

Integration: An Intellectual History

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Statement of Research Project

In 1963 African American writer James Baldwin declared that he did not 'want to be integrated into a burning house.' Americans today view the civil rights era as a period in which African Americans and other racial minorities sought integration as compared to the 'separatist' demands of the Black Power movement that followed. Everyone knows what it meant to integrate a school, a lunch counter, or a polling booth. But, as Baldwin's quote suggests, debates about integration were no simply binary debate of 'for' and 'against.' Baldwin favored integration, but only if America also put its house in order.

From the 1940s to the 1960s, when the term 'integration' had its greatest currency in American life, it provided a common agenda for civil rights activists and their allies. But the shared language masked key differences that became explosively apparent by the mid-1960s after the passage of landmark civil rights legislation. Did integration mean the 'color-blind' society advocated by moderates or did it require more fundamental social change as advanced by Baldwin, Martin Luther King, Jr. and others? Would African Americans retain a strong group identity in an integrated society or would they fully assimilate through intermarriage? Opponents of integration, ranging from white supremacists to Black Power advocates, also defined the concept through their critiques.

Despite the term's obvious status as a crucial concept in American race relations, 'integration' has received little historical attention. In this project, I aim to offer the first scholarly book on the history of the concept, one that will transform our understandings of the civil rights era and will be published with a leading academic press (as were my first two

books). Civil rights historians have correctly recognized that 'integrationist' inadequately describes the civil rights movement, noting that inclusion with whites in public institutions such as schools was not the ultimate goal of the movement but a means to an end: African American equality. In downgrading 'integration' as a category of analysis, however, historians have overlooked a rich debate about the term that highlights how Americans conceptualized their polity and society. I argue that 'integration' functioned as what cultural critic Raymond Williams called a 'keyword,' a familiar term that articulates social ideals but is open to diverse and conflicting interpretations. Because keywords' meanings are defined by the struggle of forces that claim, contest, and modify them, studying them unlocks broader cultural cleavages and competitions for power.

A Provost's Scholar would substantially contribute to this project. In the first instance, I would ask the postgraduate to comb through primary source material to determine when the term 'integration' first entered American discourse in relation to race. They would make use of newly acquired library databases of the newspapers *New York Times* and *Chicago Defender* (an African American publication) as case studies. In addition, the student would help me create a Google ngram that would show the rise and fall of usage of the term 'integration' in the Google Books database. This would help reveal when the concept gained salience and when it lost purchase. Generally, having a postgraduate student working on a similar topic to my own would prove extremely useful in terms of creating a collaborative research environment. A Provost's Scholar would provide crucial assistance to my study of how the meanings of 'integration' map the contours of racial politics that have defined the U.S. since the civil rights era, when Americans have debated competing visions of liberal multiracial democracy. As such, this project will substantially contribute to the 'Identities in Transformation' research theme.

Statement of Research Profile Advancement

I have already published two highly-regarded monographs and a series of articles in leading historical journals. I want my third book to be more ambitious: to cover a broader chronological and thematic range and to reshape my research fields of twentieth-century U.S. history, intellectual history, and civil rights history. A postgraduate research assistant would improve the quality of my work and the speed with which I could complete it.

Recruiting PhD students has been among the biggest challenges I have faced since I came to Trinity in 2009 as its first ever researcher in U.S. history. It is difficult to start a PhD research culture from scratch and hard to persuade students to study U.S. history at an institution where they may be the only doctoral student in the field. I have had some success in recruitment. One student finished a PhD with me in 2016; another who has an Irish Research Council award is studying with me currently; and a third is applying for an IRC to work under my supervision starting next year. I also have an IRC postdoctoral fellow working with me.

My goal is to build on this success and to create a critical mass in U.S. history that would attract a large cohort of PhD students to Trinity to work under my supervision. To that end, a Provost's Scholarship would be invaluable in helping attract a top-quality postgraduate student working in my field. Substantial PhD supervision is the most significant gap in my c.v. at the moment that I need to fill to reach senior academic status. Success in this area will help prepare me to apply for external grants such as an European Research Council Advanced Grant and aid me in attracting more IRC-funded postgraduates and postdoctoral fellows to work with me.