

The study of history offers us a unique opportunity to learn from the past and work towards creating a better future. This is especially true in the context of the human rights violations that have scarred our world. The Holocaust and other topics involving genocide and human rights violations are challenging topics to navigate as a scholar, teacher, or historian. As a teacher and historian, I deeply believe in the importance of ensuring that future generations understand the gravity of these atrocities and are equipped with the tools to promote social justice and respect for human rights. That is why I am excited to have the opportunity to apply for the *Holocaust, Genocide and Human Rights Education Initiative at Penn State*, which will help me develop the knowledge, strategies, and skills to effectively teach about these important issues.

During my undergraduate education at Saint Vincent College, I had the opportunity as a history major to explore my interests in human rights issues and areas of history less commonly taught. The majority of my research revolved around Native American history and the human rights violations committed against these groups by the United States and Canadian Government. I had several opportunities in history classes and independent study courses to research and write about the topics of residential schools, cultural genocide, and reproductive abuses committed against Native American communities. My senior thesis was titled “*Canada and the Genocide Question: Government Policy and Compulsory Sterilization of Canada’s First Peoples*” and investigated the overrepresentation of Indigenous people affected by Canadian eugenic sterilization laws and other eugenic efforts. My thesis argued that the Canadian government’s encouragement and use of involuntary sterilization and other forms of negative eugenics against Indigenous communities were a violation of treaty obligations and, more importantly, a violation of human rights and a form of genocide as defined by the United Nations’ 1948 *Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide*.

For the past two years, I have taught ninth grade American History at Norwin High School in North Huntingdon, Pennsylvania. My curriculum covers American history from the 1840s to 1914, including the trans-Atlantic slave trade, slavery in America, the Reconstruction era, and the treatment of Native American groups during America’s westward expansion. All three of these historical topics involve discussion of human rights and violation of those rights. Teaching American history should not gloss over the genocide perpetrated by the institution of slavery and the trans-Atlantic slave trade. In my classroom, my goal is to teach these difficult topics honestly and effectively while maintaining a trauma-informed approach. As mentioned above, I have an educational and research background in the area of human rights. However, as I started my career in the classroom, I have found that scholarly research and classroom teaching requires vastly different skills and approaches. I have made a concerted effort to learn how to teach these difficult topics through reading and other online resources as well as through collaboration with my colleagues.

Teaching accurate and objective history is important to understand and learn from the mistakes committed by those in the past. It also plays an important role in combating anti-semitism and racism in society. In the past few years, history education has increasingly

been the focus of political and community debate and controversy. In many communities, there are those who feel that to teach difficult topics and engage with the darker parts of history is inappropriate for the high school classroom. I currently teach about America's complicated history of race and racism in a deeply divided and highly politicized school district. It is my, and my departments' belief that these difficult and "controversial" topics are valuable and important for students to investigate, grapple with, and learn from. It is our hope that by attending this institute, not only will I obtain and pass on new strategies, ideas, and approaches, but that this institute will help affirm the importance of teaching genocide, human rights, and other difficult topics in an honest and effective way. In order for students to truly learn and gain from their history classes, difficult topics need to be taught with an unbiased and fact-based approach.

I am applying for the *Holocaust, Genocide and Human Rights Education Initiative* because I have a strong belief as a history teacher that it is crucial that we educate future generations about the devastating impact of human rights abuses throughout history. We must actively teach the concept of human rights and apply it to our history to ensure that future generations are equipped with the knowledge and skills to promote a more just and peaceful world. That belief is personalized as my extended family is still experiencing the effects of generational trauma created by the Holocaust. My maternal grandfather, Andreas Chrambach, was a Holocaust survivor who was sent to Auschwitz-Birkenau, and many members of his family were either victims of the Holocaust or displaced around the world as a result of it. His experience and trauma had a significant impact on my family, and their experiences in learning about the Holocaust and human rights.

