

Community Proposal: Intersectional Identities

Community Members; Aguilar, Beggs, Gray, Greiner, Gutterman, Hinrichs, and Hobgood

The study of identity is, we think, endlessly fascinating—and for good reason: identities enable people to define, redefine, and navigate their way through the world. The construction of identity, of course, is far from benign; to create and sustain identity categories are fundamentally expressions of power. As political theorist William Connolly offers: “Identity needs difference in order to be; it turns difference into otherness in order to sustain its self-certainty.”

The three faculty projects that anchor this LARC group explore the creation and recreation of identity in three of the most vital forms: the delineation of norms of able-bodiedness (Allison Hobgood), queer sexuality (Jade Aguilar), and the intersection of race, ethnicity, and religion (David Gutterman). Although the particular subjects of our research vary considerably—the poetry of John Milton (Hobgood), the sex advice column of Dan Savage (Aguilar), and the evolution of the Black Church in America (Gutterman), we are all motivated by a common set of concerns: the social processes shaping and determining identities that both vex and define cultural standards of what is “normal;” the way cultural institutions (news columns, poetry, the church) have been utilized to exact power and to challenge and reify identity categories. Moreover, each of our projects, including our undergraduate colleagues’ projects, examine how identity creation—as well as the importance placed on certain identity markers—is specifically socially and historically located yet still constantly transforming. For instance, Gutterman will analyze how the primary importance of a black identity within the historical Black Church is giving way in the 21st century to an increased emphasis on racial and religious integration, pluralism, and multiplicity. Hobgood is working to recover disability as a “modern” identity experience too often overlooked or misidentified in its important historical contexts. Aguilar is seeking to understand how the firming boundaries of a gay or lesbian identity strive to exclude various groups and serve as a catalyst for a growing “post-gay,” queer identity. While certainly contrasting in many ways, each of these projects examines both the particular contexts in which marginalized identities have taken shape as well as the social and historical processes that seek to normalize those identities and to resist or accommodate their “difference.”

Additionally, recent scholarly focus on intersectionality has fueled new theoretical work in which identity categories once viewed and studied as discrete are now understood to co-establish and co-influence one another. This anti-categorical approach deconstructs categorical divisions, instead probing the ways in which people experience identity from various vantage points concurrently. Intersectionality also posits that experiences of self are impossible to understand outside of an interlocking system of oppression in which various axes of identity interact simultaneously to both support and subvert an overarching matrix of domination. What we hope to discover in our collaboration is the way our seemingly disparate interests in race/religion, sexuality, and disability all connect to one another. How do the religious politics of the Church of Latter-day Saints intersect with queer identities? How have lingering religious and political histories from Milton’s England influenced current religious and political communities in America? How do “overcoming” narratives about “conquering” disability serve the same function as a newspaper column that normalizes deviant sexual behaviors and (re)constructs them as socially “appropriate” sexual acts?

All three faculty members in this Liberal Arts Research Cooperative previously have written about questions of identity and hence reached beyond our respective disciplinary boundaries (academic disciplines, of course, being one example of the way we have created, and challenged, categories of intellectual identity). We are eager to have the opportunity to work together next summer because LARC's inherent cross-disciplinarity will illuminate the blind spots present in our scholarship and offer new insights that will enrich our individual projects. In addition, each of us is deeply committed to working with undergraduate researchers not simply to help guide them through the development of the content of their individual projects but perhaps more importantly to help mentor students through the daunting process of academic research. In this latter regard, we believe working as a community is invaluable; it is all too rare that students (or faculty, for that matter) can share works in progress with colleagues who will critically read and engage their research. We will model this process in our LARC group with the hope and expectation that all of us will in turn nurture further academic and intellectual collaboration within the broader Willamette community and beyond.

Community Budget:

The proposed budget supports faculty and student development and costs associated with travel for data collection and presentation of student research at scholarly conferences over the course of the 2012-2013 academic/fiscal year.

Item	Quantity	Amount	Subtotal
Social Postmodernism: Beyond Identity Politics	7	\$42.70	\$297.50
Bending Over Backwards: Disability, Dismodernism and Other Difficult Positions	7	\$23	\$161.00
The Intersectional Approach	7	\$20.20	\$141.40
Guest speaker Dan Savage to speak at WU	1	\$1000.00	\$1000.00
Conference and Data Collection Travel	7	\$1057.00	\$7,399.00
TOTAL			\$8,999.00

Books and Reading Materials

In order to establish a common understanding of the use of intersectional theory, the group will read *Social Postmodernism*, *Bending Over Backwards*, and *The Intersectional Approach*, as well as develop a reading list of key texts on the issue. The cost estimates assume that books will be purchased new at Amazon.com.

Guest Speaker to Campus

Part of our funds are being requested to bring Dan Savage to give a public lecture at Willamette, addressing some of the issues of intersectionality that emerge in our research.

Travel Expenses

All travel expenses are related to either data collection (such as travel review archival materials at the Huntington Library in San Marino, CA); or for presentation of research findings. More specifically, some of the travel funds will be used to help offset the costs of travel and accommodations at regional conferences held during the 2011-2012 academic year in which collaborators, especially our undergraduate colleagues, might participate.