



NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR THE

Humanities

DIVISION OF EDUCATION PROGRAMS

## **Narrative Section of a Successful Application**

The attached document contains the grant narrative and selected portions of a previously funded grant application. It is not intended to serve as a model, but to give you a sense of how a successful application may be crafted. Every successful application is different, and each applicant is urged to prepare a proposal that reflects its unique project and aspirations. Prospective applicants should consult the Education Programs application guidelines at [www.neh.gov/grants/guidelines/EnduringQuestions.html](http://www.neh.gov/grants/guidelines/EnduringQuestions.html) for instructions. Applicants are also strongly encouraged to consult with the NEH Division of Education Programs staff well before a grant deadline.

Note: The attachment only contains the grant narrative and selected portions, not the entire funded application. In addition, certain portions may have been redacted to protect the privacy interests of an individual and/or to protect confidential commercial and financial information and/or to protect copyrighted materials.

Project Title: NEH Enduring Questions Course on “What is Equality?”

Institution: Georgetown University

Project Directors: Samantha Pinto and Lahra Smith

Grant Program: Enduring Questions

Samantha Pinto  
Lahra Smith  
NEH Enduring Questions Grant

### **Narrative: What is "Equality"?**

#### *Intellectual Rationale and Teaching Value*

"Equality," is, in many ways, the cornerstone of modern conceptions of society, government, and global human rights. Since the Enlightenment, it has been the express concern of the Western world. But it is also, historically and culturally, controversial: What does "equality" mean? Or, as a famous law article on the topic asks, "Equality of What?" This proposed course would trace the European and US philosophical traditions of equality alongside cross-cultural conceptions and critiques of the term, particularly those produced by African authors and artists. In doing so, it hopes to unsettle easy assumptions about the term's meaning, and to bridge American ideals of equality to a global understanding of the term.

"Equality" itself came of age in the Western Enlightenment, with philosophers and political theorists like Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau, and Kant. These theories of equality moved from more classical traditions of the "natural order" of man, a hierarchy of human relations posited by Plato and Aristotle, to one focused on the individual and his/her potential and "rights." These rights were classified in both the terms of science, differentiating the human from animals and other species, and in the frame of nationalism, as new "citizens" and the public sphere of politics were emerging. But these new discourses of inalienable human rights were also emerging at the same time that imperialism, colonialism, indigenous genocide and displacement, and the chattel slave trade in the New World were creating racialized discourses of fundamental difference that drew various and contradictory lines about who was and was not fully "human."

This course gives Georgetown students an opportunity to explore these fundamental questions—and contradictions—through humanistic discourse itself. Rather than viewing government and law as the only spheres where the meaning of equality is decided, “What is Equality?” utilizes the unique properties of literature, philosophy, and the arts to interrogate the complex ways that abstract concepts like freedom and justice might be imagined, in the past, present, and future. Most importantly, it embraces the fundamental meaning and question contained in equality itself—that of comparativism. What does it mean to be “equal” in differing historical and geographic contexts? How does a culture achieve “equality” in relation to another culture’s customs and ideals? In this regard, “What is Equality?” could also link to the NEH’s *Bridging Cultures* Initiative.

With this in mind, our syllabus balances philosophy, history, and political theory written around the question of equality across several centuries with literary and cultural texts from a similarly wide span of regions and time periods. Along with the Enlightenment philosophers above, we include Plato, de Tocqueville, Marx, Rawls, Jefferson, Patemen, Kymlicka, and Young, taking us from the hierarchal “Allegory of the Cave” to contemporary theories of multicultural citizenship in the globalized world. We also include the primary texts of African Nationalisms in the form of speech transcripts from Tom Mboya, Nyerere, Nkrumah, and Cabral, as a way of envisioning African discourses on equality, as well as work by African Philosophers such as E. Chukwudi Eze and Nikru Nzegwu. For primary cultural and literary texts, we move from the ancient world of *Antigone*, where state definitions of equality contest those of community, religion, and family, to contemporary fiction and film on thorny issues of race, gender, and nation in Africa and beyond in the searing cinema of Senegalese author and auteur Ousmane Sembene and the lyric prose of Nuruddin Farah. We place these texts in

relation to one another within the multi-faceted, multi-lingual, multinational African framework to show that just as Western thought has a complicated relationship to equality as it concerns difference, so, too, does Africa itself.

In focusing on Africa, we feel the course has a unique opportunity to bring issues our students at Georgetown are deeply interested in to the forefront: international relations and questions of social justice. As such, we are pitching the course as an elective particularly suited to our dedicated body of students interested in history, government, Culture and Politics (and other School of Foreign Service students), Comparative Literature, Justice and Peace Studies, Women's and Gender Studies, English, Philosophy, Theology, African American Studies, American Studies, and African Studies. This would ideally be a course for second year students looking to broaden their critical thinking, reading, and writing skills through the rigorous study of humanities texts and methods. As first year students, Georgetown requires a course not just in composition, but in "The Problem of God," which introduces students, as the title suggests, to thinking in complex ways about large, abstract concepts. "What is Equality?" would build off this community of inquiry, introducing students systematically to writing on difficult philosophical questions that effect how we see and act in the larger world.

