2021–22 UNIVERSITY OF IOWA OBERMANN CENTER ANNUAL REPORT

Shining Light on Difficult Questions
Obermann Scholars in Action

The Obermann Center took 2021–22 as an invitation to pause and reflect on the mission of our work. After returning to campus—yet not back to "normal"—it made sense to reexamine how we serve the research mission of the University of Iowa.

Through focus groups and a survey, we received two strong messages: first, that the Obermann Center’s support for marginalized scholars in the form of funding and safe space is critically needed; and second, that when we consider which programs to fund, we should give special consideration to work that addresses “wicked problems,” those seemingly intractable issues that cross disciplines, geographic lines, and other strata.

We are excited, impressed, and humbled by some of the big questions that our scholars are asking. They are shining light on issues that defy easy answers and invite cross-disciplinary attention. Many of these scholars are working beyond the walls of campus, partnering with local, state, national, and global organizations, governmental agencies, and community-based artists and activists. We believe that the future of higher education lives in these kinds of risk-taking questions and the untidy answers they produce.

As our state’s student population becomes more diverse, how do we recruit and retain the educators of color our children need?

We know that students of color perform better when they have a teacher who looks like them. But in an already stressful profession, teachers of color experience a much higher rate of burnout than their peers—as much as 25% more. Ain Grooms, Duhita Mahatmya, and Ebonee Johnson are combining their methodology and research knowledge from the areas of educational leadership, youth and adult development, and rehabilitation counseling to better understand the lived experiences of this educator cohort. They are developing evidence-based psychological interventions as well as school-wide professional development trainings to help curb this trend.

Ain Grooms, formerly Education Policy & Leadership, College of Public Health; Ebonee Johnson, Community & Behavioral Health, College of Public Health; Duhita Mahatmya, Grants & Research Services Center, College of Education

Award: Spelman-Rockefeller Grant

At the onset of the pandemic, Kirsten Kumpf Baele received a piece of good news: her application to the Anne Frank Center USA for a sapling propagated from the chestnut tree that once stood outside Anne Frank’s Amsterdam annex had been accepted. Because of delays caused by Covid, she had two years to plan the sapling’s celebratory planting, all the while watching as memorials around the country were removed or questioned. Working with a team of community and campus partners, Kumpf Baele devised programming that situated the tree as a living and inclusive memorial, and as a symbol of sustainability, free speech, social justice, and a living Judaism.

Kirsten Kumpf Baele, German, CLAS

Award: Co-sponsorship and in-kind

Can a tree related to the Holocaust serve as an inspirational and relevant contemporary memorial?
In a moment when reproductive freedom is diminishing, how can those seeking to safeguard reproductive care use language that represents the rich diversity of gender in the context of conception, pregnancy, birth, and parenting?

Language lies at the intersection of reproductive justice and the rights of trans people. And that language often complicates and even polarizes groups that should be allies. Natalie Fimser-Oraiz and Sharon Yam are co-authoring a book, New Grammars for Reproductive Justice, to demonstrate how anti-trans discourse that polices the boundaries of gender, reproduction, and family formation is a kind of reproductive injustice that has grave impacts not only on trans and gender non-conforming people, but also on people of color and cis-gender women.

Natalie Fimser-Oraiz, Communication Studies and Gender, Women’s, & Sexuality Studies; Sharon Yam, University of Kentucky
Award: Interdisciplinary Research Grant

How is our community preparing for climate change, and what role can the humanities play?

A group of graduate students from multiple departments visited the offices of university and community partners working broadly in the areas of environmental activism and community organizing. Their visits were the central “text” for Eric Gidal’s environmental humanities course that pushed the boundaries of graduate education toward more local sources, including farms and watersheds. “These experiences were illuminating and exciting in comparison to the theory-based learning that is inherent to graduate school. I feel that I have been waiting for this practical and action-based component for several years, so it was exciting to finally pair ideas with experiences, values with actions,” wrote one student.

Eric Gidal, English
Award: Humanities for the Public Good: Graduate Humanities Lab Course Grant, supported by the Mellon Foundation

How does the contemporary university define and reward “research”? What is the role of the research university in responding to intractable societal issues?

The mission of the Obermann Center is to support the research mission of the University of Iowa. When this mission was established, academic disciplines had clear expectations of what counted as research in their areas. Today, the questions scholars are responding to necessitate cross-disciplinary thinking that moves beyond the one-author monograph, that has more urgency in the need to share outcomes, and that invites creative frameworks and accessible language. Through a series of online “What Do We Mean by Research Now?” panel discussions with a diverse array of guest speakers, Obermann Center Director Teresa Mangum questioned the nature of current university research and provided hopeful examples of its application to issues (seemingly) far outside the academy.

Teresa Mangum, Gender, Women’s, & Sexuality Studies; English; and Obermann Center
Award: This program was free and open to all; participating scholars freely gave their time.