

DEI Committee Meeting Notes
Wednesday, May 5 -- 4:15-6:00 pm

Attendees: Pamela Bjorkman, Michael Dickinson, Mary Kennedy, Derrick Morton, & Leo Green, Jean Badroos, Shelley Diamond

Absent: Leo Green

Item 1: Pamela and Mary got the outreach course approved by the BBE curriculum committee.

Potential History of Eugenics Course:

A joint course between BBE and HSS about the history of the history of Eugenics in the US and its impacts on science and society has been proposed.

Pamela asked the group, specifically asking for Jean's and Matthew's input, if this class would be of interest to Caltech students and/or if there's a need for it to be taught.

Michael did some research into what other institutes are teaching on eugenics and listened to some online lectures. He fully supports having the class be taught.

Jean mentioned and participated in a reading group offered by HSS taught by Peter Calafef, that discussed "The Molecular Vision of Life," specifically eugenics and its relation to Caltech and other institutions. The reading group had a good attendance with a mix of biologists and people from HSS. Jean believes a similar class would have good attendance too. Matthew was also in favor of having the class, especially if students would receive college credit.

Jean followed up with the course being a joint BBE and HSS class could have a benefit in biology. In biology courses, some history of old experiments are taught and earlier scientists who made discoveries. That history is often lacking in biology courses.

Rochelle mentioned two instances where the topic of genetics and the LGBT community have occurred. She organized a symposium for the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS) many years ago, when a man named Dean Hamer at NIH thought he had discovered a piece of the X chromosome that would signify gayness. At the same time there was a play that was later turned into a movie called, "Twilight of the Gold," that was about the discovery of a gay gene and whether or not to abort the child because of it. These topics are still discussed and there's a component within the LBGT community in science that should also be discussed. Also a discussion on science and ethics. Mary suggested that Shelley could be a guest lecturer for the class.

The committee decided they are not qualified to comment on an HSS person to teach the class but fully support having an HSS and/or HSS/BBE eugenics class added to the curriculum.

Action Item: Jean writes a description of the reading class she attended, Rochelle writes something on her topics.

From Jean:

Eugenics course in BBE:

I fully support the suggestion of a eugenics course in BBE. Just a couple months ago Peter Collopy, Caltech's archivist, with other Caltech Humanities faculty hosted a informal reading group for The Molecular Vision of Life: Caltech, the Rockefeller Foundation, and the Rise of New Biology. The low-

publicized meetings gauged the interest 10s of people consistently, all of whom were happy to do the chapters of reading and discussion even outside of a formal classroom format. After the book was completed, Peter spoke of trying to bring about a similar reading group and even mentioned the possibility of putting a course together on Eugenics given he had quite a few sources he thought would piece together well. That being said I believe there would be substantial interest, and think we have some infrastructure for it already. I do see the benefit to this being offered in BBE, as these stories of the history of science are highly informative on bias' that are frankly missing and ignored in the science curriculum.

From Shelley – re Eugenics course:

R. W. Shufeldt was a noted doctor with the U.S. Army and a prolific author of eugenic treatises such as his 1915 book "America's Greatest Problem: The Negro" and his 1907 book, "The Negro: A Menace to American Civilization". At the same time Shufeldt was writing about race, he was also researching a seemingly different topic: the defining of queerness, which he variously referred to as "passive pederasty," "inversion," "perversion" and "homosexuality." As a eugenicist, Shufeldt didn't believe that someone's sexual nature could be changed, because he believed it was hardwired into the body. But he did believe that queer people could be prevented, in much the same way that racial miscegenation could be prevented: by closely policing heterosexuality. He wrote in a 1905 paper entitled "The Medico-Legal Consideration of Perverts and Inverts," that he believed that America "will continue to breed millions of sexual perverts and inverts — psychopathic types — just so long as any ignorant priest, justice of the peace or other party, is permitted to give people permission to breed them." He cultivated a kind of medicalized homophobia, which simultaneously taught people that homosexuality existed and that they should despise it.

In recent years, debates about genetics and sexuality have often revolved around the search for a "gay gene" (primary for gay men), a scientific endeavor that activists and scientists have alternately viewed as liberating and potentially stigmatizing. In 1994, I presented a AAAS annual meeting session entitled "Social, Ethical, and Scientific Perspectives of Biological Research on Sexual Orientation" which discussed then recent work by Dr. Dean Hamer and colleagues on a segment of the X chromosome thought to be partly responsible for gayness in male identical twins. That stirred a national ethical debate on the dilemma of possibly aborting fetuses that test positive for such a putative gene. A play and movie came out called "Twilight of the Gods" that debated the eugenic assumptions about the worth and fitness of parents and families who choose or not choose to have a child with the possibility of being gay. Thus, eugenic ideologies have long permeated opposition to gay marriage and adoption, demonstrating the long intertwined relationship of eugenics and sexuality into the 21st century.