### *Envisioned Course Design*

As a literature professor and a political scientist, respectively, we bring the crucial intersection of humanistic critical inquiry and political theory to bear on the syllabus, in terms of text selection, but also pedagogical design. "What is Equality?" will be broken down into smaller, thematic sections during its fifteen week semester: the first will focus on the historical underpinnings of the term, followed by sections on colonialism, slavery, nationalism, feminism,

and human rights. The course would meet two times a week, with most reading assignments pairing a primary cultural text with a philosophical or theoretical text to help us think through the question of equality. Classes will be discussion based not just within the classroom, but in a larger interactive community of discourse created through a course website and blog where designated students will post questions and comments each week in a more informal, multimedia setting. Those students who post will be responsible for facilitating a portion of the course that week, so that our discussions on equality will be student-centered and focus on building a public discourse of the humanities. Field trips to Thomas Jefferson's estate, Monticello, and to the Smithsonian International Galleries will also emphasize the integral and public nature of the humanities and arts in shaping political and social ideals. We are also hoping to use Georgetown's conferencing technology to link up with a college classroom in Africa, most likely at the University of Dar es Salaam in Tanzania, where Professor Smith has served as Director of Georgetown's local study abroad program.

In terms of writing (a crucial part of any Humanities course), the students will start early, with three short close readings due in the first half of class, using at least one philosophical text to ground their cultural critique, and writing one focused on an "outside" resource connected to either our class field trips or another one of Washington, D.C.'s many cultural offerings. These writing assignments will resonate with the three major assessments of the course: first, a longer comparative paper that uses two or more primary text and two or more theoretical texts to examine a specific aspect of equality; second, and moving away from more traditional models of assessment, the students will work in groups to present "panels," akin to conference roundtables, on the last day of each thematic section, driving home the multiplicity of perspectives on the question of equality; third, and in keeping with the course's interdisciplinary and innovative

design, the students will create final projects that can take the shape of a syllabus, creative text, exhibition, or another form that requires significant outside research on a topic around “equality” that the student wants to explore in further detail—either in a different/specific region or time period, or a different medium or genre—along with a rationale explaining their research process as well as how and why they made the critical choices for their assignment.

### *Plan of Work*

Preparation for a course like “What is Equality?” will require the rigorous reading and re-reading of key texts in our respective fields, particularly in the summer of 2011 before the course is first offered by Professor Pinto, and then by Professor Smith in the Spring of 2012, to be repeated in the Fall of 2012 and the Spring of 2013. In particular, we would want to make sure that the range and scope of the perspectives we are offering for analysis are up to date. In a burgeoning field such as the study of Human Rights, for instance, we will both have to read foundational and then more contemporary scholarship in the field. This process of reading deeply around the themes of the course will culminate in the difficult task of culling our knowledge into an acceptable syllabus form, with well-spaced assignments and a balance of writing, reading, and participation that suits our admittedly ambitious Georgetown undergraduates. We will also scout our potential field trips, figure out the logistics of group travel, and work closely with our Center for New Designs in Learning and Scholarship to develop an online course presence that will be dynamic but also intuitively organized for student use. With this exciting course on the horizon, we would also spend time visiting related classes and departments with a course description and website to attract the best and brightest students

interested in issues of equality and comparative cultural studies. We will also meet at the close of each semester to strategize about any shifts or suggestions for the following term.

### *Faculty Preparation*

We are confident that the preparation and teaching of this course will enhance our own scholarly work as well. The demand for interdisciplinary research that speaks to our expanding global connections is high, and studying our differing disciplines will expand each of our intellectual ranges considerably. For Professor Pinto, working on questions of legal and extra-legal human rights will feed into her second project on cultural iconography in the black diaspora and the way it shapes and is shaped by discourses of the human. For Professor Smith, the humanities focus in the course will help her to transition to her second project, a broad-based interrogation of “multicultural citizenship” as a political ideal. As two scholars who work on cross-cultural analysis, and write for the US academy while speaking about and to scholarship abroad, creating comparative intellectual dialogue through the enduring question of “What is Equality?” helps us to speak to the significance of African culture and thought to foundational and transnational epistemological desires.

Samantha Pinto  
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Enduring Question Grant  
“What is Equality?”

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**[See also, Core Reading List]**

Samantha Pinto and Lahra Smith  
Enduring Questions Grant: “What is Equality?”

### Core Reading List

- Aidoo, Ama Ata. *Anowa* (1970) and *The Dilemma of a Ghost* (1964). London: Longman, 1995.
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