

University of Denver/Illiff School of Theology Joint Doctoral Program in the Study of Religion
2019 IDN Experimentation Grant Application
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A Plan to Improve the Thriving of JDP Students of Color (SOC)

Institutional Mission/Profile

Drawing broadly upon the resources of both institutions, the University of Denver-Illiff School of Theology Joint Doctoral Program in the Study of Religion (JDP) prepares globally minded scholar-teachers through dynamic, interdisciplinary training in the study of religion as theorized and lived. This mission is supported by Illiff's vision to "transform the world by creating new and renewed local and global communities of inclusive justice by generating critical scholarship and engaging what is sacred," and by DU's vision to "be a great private university dedicated to the public good."

Statement of Need

After a full year exploring the experiences of our students of color and the institutional frameworks that help shape those experiences, we are excited to move forward with the development of a comprehensive and systematic plan of support to improve recruiting, retention and thriving of our SOC. Our IDN Committee is in place to do this work in partnership with JDP leadership and related initiatives at our parent institutions.

Description of the Work

Using the consultant's report from our first grant, we will develop a comprehensive multi-year plan to improve the thriving of JDP students of color, while also implementing things that can be tackled in 2019. For this implementation we take a two-pronged approach: 1) improve the experience of current SOC by fostering a more responsive, culturally literate and sensitive community 2) increase the number of SOC with attention to social justice issues.

Improving Student-of-Color Experience

Many things were identified that could improve students' experiences: better financial support, better and more consistent mentoring, greater sense of community through additional social events, more responsive faculty, greater public recognition of the JDP by its two institutions, more PhD-only classes, and greater engagement with minoritized scholarship in more classes, among others. We propose three primary areas of engagement:

1. A task force has already been appointed by the Deans to study **faculty responsiveness** to JDP students and make recommendations.
2. We plan to develop videos and workshops to train our faculty to mentor SOC, as well as train advanced students in peer-to-peer **mentoring**. At the same time, we will create a mentor manual for faculty and staff that will serve all students, with special sections for

issues that are primary concerns for SOC, women, and LGBTQI students. By emphasizing mentor training, we hope to create a sustainable culture of support for students that will continue even as faculty and student mentors come and go.

3. An additional area of concern is a **perceived lack of sensitivity, knowledge about the work of scholars of color, and attention to diverse pedagogies** among some white faculty; compounded by students' fear that race and ethnicity cannot be safely engaged outside of a few specific courses. This is a larger issue than the JDP, since all of our faculty come from Iliff or DU, but we will work with the DU Office for Diversity and Inclusive Excellence and with Iliff staff to provide workshops, as well as forums for discussion among students and faculty around issues of concern. We can promote the diversity training and workshops offered by the Office of Teaching and Learning and explore the creation of a core JDP graduate faculty membership that could require specific competencies in teaching diverse audiences and engaging with difficult subjects. With this in mind we will use the grant to incentivize faculty to receive training in various workshops. If successful, this preparatory training in winter/spring will lead to fall panel-discussion-led JDP community conversations around issues of race/ethnicity and intersectional identity in the study of religion. These conversations could revolve around common readings and specific issues. Every year we bring in a Vincent Harding Memorial Scholar of Color for workshops and lectures, so a careful choice about the next such speaker could intersect well with this initiative.

Increasing the Number of SOC through our Social Justice Focus

1. Modifications to our curriculum, and possibly to our vision statement and requirements, will make the social justice emphasis of the JDP more robust and visible. Under discussion is a change from the current faculty area of strength called "Religion, Race, and Ethnicity" to "Social Justice (race, ethnicity, class, gender, sexuality, ability...)." Adding newer DU faculty whose research intersects this area will also help expand this social justice presence.
2. An online social justice class currently under discussion could enroll prospective students, newly admitted students, and current students as an introduction to the broad arena of religion and social change. Each faculty member who teaches classes in a specific area of social justice might prepare one digital-video-recorded unit in this five- or ten-week course as a way of introducing students to the subjects and problems, as well as faculty. Recording the sessions will help make the course sustainable, so that an advanced JDP SOC can teach it using the videos and suggested readings, updated with current issues and scholarship and supplemented with on-line discussions to ensure robust critical engagement with the issues. This will give advanced SOCs a chance to teach as instructor-of-record, an opportunity we currently offer only rarely.
3. There has also been some preliminary discussion about creating a social justice requirement, so that all JDP students would engage with these issues, not necessarily

through a single required class, but more likely by allowing students to choose one from many classes and/or by integrating these concerns into many existing classes that are not focused exclusively on justice issues. While we don't know exactly what the end result will be, the grant will allow us to hold faculty and student meetings about this, develop the online course, and investigate other options. We hope that by elevating social justice, we will attract more students of color and simultaneously improve the culture and solidify community around common concerns for creating social change.

