply didn't feel like doing the reading or couldn't be bothered to seek help with their essay. If our goal is to provide an equitable environment where student success or failure is based on the student's efforts, rather than contingent structural factors beyond the student's control, prioritizing students who face such contingent barriers seems like a clearly justified pedagogical choice.

### **5. A Moral Defense of Progressive Stacking**

No practice, regardless of its benefits, ought to be implemented if it is not morally defensible. Typically, a pedagogical practice is so broadly accepted or anodyne in its implementation that it does not require a moral defense. We do not, for example, take time to justify take-home exams or pop quizzes. But there are cases where the practice carries with it the possibility of harming or wronging our students,<sup>7</sup> and in such cases, an explicit moral defense ought to be available. Progressive stacking represents just such a case, especially since instructors who have implemented the progressive stack have been accused of morally impermissible discrimination against non-marginalized groups.

To take a recent and reasonably well-known example, historian Stephanie McKellop has come under fire for using the progressive stack in class (Flaherty 2017; Rabin 2017; Zimmerman 2017). Indeed, use of this strategy has been controversial enough that McKellop's teaching has

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<sup>7</sup> See, for example, defenses of in-class laptop restrictions, in which such policies are defended against claims of paternalism, rights restriction, etc. (e.g., (McCreary 2009; Wright 2016))



come under investigation by administration at the University of Pennsylvania. Steven Fluharty, the Dean of the School of Arts and Sciences at Penn, writes in an email that the university is “looking into [McKellop’s teaching]... to ensure that our students were not subject to discriminatory practices in the classroom and to ensure that all of our students feel heard and equally engaged” (Fluharty 2017).

If progressive stacking is morally impermissible, it would be because it impermissibly harms our students. I argue in this section that it does not by advancing two separate arguments. First, I argue that progressive stacking does not harm the marginalized students it seeks to prioritize. Second, I argue that if progressive stacking harms non-marginalized students, any resulting harm is either not impermissible or able to be mitigated. Since progressive stacking ultimately benefits both marginalized and non-marginalized students, this second worry is misplaced.

### *5.1. Progressive stacking does not harm the students it seeks to prioritize*

It may seem odd to ask how a strategy designed to aid marginalized students by prioritizing their voices would harm the very students it is designed to help, especially when progressive stacking has the benefits outlined in the previous section. The potential problem arises when taking into account the fact that not all marginalized statuses are readily apparent and not all marginalized individuals wish to be identified as such; some statuses may not be publicly disclosed. For example, this discussion has frequently used race as an identifier of marginalized status both because the data on racial discrimination—both explicit and implicit—overwhelmingly demonstrates that non-whites are marginalized with respect to whites, but also because race is often an obvious, visible signifier in ways that sexual orientation, disability, or other marginalized statuses are not.

Without thoughtful implementation, progressive stacking could further harm students with such invisible signifiers by further marginalizing them in one of two ways. First, we may inadvertently force disclosure in order to grant invisibly marginalized students priority in discussions. Second, we may ultimately further silence invisibly marginalized students who do not disclose.

For example, suppose Smith is gay, but is not open about his sexuality. Further suppose Smith presents no visible signifiers of membership in a marginalized group. As a member of a marginalized group, progressive stacking ought to prioritize Smith's contribution. But since there is no obvious signifier of marginalization, it seems implementing a progressive stack forces Smith into a dilemma. He must either disclose his sexual orientation to gain priority or must remain silent, forgoing the advantages afforded by the progressive stack while also facing any other attendant harms associated with continued marginalization.

It seems profoundly unfair that membership in some marginalized groups are generally readily identifiable while membership in others is not. Progressive stacking may therefore be easily applied to the former sets of cases while simultaneously avoiding pernicious dilemmas like whether to out oneself or continue to be silently marginalized.

There are two potential responses to such cases, one involving a strategy for implementing the progressive stack so that invisibly marginalized students can have a sort of plausible deniability should they wish it, and the other drawing an analogy with certain legally available accommodations (for example, via ADA accommodations) that force disclosure of some status conferring an educational benefit because the benefit outweighs the corresponding drawback associated with revealing one's status.

In the first case, recall our previous discussion of explicit identifiers of marginalized status, such as placards, when determining how to prioritize in the heat of in-class discussion. One

objection to such a strategy, I suggested, was that such strategies remove any possible plausible deniability to students who may wish to claim the right to have their contributions prioritized because of marginalized statuses they do not necessarily wish to be publicly revealed. This is precisely the sort of marginalized student who may be harmed if progressive stacking is not implemented thoughtfully; they seem to face a dilemma between outing themselves, which they may not wish to do, and forgoing an educational benefit to which they would be entitled.