Update on DEI Reps:

Rochelle, Mary, Derrick and Lauren met with the CCID people and brought them up to speed on what we wanted to see from the DEI reps and put together a hour presentation/training for our reps. We decided to have the committee meet with the reps briefly to have a short introduction, discuss with them what they can expect, and tell them about the outreach class and the postdoc fellowship that was awarded.

**Action Item: Invite reps to next DEI committee meeting for intro.

BBE Town Hall on DEI

Jean suggested having a town hall discussion on DEI related topics within the division. Michael suggested that having the town hall during the next BBE retreat could help in revamping the event to be more useful and fun. Mary came back with that it should be its own thing to not take away from it. The overall idea of having it was welcomed by the committee.

Second Advisor

Jean brought up the topic that was discussed in previous meetings with a BBE faculty member about having a secondary advisor for incoming graduate students. This second advisor would meet with the student once a month to check in with them on progress/challenges, outside of their own advisor. Her idea was surveying the incoming class if they would want this for the first year or so of their graduate program. This advisor would not be their thesis advisor. A faculty liaison rather than a mentor.

The conversation then turned to how to implement this sort of advisory faculty person because each option treats their incoming students differently. CNS assigns a faculty advisor for the incoming students, who happens to be Michael. Mary suggested having this become divisional policy. This then turned to having the option reps for BBE sending a form to the students asking if they'd be interested in this.

Derrick suggested adding senior postdocs as an option for liaisons.

****Action Item:** Michael and Pamela discuss this topic with the steering committee. With Jean writing a description of it to be reviewed by Richard.

From Jean:

Optional second advisor pitch:

With a diversifying campus, we need to provide more resources to ensure we do not just recruit students to watch them drown on campus. One approach that we could realistically implement as soon as next year is a check-system for advisors—providing the option of a second advisor to meet every two months.

Though one could hope an advisor could be personable and learn to understand their new students backgrounds and how it influences their work style, that of course is not the case and requires a lot of re-learning for an advisor. This becomes a problem because of the structure of graduate programs; students have an advisor above them and little else that they directly must answer to or could go to for advice, intensifying any already difficult and trapped feelings a student may have. This struggle exists for everyone, but falls disproportionately on students with diverse and historically unrepresented backgrounds. It can make their experience unfairly more difficult as they either struggle to work harder than their peers, take longer, face general discomfort, and can drop disproportionately more.

By offering incoming students the option to have either a faculty member or senior post doc 'second advisor' of sorts to meet with every two months or so, this problem could be mitigated. Not every student would even want this, but providing an option in itself is meaningful. This approach would also provide a way for someone as myself to encourage peers in BSEC to take advantage of this opportunity—as could be done in other identity-based groups and clubs. To offer this upfront and as a sort of advisor is also more meaningful than simply assuming students can find support and advice from elder grad students or post docs. It is a simple effort that shows Caltech itself is worried and supportive of *all* its students, and does not just expect certain groups to figure out and put in disproportionately more work. It also is different to think of an advisor as someone that Caltech recognizes as a legitimate source of support rather than a friend.

How to Get Faculty to be Understanding:

Jean brought up the question of how to get faculty to try and care about mentoring people from diverse backgrounds to become more understanding. Have them make more of an effort and push the culture of the campus to get involved and whether having some sort of

award/recognition given to help drive the change. Currently there is nothing on campus that offers such a training.

Michael brought up that his wife is a writer who currently works on articles about the lack of diversity in certain fields, such as dermatology. A current theme that comes up with the people who are interviewed is experiences they had with key people mentoring them at critical times in their career. Agrees with Jean that it's needed but doesn't know how to implement such a training.

At this point the committee concluded that they were at a loss on how to implement such a training program or how to get faculty more involved with outreach. It's a hard discussion but it's important to have. Enough people start talking about it, someone will come up with an idea/plan for change.

Derrick's Updates:

The PEER summer program will have stipends for the student participants. Advertising will start within the month to aim for a start date for the program to be late June with a goal of 5 students participants. Some Caltech faculty have already expressed interest in having students from the program.

Derrick is leaving his position at Kaiser Permanente to start a lab at USC to be able to have more research time. His lab may not be ready till fall 2022, so he'll be able to be at Caltech full time. Willing to stay on the committee as an advisory role.

Website:

Committee went over further changes made to the site. Michael emailed Richard to get the DEI site on the main page for BBE.