

IDN Experimentation Grant
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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." The JDP shares the values of its parent institutions: engagement, integrity, inclusiveness, respect, excellence, innovation, accountability.

Statement of Need

In 2015, the JDP admitted its first class to a restructured and radically reconceived program. The program sought to become smaller, using a cohort model of (ideally) 10 students per year. It became more unified in purpose, without concentrations or tracks, and more intentional about the inter-disciplinarity it has always embraced. Before 2015, the JDP benefitted from considerable ethnic, racial, gender, and religious diversity in its faculty and student body because of the efforts, cultures, and values of Illiff and DU. The program embraced diversity with open arms, but did not plan or cultivate it. In fact, we did not know the JDP's exact demographic or statistics like time-to-completion until the application for IDN caused us to seek answers. As a result, we are particularly interested in an experimentation grant for two reasons:

First, as we reduced the program's size, the number of students of color also shrank. We believe it is falling below a critical mass needed for these students to thrive. We need to become intentional about recruiting students of color, increase the percentage of students of color in each cohort, and seek new ways for our students to connect to peers at DU and Illiff. There are undoubtedly other ways to ensure that our students do not feel alone in their classes and that they are supported by their peers, mentors, and faculty. Now is the time to seek those answers.

It should also be noted that three of our colleagues of color left the JDP faculty at the end of last year (two retirements and one move). While this was not related to the change in the program, it does negatively impact our students and faculty of color - and all of us in the JDP. We hope that both institutions will be successful in filling this gap as they hire new faculty. We are mindful of the importance of retention and continuity to our faculty's (and students'!) thriving.

Second, we are interested in an experimentation grant because we now have demographic information that prompts us to learn more about how our faculty and students are/are not thriving. We are also somewhat skeptical of some of the institutional data about time to degree and other such metrics. It seems likely that other, less optimistic realities are hidden behind these numbers. We want to drill down and understand what the lived realities are for our faculty and students of color, so we can respond in ways that will better support them.

Description of the Work

We seek 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. We propose a two-stage work program: 1) gather information and understanding of our situation with the help of outside consultants 2) review and plan for change.

For the first and second phase we plan to invite two different outside consultants who do not have any institutional connections with DU/Iliff. We plan to approach Dr. Benny Liew of the College of the Holy Cross, who has teaching experiences in both theological and religious studies, for this phase of work, and either Dr. Willie Jennings of Yale Divinity School or Dr. Anne Joh of Garrett Evangelical Theological Seminary, who are known for their work in racial discourses in religious contexts. We expect the following tasks in each phase of the work:

1) Phase One: the first consultant will conduct in-depth interviews with administrators, all JDP faculty members, and students of color in different stages. Ideally, the first consultant will visit our campus in February or March 2018 to help us better understand our institutional barriers and support systems.

2) Phase Two: the second consultant will visit our campus in October 2018 to facilitate a series of conversations and workshops with all JDP faculty and administrators to consider the findings reported by the first consultant. Through these workshops, the JDP will identify major priorities and action strategies, and develop an implementation plan for 2019. In November/December 2018, JDP administrators will write a renewal grant application for implementation.

Activities

Jan-June 2018: Phase One: First Consultant

Jan: JDP prepares background and other materials to send to first consultant; graduate student assistant begins work to support project (\$1,675 – 110 work hours total)

Feb: first consultant reviews JDP materials and conducts telephone interviews with JDP directors and Deans.

Mar: first consultant visits campus, interviews four different groups of faculty: junior faculty of color, senior FOC in religion/theology, senior FOC in other disciplines who work with JDP students, and white JDP faculty. The consultant will have one dinner with all FOC to gather information in a less formal context (\$400). The consultant will interview 12-15 JDP students of color, including students in coursework, comprehensive examination, and dissertation stages, and up to two alumni. Each student interviewed will receive a \$50 Amazon gift card. (\$300 interview lunches/snacks, \$750 gift cards)

April-July: first consultant reviews on-campus interview notes and materials and writes report assessing the current situation for JDP faculty and students of color, and offering recommendations. JDP administrators send the report to all JDP faculty and staff, as well as to the second consultant. (\$1600 honorarium, 1500 travel)

Aug-Dec 2018: Phase Two: Second Consultant

Aug: second consultant reviews JDP material and conducts telephone interviews with JDP administrators and DU/Iliff Deans

Sept: second consultant visits campus, conducts workshops with JDP faculty and administrators, as well as a listening session with students, to identify major priorities and action strategies for the JDP to pursue. (\$300 workshops/sessions lunches/snacks & \$400 dinner with FoC/SoC)

Oct-Nov: second consultant writes report; JDP reviews and confirms implementation initiatives. (\$1600 honorarium; \$1500 consultant travel)

Nov-Dec: JDP administrators write renewal grant application to support implementation.