Instructors may mitigate, though likely not completely remove, this concern by announcing that progressive stacking will frequently—but not exclusively—prioritize marginalized voices by giving them the opportunity to speak first. By couching the strategy in these terms, it allows students an off ramp if they are called on early in a discussion but do not necessarily wish for their fellow students to know that they are marginalized. Perhaps their contribution was one instance where the instructor wished to call on a non-marginalized student. Perhaps the circumstances were such that a different priority was at play. Essentially, if the only people who know that a student self-identifies as marginalized are the student and the instructor, only the student and instructor need know with certainty that the student was given priority because of their marginalized status.

However, let us suppose for the sake of argument that circumstances dictate that the only options available to a student are exposure or forgoing the advantages of progressive stacking. Such cases would be analogous to disclosures associated with various laws requiring accommodations for persons with disabilities, such as Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) accommodations. Such accommodations, along with the disclosures required to obtain said accommodations, are generally taken to be generally unproblematic when implemented thoughtfully.

I should remark at the outset, though, that such disclosures and accommodations are not without their own problems and constitute the legal minimum we are required to do for our students. In other words, we can and often should do more than the ADA requires of us. For example, we should seek to minimize the instances in which students are forced to publicly disclose the fact that they have a disability in order to obtain the benefit to which they are entitled. Similarly, implementing a progressive stack ought to allow students to claim the benefits of the strategy without forcing unwanted disclosure via strategies like those outlined above. But for the purposes of our present discussion, my goal is to merely use ADA accommodations as a rough framework that could be used to sort out cases where the only options are disclosure or an inability to claim the benefit.

I should also note that there are important disanalogies between marginalized status and disability, though given society's view of the disabled, disability itself is often marginalizing. For the purposes of my discussion, the important similarity is this: both disability and marginalization can be addressed, in part, by attending to the environment of the individual, rather than viewing their disability/marginalization as somehow central to the individual *qua* individual. For example, if Smith is confined to a wheelchair and cannot reach the second floor because stairs provide the only access, the problem is with the built environment and not with Smith. Similarly, if Jones is marginalized because of her gender, the problem is society's marginalization of women, rather than the mere fact that Jones is female.<sup>8</sup>

Like marginalized statuses, the visibility of disability falls on a spectrum from invisible (e.g., test anxiety) to inescapably obvious (e.g., quadriplegia). When addressing ADA accommodations, our response is not whether the disability is visible or invisible, but rather

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<sup>8</sup> I owe consideration of this point to helpful comments from an anonymous reviewer.

whether the individual in question is entitled to the accommodation. In the case of an ADA accommodation, a student must affirmatively seek out that accommodation, disclosing the nature of their disability in order to determine what sorts of accommodations are reasonable and necessary. Thus, if the student does not disclose, they are not entitled to the accommodation. Importantly, the precise nature of the student's disability (e.g., dyslexia, test anxiety, etc.) is required to be disclosed only to staff in the appropriate office; instructors of students with a disability are informed only of the disability's general nature and accommodations that may be appropriate for the student in the instructor's class.

In the case of the progressive stack, we might similarly ask students to confidentially self-disclose in a way that would allow us as instructors to recognize a student's marginalized status and allow them the ability to speak first, for example via a survey similar to the one discussed previously. We would not need to know the precise nature of the student's marginalized status, since progressive stacking produces the same outcome regardless of marginalized status—the marginalized student's voice is prioritized. Naturally, we would not then announce that we will call on a student on the grounds that they are marginalized in a specific way (e.g., Smith is transgendered) any more than we would announce that Jones is in need of a note-taker because of her dyslexia, even if we know Smith's status or Jones' condition. Just like students who are eligible for ADA accommodations, students who choose to disclose marginalized status may do so, and students who do not wish to do so need not.

Of course, allowing students to self-disclose marginalized status without disclosing *precisely* what that status is opens the system up to abuse, intentional or otherwise. Perhaps a student believes that the whole exercise of progressive stacking is liberal hogwash and registers as marginalized to prove a point or stick it to the instructor. Perhaps a student genuinely but wrongly believes that some feature of their identity confers on them marginalized status. My

inclination with such cases is leave them be. It is unlikely that enough students will perniciously seek to upset the apple cart or mistakenly claim marginalized status to throw off the balance of discussion within the progressive stack. But even if an instructor faces such challenges, the core strategy of disclosure can be modified to adapt to these challenges relatively easily.

