

Social Justice in the Whitman Curriculum

Cross-Departmental Inquiry Project

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Project description:

Last year's Financial Sustainability Review identified Social Justice and Human Rights as an area that appeals strongly to prospective Whitman students. How, the FSR faculty asked, might Whitman better harness the interest students bring to the topic and support their intellectual growth? Initial conversations with faculty members last spring confirmed that there is interest across departments in developing a curricular framework, such as an interdisciplinary minor or concentration, through which students can critically examine competing approaches to social transformation and the relationships between academic study and activism. The aim of our PIG was to develop and evaluate varying curricular models for such work.

Our time together:

During the grant period, we discussed what the term social justice means to us in our varying disciplinary locations, as well as the expectations surrounding the concept that students bring to our classes/majors. We examined social justice offerings, both curricular and co-curricular, at institutions varying in size, mission, and student body demographics (Alfred U, Beloit C, Berea C, Brandeis U, Case Western Reserve U, Colorado C, Dominican U, Eastern Kentucky U, George Washington U, Hamline U, Hobart & William Smith C, Macalester C, Merrimack C, Occidental U, San Francisco State U, Seattle Pacific U, Spelman C, U of Illinois Chicago, U of Portland), to better understand options we might explore at Whitman and the resources required to make these pathways worthwhile and sustainable. To familiarize ourselves with the ways social justice is currently being framed in higher education settings, we also completed a number of readings from the sources we had identified in our proposal (Adams and Bell, *Teaching for Diversity and Social Justice*, Routledge, 2016; Sensoy and DiAngelo, *Is Everyone Really Equal?: An Introduction to Key Concepts in Social Justice Education*, Teacher's College Press, 2017; Shultz, "Decolonizing Social Justice Education" in Abdi, ed., *Decolonizing Philosophies of Education*, 2012). After developing some preliminary thoughts on potential pathways to pursue we met with Vice President for Diversity and Inclusion John Johnson to invite his suggestions and discuss future coordination between his office and faculty pursuing efforts in this vein. We also reached out to Director of Global Studies Leena Knight to learn more about the successes and challenges the program has experienced in implementing the first concentration option at Whitman. In addition, with the help of Director of Alumni Relations Nancy Mitchell, we drafted and sent out an alumni survey designed to solicit

feedback from graduates on the articulation of their academic studies with their post-Whitman careers and social justice goals, and any needs they have identified that the College could have better met. Finally, we met with the co-chairs of the CELERI committee, Kelsey Martin and Matt Reynolds, to discuss potential articulations between our efforts and existing work in community-engaged learning taking place across campus and the NW5C, and Co-Executive Director of the Power & Privilege Symposium, Tejashree Jadhav, to discuss potential collaboration.

Outcomes:

Our group considered three models for better supporting students' social justice work: a traditional major/minor offering; a concentration; and a co-curricular center or program. The aims we wanted any new structure to achieve were:

- to develop students' ability to critically interrogate the much-used but often ill-defined concept of social justice;
- to help students articulate connections between their academic courses and their social justice work outside the classroom (providing preparation in advance of internships and activist work and supporting additional reflection and integration during/afterwards);
- to support communication and collaboration between the many social justice-oriented activities occurring on campus;
- to strengthen the presence of social justice at Whitman on its website and other communication by gathering together information about all of these activities in a single, visible place
- to provide sufficient structure and resources to all constituents to make their work sustainable

We saw distinct advantages to each of the three broad models we investigated, including, for example, the depth of understanding provided by majors and minors (along with the legitimacy and seriousness of purpose afforded by students' familiarity with these pathways); the flexibility of the concentration format and its ability to integrate academic study and co-curricular work; and the capacity of a more centralized co-curricular initiative to make visible to current and prospective students (as well as community partners) the host of social justice-related activities already occurring on campus (in classes, in faculty-student research, in Penrose Library and the Archives, in the Intercultural Center, in the CCEC...) and to forge stronger connections between these efforts. We also devoted serious discussion to workload, resource needs, and sustainability, particularly in an institutional climate of austerity.

We will continue to refine our thinking this spring in light of the forthcoming alumni survey results, future outreach to additional departments, and feedback generated at a Power & Privilege Symposium session we plan to propose. We have provisionally identified a two-plank proposal that we find both intellectually engaging and sustainable,

given sufficient resource investment from the College:

- A Center for Social Justice co-directed by the community-engaged learning specialist and a faculty curricular director. The community-engaged learning specialist will oversee co-curricular and community-engaged initiatives at Whitman, liaising with the Vice President for Diversity and Inclusion and campus offices such as the Intercultural Center and the CCEC. The faculty curricular director (a term-based, rotating position) will administer the Social Justice Concentration, liaise with academic departments, lead curriculum development and review, and teach the concentration's gateway course.
- A Social Justice Concentration fulfilled by completing three components: a newly developed gateway course; a series of electives drawn from existing offerings across campus; and an integrative presentation relating the concentration courses to one another and to the student's co-curricular work, delivered at the Power & Privilege Symposium or the Undergraduate Conference

The next steps will be informed by the student, alumni, and colleague feedback, as well as willingness on the part of the College to meet innovation with modest investment.