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Why studying inequality matters

5-6 minutes

COVID-19 has laid bare the social inequalities of our age: Counties with higher rates of poverty and housing density also have higher COVID-19 morbidity and mortality. Risk of death of COVID-19 is three times higher among Black, Hispanic and Indigenous Americans than for white Americans. And millions of Americans have lost access to jobs, income and healthcare in the crashing economy.

Perhaps it is fitting, then, that this is the environment in which we are launching the new minor in Inequality Studies at Duke, the product of a collaboration between the Department of History and the Samuel DuBois Cook Center on Social Equity. Like so many elements of our daily routines during this pandemic, the prevalence of inequality threatens to become a sort of wallpaper: both terrifyingly ubiquitous and painfully mundane. Studying it—that is, acknowledging it, confronting it, and persistently striving to recognize and address it—is one way of facing its effects and moving forward with hope.

Of course, forms of inequity stretch far beyond the pandemic. Pick your statistic: Executive compensation is now nearly 300 times that of the average worker in the U.S.; the top 0.1% in America hold as much wealth as the bottom 90%; the bottom 50% hold as much wealth as just three people: Bill Gates, Warren Buffett and Jeff Bezos. The average Black household in America has little more than ten cents of wealth to the white household's dollar, effectively showing no improvement since the 1960s. White women who graduated from college have 35 times the wealth of Black women in the same cohort.

What 2020 has made plain is that we need a deeper understanding of how these disparities developed, why they persist and how they evolve over time. Inequality overlaps with our social and economic institutions, reinforcing racism, sexism, colorism and other forms of discrimination. To understand inequality and the social and political forces that sustain it requires understanding how businesses are organized or ruined, how families are maintained or split, how laws are passed or tabled, how wealth is accumulated and lost. To understand inequality is to understand the modern world and the conditions that created it. More to the point, understanding inequality is a precondition to overcoming it: that is, to healing the wounds of the past, generating social solidarity and rebuilding a more just society.

Our new minor, believed to be just the second of its kind in American higher education, will not solve these problems. But it does signify a key step in what promises to be a very long journey. Officially launching in the spring 2021 semester, the minor includes required courses that cover the history of inequality and the social science research methods employed in its study, as well as elective courses that examine the precise mechanisms that have developed inequality throughout different regions and eras.

Commendably, Cornell University's Center for the Study of Inequality has offered a Minor in Inequality Studies for the past two decades. Our program will advance their necessary work, distinguishing itself

through the required courses that will ensure students learn about the deep-rooted nature of inequality and produce new, first-class research of their own. Above all, the new minor will help undergraduate students acquire a rigorous and analytical understanding of social inequality that they can then integrate into their liberal arts education—as well as into their social and professional engagement at Duke, in Durham and the wider world beyond.

It has become trite to say that, in the wake of all that 2020 has elicited, crises provide opportunity. Nevertheless, we applaud Duke for seizing the opportunity of this moment to expand its curricular pathways to include focused study of inequality. As the leaders of this new program, we are thrilled to embark on this work and excited to see where the study of inequality will take our students in the years ahead.

Sincerely,

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