Alumnae of Northwestern University
Award for Curriculum Development
Proposal

Art of the Ancient Americas
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Basic description:

This course is an introduction to the deep cultural heritage of the Americas. Students will acquire a basic familiarity with:

- great civilizations of the ancient Americas such as the Aztecs, Inca and Maya
- major Native American cultural traditions of the United States and Canada such as the Inuit, Pueblo, Mississippian and Northwest Coast.

The focus of the course is on art and architecture in the context of the following wider themes:

- environmental/sustainability;
- Native American mathematics, science and engineering;
- issues of diversity, inequality, and politics.

We will also look at the influence of ancient Native America on modern American and Latin American culture and on contemporary Chicano, Latino, and Native American artists, musicians and writers. The course will feature a classroom visit from an artist and a museum curator, as well as field trips to local cultural institutions such as the Art Institute of Chicago, the Field Museum of Natural History, and other places or special events.

Level and format:

This will be a large introductory class. It will be part of the 200-level introductory series of survey courses in Art History, and may also be taken for credit in Anthropology or Latin American Studies. It will fulfill student demand for courses in Native American/Indigenous Studies [NAIS].

Relationship to the existing curriculum:

This course will replace Art History 228: Pre-Columbian Art with a more expansive and updated course designed to meet curricular needs for courses on Native Americans and on racial and cultural diversity. It will also provide a course in Anthropology on Native Americans and on the Anthropology of Art, two topics that are not current taught at the undergraduate level (a Native American course was taught up until the retirement of James Brown several years ago).

Innovation:

This course is innovative in three ways:

- It broadens the focus of the existing Pre-Columbian art course to include Native Americans of the U.S. and Canada
- It encompasses a broader range of issues than a conventional course on Pre-Columbian art, making it of potential relevance to students outside of the humanities.
- The lectures introduce innovative technologies including video, online materials and an innovative presentation style, and students are encouraged to incorporate these into their own projects.

Proposed budget for curricular innovation:

2500$ to a research assistant to collect visual materials in preparation. This assistant is a Northwestern alum now working in the Chicago area as a visual artist and musician.

2000$ to a graduate student assistant to work on the syllabus. This will be a student who hopes to teach a similar course in future; if possible, that student will be a TA for the course the first year it is taught.

2000$ for visiting speakers, including at least one Native American or Latino artist who will speak about the influence of Pre-Columbian art on their work, and possibly a curator from the Art Institute or Field Museum of Natural History.

500$ towards costs for field trips.

Learning outcomes and impact of the course on undergraduate students:

Impact: In my experience, learning about the cultural and technical achievements of ancient Americans has a profound impact on students. In the Kaplan Honors course I am currently teaching, students told me last week that the first three lectures on the Pre-Columbian Americas had ‘changed everything they had learned in the last eighteen years’. This course fills a lacuna in American education, in which we do not learn the deep history of our own continent; students recognize this and value it. It also provides valuable cultural capital for our students, who must learn to thrive in the more diverse social environments of the twenty-first century and in international contexts. It validates the cultural heritage of many of our students of color, and gives students from European, Asian, and other backgrounds a basic familiarity with Latino, Latin American and Native American culture and history.

Learning outcomes: This course also challenges students to move away from the purely text-based forms of knowledge often taught in the humanities and social sciences, and to learn to work with images. In the visually saturated online world in which our students live and work, this kind of learning is imperative – but often remains untaught. The lectures and assignments, which will include visual presentations, will give students some facility with learning and presenting information in visual form as well as in words. This skill will be of great use to them in their future careers, whether these involve business, sales, education, or the STEM fields.