

Making History More Inclusive at Trinity: Exploring Gender and Racial Disparities in Course  
Enrollments and Students' Decisions to Major

Proposal for the Mellon Foundation Inclusive Teaching Grant  
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Overview

As the History department undertakes a self-study and external review in Spring 2021, we note two trends that are linked to concerns over inclusivity: the first is a dearth of women and students of color among those majoring in History; the second, a similar and more general decline in the number of such students who choose to enroll in History courses, regardless of their chosen major. Since the study of history, as an essential element in a liberal arts education, is crucial to understanding the persistent structures of inequality in society and how these relate to marginalized students as individuals, we plan to develop ways to bring these students into both our classes and our major, and make the study of history more meaningful to them and their fellow students in the process. Moreover, as we look toward a Special Opportunity Hire in the near future, while taking into account the recommendations of the external review, we believe the findings of the proposed project would be of enormous benefit to the department and its service to the liberal arts mission of the College.

Proposal

The project will consist of three areas of exploration, to be pursued more or less in parallel. The first will be comprised of an analysis of trends among our majors over the past decade, to look not only at the changes in the numbers of women and minorities majoring in History over that period, but also their proportion of total majors and what courses being offered within the major seemed to most attract their interest. We would also conduct an outreach survey of both current students and alumni in these groups for a better sense of what drew them to the major, what they found most beneficial about majoring in History, as well as what they found unsatisfactory in their experience of the major. This survey would be conducted via Qualtrics, with targeted follow-up through email and/or interviews. This approach will provide rich qualitative as well as quantitative data on how women and minorities majors have perceived their course of study, the department, and their relationship to it over time.

A second area would entail a longitudinal study of all women and minority students over the past ten years who took two or more History courses while at Trinity, but who did not declare it as a major. Here too, the objective will be to conduct a Qualtrics survey – to be followed up with more targeted interviews – that will yield rich qualitative data about their motivation for taking their HIST courses, their general levels of interest in studying about the past, their reasons for choosing the major they did, and whether there was anything in their experience or understanding of the major that may have dissuaded them from choosing to major in History.

Thirdly, we would explore the state of women and minority student involvement in History programs at other liberal arts institutions of similar size to Trinity, especially among those with similar resources to ours in their History departments. Are there departments that seem to be doing a better job at attracting such students to the major? If so, what lessons might we be able to learn from them to inform our own thinking about curricular design, staffing, etc., as we begin the work of addressing the findings and recommendations of the external review during the fall of 2021? How might what we can learn from History departments elsewhere, as well as from the current students and alumni we survey, help us in defining the nature of proposals for Special Opportunity Hires for next year, as well as in crafting future EPC proposals?

Throughout this process, the department members overseeing the project will periodically report on their work in progress to the department. We look forward to also discussing our findings with Anita Davis, Vice President for Diversity, Equity and Inclusion, for her input as we put together a set of proposals to discuss in the department as part of our curricular review process.