At this point, it is important to note that progressive stacking will almost certainly publicly identify some students as being marginalized in some way, even if the precise nature of that marginalization is not readily apparent and even if steps are taken to provide the sort of plausible deniability discussed earlier. If Smith is regularly called on first in our example, it will likely be clear that Smith is somehow being prioritized, even if he never publicly outs himself. Indeed, the fact that such prioritization will seem obvious in some cases, coupled with the benefits of pedagogical transparency with our students, makes clearly communicating one's intention to employ progressive stacking a vital part of the strategy's successful implementation.

Though there may be no way to avoid the sort of public disclosure invisibly marginalized students would face in all cases, the ADA analogy again provides us cases where such similar public disclosures are not judged to outweigh the benefits of the policy. For example, if Jones is entitled to time-and-a-half exams in a quiet testing space, she will necessarily be absent from class on exam days if such accommodations are provided via a testing center located elsewhere on campus. Provided a class is small enough or observant enough, Jones' accommodation will be disclosed via her absence. This disclosure, though, is not sufficient to prevent us from providing for Jones' accommodation; the judgment is made that the benefits of the accommodation outweigh the drawbacks. Similarly in Smith's case, it may be the case that the ability to be recognized as a marginalized voice outweighs any drawbacks associated with non-specific disclosure of marginalization.

What is important in both the Smith and the Jones cases—and what I think makes the ADA analogy compelling—is the fact that in both cases, it remains up to the student whether to disclose. In other words, it is up to the student to determine whether the benefits of disclosure outweigh the drawbacks. Just as there is no requirement that Jones disclose her disability, there is no requirement that Smith disclose his marginalized status; it is up to each of them to make decisions as adults to pursue the course of action they believe to be in their best interests. While we may disagree with a student’s ultimate decision to disclose or not, and while the decision to disclose or not will have effects on the student’s educational outcomes that we may agree or disagree with, there comes a point where we need to respect students’ decisions (and their attendant consequences) as those made by the reasonable, competent adults they are.

5.2. *Progressive stacking does not impermissibly harm the students it deprioritizes*

If one group of students is regularly given speaking priority over another group of students, it seems that the group without priority can make at least a *prima facie* case that they are being discriminated against and therefore impermissibly harmed. This is, after all, the basis of the claim in favor of progressive stacking; *ceteris paribus*, marginalized groups are discriminated against because they are discouraged from speaking in class, even if that discouragement is not explicit. What’s more, the seeming discouragement of non-marginalized speech *is* explicit in this case. Thus, such students seem obviously owed an account of why progressive stacking does not wrong them.

This is not, I should note, idle philosophizing; something like this seems to be the line of reasoning implied in Fluharty’s response to the McKellop case. The idea that Penn must “ensure that [its] students were not subject to discriminatory practices in the classroom and to ensure that all of [its] students feel heard and equally engaged” clearly implies that any concerns related to McKellop’s teaching are concerns about how non-marginalized students were treated by the

policy. In essence, we must answer the charge that progressive stacking shifts the wronging from marginalized to non-marginalized groups, when a more appropriate response might be something like a discussion policy that does not favor any one group.

When considering the effects of progressive stacking on non-marginalized students, four responses immediately spring to mind. First, employing an alternative marginalization-blind policy ignores other factors that actively and impermissibly harm marginalized students by discouraging their participation. Second, it is important to keep in mind that non-marginalized students are able to reap several of the benefits associated with progressive stacking. Third, the reality of classroom discussion is such that it is highly unlikely that non-marginalized voices will be completely shut out. Fourth and finally, we should remember that progressive stacking is one of several methods we employ for prioritizing discussion; we can prioritize or deprioritize it on the fly as we do any of our other methods. Overall, I argue that these factors show that non-marginalized students are not harmed by progressive stacking on balance.

Given discussion of the factors that actively discourage marginalized students' participation and success earlier in this discussion, I have relatively little to say about the claim that marginalization-blind policies would be preferable to progressive stacking. If we take seriously the idea that the sort of discouragement marginalized students face is impermissibly harmful, and if we recognize that discussion policies that do not prioritize marginalized voices discourage marginalized students in that way, then we ought to conclude that marginalization-blind discussion policies are a non-starter.

Such claims that favoring one group is impermissible, therefore it is equally impermissible to favor another group as recompense lie at the heart of analogous claims of "reverse racism" or "reverse sexism" in other areas like Affirmative Action. These claims hold up only if one ignores the chain of events that brought us to our current situation; we can reasonably expect each of us



to stand or fall on our own merits only if we are not unfairly penalized by the ground upon which we stand.

