

## **IDN Grant Report**

University of Denver/Iliff School of Theology Joint Doctoral Program in the Study of Religion  
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The purpose of our IDN grant was to gain “an authentic understanding of JDP faculty and students of color’s experiences with our curriculum, institutional structures, and relationships in order to develop a comprehensive and systematic support plan.” The grant has succeeded in giving us a picture of our community of color’s experiences with the program and allowing us to begin forming a plan to improve students of color’s thriving. We conclude this grant by recognizing that we are only at the beginning of that process, and we have a lot of work to do.

### **Grant Activities**

Dr. Benny Liew, our IDN consultant, spent three days on campus in March, 2018 interviewing students, alumni, and faculty of color, as well as administrators and other JDP faculty. He gathered additional information from our websites, institutional reports and documents, and from phone conversations with members of the JDP community. Dr. Liew submitted a detailed 9-page report of his findings in June, which the JDP faculty directors and deans spent the summer reviewing. A letter from the program’s co-deans to the entire JDP community at the beginning of this academic year provided a synopsis of the findings and a plan for moving ahead with the work of the grant.

A faculty committee composed of five faculty of color, one of whom serves on the JDP Committee, and one additional faculty liaison to the JDP Committee, formed early in fall of 2018. This committee analyzed the full report and began discussions to prioritize the findings, consider solutions, and organize a plan. They settled on a two-prong approach for the next grant initiative that focuses on 1) improving the experience of current students by mentoring students and training faculty, and 2) marketing the program and recruiting students of color through a re-emphasis on social justice. The second approach will be greatly aided by the success of the first, since the stories current students tell always impact recruitment efforts. It also reflected the committee’s concern for current students, and for making meaningful improvements to their experience today, rather than focusing solely on the future.

These activities were followed up in October with a full JDP faculty meeting to discuss the report, the committee’s progress, and next steps. Dr. Liew, who had previously met through Zoom with the committee and separately with the directors, was present by Zoom at this all-faculty meeting as well, and answered faculty questions. He has been a wonderful resource and partner throughout. Although the original grant proposal called for two different consultants, we chose to retain Dr. Liew throughout the process and believe that this has helped us with continuity and momentum.

In addition to the JDP’s IDN committee, which is working closely with the JDP directors, the deans appointed a six-person task force, half faculty and half students, two-thirds of whom are

people of color, to work on one prominent issue involving faculty engagement with students and student access to faculty. The formal charge of the task force is to survey students and faculty in the program to understand firsthand the root causes behind a lack of engagement whether real or perceived. Based on the findings from this information gathering, the task force will provide a set of recommendations to the deans that include short term (no/low cost) initiatives and some long-term plans that require institutional investment. This work will begin next term (January 2019) with a goal to begin adoption of some of these high impact practices in order to effect change at the start of Fall 2019.

## **Lessons Learned/Findings**

### *Admissions*

The consultant's report confirmed many things we believed about our situation and clarified or sharpened others. For example, we wrote in the grant proposal that since reducing the size of our cohorts "we believe [the number of students of color] is falling below a critical mass needed for these students to thrive." The report showed that applications from domestic students of color have been falling each year to a reported 0 completed applications in fall 2018.

Subsequent research showed that we are admitting international students of color (which our institution does not track at the application stage), which made the lack of domestic students of color less evident. Clearly, we must focus efforts on greatly increasing the applicant pool for domestic students of color.

- Because AAR/SBL was in Denver this year we hosted a lunch and invited the FTE-IDN master's students. This was very well attended by these prospective students and by our own. The atmosphere was welcoming and warm, faculty spoke briefly about their work, and everyone mixed and talked. This has great potential as a recruiting tool.
- We are planning new marketing efforts focused on HBCUs and HSIs with the help of our IDN committee. The PANAAWTM (Pacific, Asian, and North American Asian Women in Theology and Ministry) is also an important organization for us.
- An effort to engage alumni of color in making brief videos for our website came to naught because most were unable to attend this conference, but we will get this done through remote technology.

The consultant's report provided varied and conflicting ideas from faculty and students about why our numbers of new students of color are low. These included current or graduated students telling potential students about their less than satisfactory experience, a belief among some faculty that eliminating concentrations—especially the Religion and Social Change concentration which attracted many students of color—made the program's emphasis on social justice less visible, and general lack of financial aid. The report also revealed that neither faculty nor students really know the process for marketing, recruitment, or admission of students to the JDP. That is a communication issue that the directors are now tackling through a campaign of information about the JDP to everyone on our campuses. The financial aid concerns are being addressed by ongoing efforts to adjust the budget to better support students, as well as small steps of progress made this past year toward joint institutional fund-raising for the JDP.

### *Reputation and Identity*

The report identified institutional structural issues that have for many years been discussed and blamed for a variety of perceived programmatic ills. The current leadership, deans as well as directors, were all new to their positions in 2017, however, and they are finding it possible to work collaboratively and effectively within the current structure. Thus, rather than try to change a complicated two-institution structure for which all agree there is no ideal solution, we have asked our community to give us a little time to see if we can change the culture, improve processes, and create conditions for thriving.

At the same time, we recognize the reality of DU's whiteness, which lies behind its reputation as an elitist white establishment: DU is a predominantly white institution (PWI) with only 22% of undergraduate and graduate students of color, and 18% full-time faculty of color. The JDP's leadership is also majority white. All agree that it would be good for the program to have a director of color, yet someone with sufficient seniority and administrative skills will be needed, and the three-year alternating-institution director-assistant director system means that this will take time. The current leadership can help establish a pipeline by recruiting from both institutions faculty of color who have (or who will soon gain) senior associate or full professor status and who believe that change is possible. For now, the current directors and program manager of the JDP have reached out for additional diversity training. We hope this will also help pave a path toward more training for white faculty as we move forward.

### *Teaching and Learning*

Students reported a desire for more doctoral-only classes, more students of color in all their classes, more frequent classroom engagement in issues of race and ethnicity, and for all faculty, not just some, to be fully literate with regard to minoritized scholarship. We have excellent resources at both institutions that we can draw upon to address this. Existing diversity workshops, presentations, and discussions, as well as individual conversations with faculty, are likely to become part of the plan of approach. Conversations have also begun with other PhD directors to share doctoral classes and faculty where interests and needs overlap (e.g. Social Work shares a need for classes in qualitative research and social justice with the JDP). This may expand the number of PhD-only classes that students can access.

### **Budget**

We have spent what we predicted in most cases, but we over-estimated the amount of work our graduate assistant would need to do, so there was \$900 left in that category. In addition, our consultant's schedule did not allow a second in-person visit, so we altered some of his budgeted travel allowance to cover other expenses toward the grant's goals, including \$500 of the JDP Program Manager's time administering the grant's finances, as previously approved by FTE. We have \$2,030 left in the grant budget that we would like to roll into our next grant proposal, which focuses on programmatic and culture change.

We are profoundly grateful for this grant, which has given us an excellent beginning tackling a complex problem.