My family history has given me a specific interest in how the Holocaust is taught and understood, as well as the importance of trauma informed educational practice. When students have personal or family history and trauma, poorly implemented instruction can be upsetting or re-traumatizing. Once a student is emotionally upset or re-traumatized, the opportunity for learning is lost. This is something I have experienced as a student. In my college French class, my professor chose to show the movie *La Rafle*, a historical drama about the 1942 "Vel' d'Hiv Roundup." While this film is historically accurate and could be a valuable instructional tool, it was utilized in a way that left me deeply upset and unable to focus on the assignment at hand. I remember sitting in class and thinking about how my grandfather and his family had experienced so much of what was shown in the film. To me, watching the deaths of characters in the film felt like watching the deaths of my grandfather's family members. My experience in that class left me certain that as a teacher, I wanted to do my best to teach about difficult and traumatic topics with a high level of sensitivity and to maintain a safe classroom environment for all students. I feel that the Initiative would be immensely helpful in developing my professional practice in this area, especially with regard to teaching about the institution of slavery and the history of race and racism in the United States.

All historical human rights abuses have affected the people involved and their families in deep and lasting ways. For example, America's history of slavery and racism has had long lasting effects on Black families and communities. This is something that my Black students

know all too well. I want all my students to understand that these events are more than statistics and facts; that they are the diverse lived experiences and histories of individuals and families. In applying for this Initiative, I hope to gain new perspectives and methods for teaching these difficult and emotionally charged topics in ways that center the humanity and dignity of those impacted and focus on the devastating impact of human rights abuses on people and communities.

In addition, the Initiative's focus on inquiry-based learning and trauma informed practice is appealing as these are both pedagogical approaches that I have been working to integrate into my instructional practice. As a high school teacher, I feel it is important to be aware that many of my students have experienced traumatic events. Trauma-informed educational practice is important to provide students with a safe classroom environment. This is doubly important when teaching students about historical events such as the Holocaust or slavery. I want to continue to learn how to utilize classroom materials including primary sources in ways that encourage students to honestly and accurately investigate the most difficult parts of history while maintaining an environment that promotes emotional well-being of all students.

One aspect of creating a safe classroom environment in which to explore difficult topics is the selection and use of primary sources and other materials. I would like to learn more about the responsible and pedagogically sound ways of utilizing primary source materials and personal narratives, especially those concerning graphic or upsetting topics. I am particularly interested in learning how to do so in a student-led manner that provides space for students to engage with the sources without trivializing the content. I feel that inquiry-based learning in history and social studies has great potential to help students develop critical thinking skills, evaluate evidence and sources, and to see the relevance of history to their own lives and the world around them. I would like to explore how inquiry-based learning could be better utilized in my classroom as we investigate difficult topics like the history of slavery and racism or the Holocaust.

I believe this Institute will support my teaching of the Holocaust, slavery, and other difficult topics by expanding my understanding of the events themselves, giving me a stronger background in inquiry-based learning, and helping me develop sensitive and trauma-informed approaches towards these topics. I also hope to have the opportunity to learn through collaboration with other professionals and educators and to share my experience and learning with my colleagues at Norwin. The *Holocaust, Genocide and Human Rights Education Initiative* presents an incredible opportunity to learn and grow alongside other professionals and to develop a stronger educational practice. I hope that through participation in the initiative, I will come away with the knowledge, strategies, and support to teach these difficult topics in a more effective, engaging, and meaningful way.

Through my participation in the Initiative, I hope to explore the following questions:

- What methods are most effective in teaching difficult topics in a trauma-informed and sensitive manner without trivializing the events?

- What are the best practices for the selection and utilization of sources, especially sources concerning graphic or upsetting content?
- How do I structure inquiry-based lessons that encourage deeper analysis and critical thinking while providing scaffolding and support for a wide range of students?
- What strategies might counteract student apathy and foster genuine empathy, curiosity, and engagement in students?
- How should I approach the teaching of genocides and human rights issues that may be considered controversial by some in the community?