Similarly, I have little to add regarding the benefits non-marginalized students draw from progressive stacking that has not already been noted. If one of the benefits of progressive stacking is the introduction of novel viewpoints to classroom discussion, often by members of marginalized groups, it seems clear that non-marginalized students are able to reap this benefit. Indeed, non-marginalized students seem especially well-positioned to benefit from such viewpoints, since the sorts of practices philosophers try to develop in our students (charitable interpretation, analysis, etc. of unfamiliar and novel views) are especially salient when non-marginalized students are confronted with marginalized viewpoints or arguments. In essence, the pedagogical benefits gained by non-marginalized students are themselves a kind of ethical justification for said students being subjected to this policy.

The final two points regarding the practicalities of in-class discussion are closely related. One of the concerns related to progressive stacking is that, given enough participation by marginalized students, non-marginalized students will be somehow prevented from taking part in classroom discussion. In essence, marginalized voices will come to dominate the conversation to the point that non-marginalized voices will effectively be silenced. This concern is somewhat different from the first worry that non-marginalized voices will merely be deprioritized; the worry here is that non-marginalized voices will essentially be unable to speak.

While this is a reasonable point in theory, I believe our experiences in the philosophy classroom can safely put such concerns to rest. No matter how much I wish there were so many students demanding to contribute to discussion every day that I had to seriously consider the possibility that some students were being completely silenced, alas! It is not the case. Progressive stacking does not silence non-marginalized voices, it merely asks them to wait at the back of the

queue, so to speak, until other voices have had a chance to contribute. Even on days with robust participation and discussion it seems highly unlikely that any student will be outright prevented from speaking, should they wish to.

But, for the sake of argument, let us imagine such a day where the electricity of robust discussion zips through the air and so many hands are raised that there doesn't seem to be time to hear from everyone who wishes to speak. What then shall we do? We have all faced such cases on occasion, and I think it is important to keep in mind here not only *that* we were able to address such cases, but *how* we regularly address such cases by rearranging our priorities on the fly. When a small group of students monopolizes discussion, for example, we will often announce a desire for new voices to contribute. If time permits, we may even do things like rearrange or edit our lectures on the fly to allow for more discussion; perhaps the point on Slide 18 is not as valuable as allowing five more minutes for everyone to contribute. The point is, our policies and priorities for in-class discussion are not set in stone, and we can and should adjust them on the fly to create a better classroom environment. As discussed previously, the various moment-to-moment priorities have no effect on progressive stacking only if we misidentify the strategy as some sort of inviolable first principle. Thus, if some voices are in danger of being inadvertently silenced, we may adjust on the fly.

Ultimately, progressive stacking not only provides benefits to non-marginalized students in the form of increased opportunities to practice the sorts of philosophical activities we are trying to develop in all of our students, but also does so in a way where the harm is at best minimal—being asked to wait a moment to speak is not in and of itself a great burden—and can be mitigated in the rare case that the harm is problematic. Given this, it seems clear that progressive stacking does not prevent non-marginalized voices from being heard generally, and

when such cases arise, there is either a pedagogical benefit or the ability to correct the situation, making it difficult to conclude that non-marginalized students are being impermissibly harmed.

## **6. Conclusions and Future Directions**

As philosophers, it is vital that we recognize that even the most mundane of decisions we make in the classroom, like which students to call on, can have profoundly ethical dimensions. This is especially true when the ethical issues we face are the direct result of our discipline's historical features. Thus, I have proposed incorporating progressive stacking into our classroom practices. By favoring marginalized voices in our discussions, we can address philosophy's history of marginalization while having a positive pedagogical effect on our students. This technique is not only pedagogically defensible, but also ethically defensible, since avenues are available to address any potentially impermissible harms. Addressing philosophy's 'white male problem' will take a variety of strategies addressing a range of issues. In other words, progressive stacking will not address the problem on its own, but it will allow us to make important progress in ways that other strategies like preferential hiring or diverse course readings cannot.

As a final note, I would like to point out and encourage scholarship on the empirical effects of progressive stacking. The phenomenon is new enough within academia that little, if any, empirical work has been done on the effects of progressive stacking in the classroom. Certainly, there is a great deal of empirical work discussing the empirical benefits of strategies that address marginalization generally, as well as specific strategies addressing marginalization. This discussion has attempted to provide a theoretical defense of progressive stacking that makes what I take to be reasonable assumptions about how such a strategy would be received. However, teaching and learning literature generally and literature on philosophical pedagogy specifically would benefit tremendously from such an analysis.

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