Relationship Between Improving SOC Experience and Increasing the Number of SOC

The two prongs of our grant work together in multiple ways. Improving the experience of current students will make the JDP a more desirable place for prospective students. Weaving social justice into the curriculum more comprehensively should attract new students even as it better serves the interests and concerns of current students. Similarly, training faculty to co-create learning with their students, develop diverse reading lists, and adopt inclusive pedagogies will foster a socially-engaged academic community for our current students and faculty that will also attract students who share these interests.

Activities (timeline and expenses)

January & February:

1. Create mentoring resources as part of a new online mentoring manual that includes videos/podcasts/texts to train faculty and peer mentors, as well as direct mentoring by alumni of color and others. Ultimately, the goal is to create better in-person mentoring through these resources. (\$150 gift card per faculty training unit x 10 units = \$1,500 plus \$500 stipend for a JDP graduate student assistant to assemble the manual)
2. Offer workshops to JDP faculty and students in preparation for community discussions. These may include training in implicit bias, white privilege and its effects on teaching; how to have difficult conversations around race and ethnicity; institutionalized academic power structures and how to level them; etc. (4 workshops/discussion events spread throughout the year x 13 participants at each x \$100 gift card per participant = \$5,200. Plus \$200 food)
3. The IDN Committee works on completing a comprehensive plan for student-of-color thriving.
4. The Dean's task force on faculty engagement gathers information from students and faculty.

March & April:

1. JDP faculty meeting/s convene to discuss the social justice curricular questions. (\$100 food)
2. JDP student meetings provide feedback regarding proposed changes to curriculum, requirements, and general issues around social justice. (\$100 food)
3. Workshops continue (see note 2 above).

4. The IDN Committee finalizes its plan.
5. The Dean's task force on faculty engagement sends its recommendations to the deans.

May:

1. Begin designing on-line social justice course, or something equivalent. (8 faculty/alumni/ABD instructors x \$150 per course unit = \$1,200. Plus \$2100 stipend for an advanced ABD student to manage the online course development project, including course design)

Fall:

1. Forums or panel discussions on race/ethnicity issues in the study of religion or other strategies determined by the IDN Committee.
2. We will invite a Wabash consultant to do a workshop with faculty and students on inclusive pedagogy and creating an educational environment in which SOCs will thrive. Wabash consultants are paid by Wabash (including honorarium and airfare). We provide lodging and board. (\$500 for lodging and food)
3. JDP all-community meeting to roll out the comprehensive plan, recognize progress so far, highlight ongoing concerns, and discuss means of meeting them. (\$100 food)
4. Write final grant report.

Institutional Capacity

This project draws upon conceptual and logistical support from DU Office of Diversity and Inclusion, Center for Multicultural Excellence, the Interdisciplinary Research Incubator for the Study of (In)Equality, Office of Teaching and Learning, and Iliff's Dean of Faculty and Office of Professional Formation. Internal funding, training, and mentoring opportunities contribute to our capacity to engage in building an inclusive academic environment for our students now.

Anticipated Change

We seek to foster a robust, diverse academic community that will be designed to offer minoritized students and those from underrepresented communities a welcoming space in which to excel personally and professionally.

Continuation Funding

Both institutions support this effort at the highest levels. Dr. Frank Tuitt, Senior Advisor to the Chancellor and Provost on Diversity and Inclusion, and his staff will continue to provide consultation and training; and we have been conscious to propose sustainable initiatives.

Learning from the Work

The lessons from our activities with this grant will be shared with the JDP community on our intranet site where a section is devoted to the grant and its work, in newsletters, meetings and workshops. We also look forward to sharing our findings with fellow IDN institutions.