Institutional Capacity

This project is designed to support JDP faculty and students of color in identifying high- and medium-priority, short- and medium-term changes that can meaningfully enable them to thrive – but without burdening them. It draws upon the considerable experience of both parent institutions to provide conceptual and logistical support. The DU Office of Diversity and Inclusion (ODI) and its Center for Multicultural Excellence (CME), the Interdisciplinary Research Incubator for the Study of (In)Equality (IRISE), DU Office of Teaching and Learning, and Iliff’s Dean of Faculty and Office of Professional Formation have years of multi-faceted experience working to support faculty and students of color in their intellectual and professional development. Internal funding, training and mentoring opportunities, and affinity groups contribute to our capacity to engage this work now. For example, several JDP students have taken part in IRISE’s Roger Salters Doctoral Summer Institute or the academic-year Writing Institute, which support “graduates from historically marginalized groups and women to pursue faculty and administrative positions in academia”, by combining academic and professional mentoring with writing support. Both DU and Iliff have associations of faculty of color and students of color. In addition, affinity groups like the Sistah Network or the Latinx Graduate Association are open to JDP students. JDP faculty and students have benefited from internal funding support like research grants from the DU Latino Center for Community Engagement and Scholarship (DULCCES). The PIs have close working relationships with administrators and staff in each of these units, and will collaborate with them to develop and implement the initiatives that JDP faculty and students of color identify as priority objectives.

On a logistical level, the DU Office of Research and Sponsored Programs is well equipped to provide judicious financial management of this grant; ORSP managed \$28 million of research in fiscal year 2018, with over 150 faculty members receiving external support. JDP faculty and staff also have considerable expertise in managing internal and external grant budgets.

The JDP is unique in Colorado as the only doctoral program in the study of religion jointly run by a school of theology and a secular university, and the only one with such a diverse faculty and student body. The Denver Seminary trains Christian professionals in ministry, while the University of Colorado-Boulder’s graduate program in religious studies extends only to the MA level. Further, neither program has the same degree of faculty or student diversity – nor the longstanding commitment to social justice that Iliff brings. The JDP will be eager to share the results of this project with other programs in Colorado and the Rocky Mountains, but recognizes that because of its unique composition, it has no local or regional model.

Anticipated Change

The JDP anticipates that this project will help us become more conscious of and devoted to our commitment to inclusive excellence, specifically by working to support faculty and students of color in thriving. These supporting initiatives should result in qualitative but measurable improvements in the intellectual and professional developments of JDP faculty and students of color. Faculty and students should expect to feel better connected to colleagues of color in the JDP, DU, and Iliff, with opportunities for vertical as well as horizontal connections; to professional (research, teaching, and ministerial) opportunities in their fields; and to administrative, teaching, research, and other units at DU and Iliff. Faculty and staff of color should expect to feel more integrated, and more integral, to the JDP.

Continuation Funding

Creating the conditions for faculty and students of color to thrive in the Joint Doctoral Program is an ongoing project, which will require multi-year support from program administrators as well as relevant administrative, student life, teaching and learning, financial aid, and other sectors at each institution. Both institutions support this effort: the University of Denver's Vice Provost for Research enthusiastically approved an indirect costs waiver for this grant application, for example. The PIs anticipate ongoing institutional support in terms of staff time and advice as well as collaboration with intersecting initiatives. They also expect to obtain continuation funding in smaller amounts (\$1,000-5,000), depending on actual costs of initiatives generated by this grant, from several DU and Iliff units: ODI, CME, IRISE, the Center for Community Engagement and Service Learning, the Office of Teaching and Learning, the Office of Graduate Studies, Academic and Information Technology, the Office of the Dean, and potentially the Iliff President's and DU Chancellor's offices. However, JDP administrators recognize that just as the JDP itself is tuition dependent and operates on a tight budget, both institutions have limited funds to offer. The JDP has a strong track record in obtaining external grant funding (as do many JDP faculty members), most recently from the Wabash Center for Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion, and recognizes that continuation funding needs must be met through grant support and fundraising.

Learning from the Work

Initially, the lessons from our activities with this grant will be shared with the entire JDP community and our constituent institutions through an edition of our newsletter. One or more of the PIs and participants may also provide presentations through the regular ODI/IRISE Thursday "lunch and learn" sessions, at Iliff faculty and board meetings, and/or library and Office of Teaching and Learning workshops for the community. These are regular fora that allow us to share our work through our institutions.

In addition, we will likely apply to present on our findings and initiatives at the regional or national AAR/SBL meetings or other appropriate conferences. We will also share with IDN through its mechanisms for peer learning.