

Art and Social Justice

Interdisciplinary Initiative Proposal

Dalton School of Music

Subcommittee members: Rhea Olivacce, Keith Kothman, Patricia Villalobos, Michael Elwell

**Brief Overview:** Provide a brief overview of the proposed interdisciplinary initiative. What types of questions would the initiative ask? What types of complex problems would it seek to solve?

We propose an Arts and Social Justice interdisciplinary minor and/or certificate. The initiative would seek to explore the ways that artists of all disciplines can connect their work to the betterment of social good, give agency and voice to those lacking it, and bridge the gap from the sometimes isolated pursuits of artistic excellence to the very real problems of the current day.

A sampling of the complex problems that this initiative could address includes how the arts address racial justice, environmental sustainability, and how the arts can explore and mediate issues of power and dialogic practice.

Social justice has been part of the WMU Signature Program, and elements exist in academic programs across campus. The contribution that the arts can make to the question of and quest for social justice is intricately tied to the varied forms of expression that the arts can take.

We recognize that social justice, socially engaged practice, or social practice each have very distinct definitions within disciplines and are often used in various ways. We want to provide some general definitions that we are using from our perspectives:

- From the visual arts:

“Socially engaged art is often collaborative or participatory, involving people and their communities as part of the medium or material of the work.” (“Socially Engaged Practice.” Art & Artists / Art Terms. TATE, 2014. Web.). Socially engaged art is trans-disciplinary and often blurs the boundaries between various fields and disciplines, creating new experiences inside and outside the gallery. Often these works engage not just communities as part of the experience but the content that is most relevant to various communities: racial, gender, and economic equity. For example, The Oakland Projects (1991-2001) by the artist Suzanne Lacy “worked with scores of youth and adult collaborators to produce lengthy and large-scale public projects that included workshops and classes for youth, media intervention, and institutional program and policy development.”<sup>1</sup>

- Design thinking is a holistic approach to problem-solving that can be used to identify authentic human needs, conceptualize and test approaches to alleviate those needs, and then implement appropriate measures to get the solution into the hands of people who most need it.

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<sup>1</sup> From the artist website: <https://www.suzannelacy.com/performance-installation#/the-oakland-projects/>

**Impacted units:** What existing units, programs, and colleges would be involved in the proposed initiative? What other possibilities for collaboration across campus or in the broader community might exist now or in the future?

The initiative has the involvement of all schools in the College of Fine Arts, along with units in the College of Arts and Sciences. Although we have not received further responses from possible units across campus, we think there could be tie-ins to Philosophy, Psychology, Sociology, Spanish, and Global and International Studies. This would pull together experts from more than one branch of knowledge, reduce the need for CFA faculty to learn new competencies to support these activities, and would have the effect of freeing faculty to concentrate on what they already do well. This proposal also aligns with interests in the Non-Profit Administration Minor in the School of Public Affairs, along with Entrepreneurship in the Haworth College of Business. Other possible areas of collaboration include the Walker Institute for Study of Race and Ethnic Relations, the Institute for Intercultural and Anthropological Studies, and the Women and Gender Studies program. It could promote increased study abroad activities.

**Impact on teaching, learning and curricula:** Describe the anticipated impact of the proposed initiative on teaching, learning, and curricula. How might this initiative help to grow enrollment, including reaching new audiences of learners through continuing education, dual enrollment, or professional certification? How will the proposed initiative positively impact the training of undergraduate and graduate students? How does it enhance our institutional commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion?

The proposed initiative has a direct impact on our institutional commitment to diversity, equity and inclusion as a primary focus of study and creative activity. It offers students in the arts a chance to put cultural study into artistic practice through community engagement, and it offers new avenues of exploration for social scientists.

**Impact on research and creative activity:** Describe the anticipated impact of the proposed initiative on research and creative activity. How will this initiative promote discovery and creative scholarship? How might it result in increased external funding?

We anticipate that the impact on research and creative activity will involve increased community engagement, interdisciplinary research opportunities for both students and faculty, and the development of new forms of capstone projects, which might require load modification for faculty supervision of capstone projects. This will better equip students and faculty to understand and respond to various stakeholders/publics and contexts that arise with shifting perspectives. Students and faculty will engage with multi-faceted, complex, and quickly evolving challenges and opportunities, redefining their purpose, and resulting in innovative, appropriate solutions. The momentum from successful projects could lead to grant opportunities from local and regional foundations.

**Efficiencies and/or cost savings:** How might the proposed initiative contribute to increased efficiencies and/or cost savings, for example by reducing administrative positions (e.g., chairs/directors), sharing staff support services and/or by sharing facilities?

The initiative has the potential to garner interest and support from the philanthropic community in Kalamazoo as they will be able to see the tangible effects of their donations on the community.

This proposal promotes efficiencies through the use of existing resources to provide more opportunities for our students. In the beginning, it would require no additional teaching resources, and it would provide efficiencies in allowing faculty to concentrate on their own areas of expertise without having to learn new competencies. However, we expect the areas of interest to grow enough to be able to create a course that would be focused on social justice and related areas of inquiry. This would serve as an anchor to the minor or the certificate in social justice. The program seeks to increase enrollment without additional resources by addressing student demand and creating an offering unique in the region.

**Impact on course offerings and workload:** At present, proposed initiatives will only be feasible and sustainable if they can be supported by existing resources, including instructional capacity, faculty and staff time, and facilities. Will the proposed initiative streamline existing course or program offerings? Could the initiative help create more equitable and sustainable workload for faculty, for example, by reducing the need to offer under-enrolled courses, reducing the frequency of course offerings or eliminating the need to teach some courses?

Some courses will be repurposed, and new forms of scholarship and creative activity will be supported. We recognize that allocating faculty to teach courses may require added resources in terms of funding. We also recognize that there are courses that we all teach that can be repurposed or refocused, for example:

Special Topics courses in the Frostic School of Art could be repurposed on a periodic basis to engage social justice or socially engaged practices.

For example:

- ART 3000/5000 - Special Topics in Printmedia (a course that can periodically be taught to deal with social practice); in the past, that course has taught IN DIALOGUE a course that engaged students' communities and TRACE + GESTURES: Kalamazoo <> Granada which was a course where students collaborated on-site in Nicaragua creating collaborative projects with artists from Central America.
- ART 4650 Product Design IV (interdisciplinary wicked problem solving), is a course that brings together students from across the University to solve real-world problems through the use of design thinking methodologies.
- MUS 3170 Opera Workshop (This course can be periodically repurposed to focus on a Social Justice Opera and address the issues in the opera chosen)
- MUS 1070 - Campus Choir (This course could be periodically repurposed to do Choir for Good, whereby students will perform music relevant to an area of social justice work and bring awareness and support to an afore chosen non-profit organization.)

**Additional information:** What additional information would you like to provide in support of this proposal?

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