2020 Election, Health Care Disparities Among Topics to be Explored by New Udall Center Fellows

Four faculty members from across campus will tackle public policy projects within their disciplines as the newest cohort of Udall Center for Studies in Public Policy fellows.

The Udall Center Fellows Program, which began in 1990, is the longest-standing program of its kind at the UA. Supported by the Office of Research, Discovery and Innovation, the College of Social and Behavioral Sciences and the Udall Center, the program aims to give faculty time to conduct public policy research in their disciplines and resources to find funding for the projects.

"It comes out of the recognition that policy is not just done in a school of policy. There's a whole range of faculty research here on campus that has a broad set of policy implications," said Christopher Scott, director of the Udall Center and professor in the School of Geography and Development. He added that the Udall Center does partner often with the School of Government and Public Policy.

Since its start, more than 140 faculty members from 42 units and 10 colleges have gone through the program.

This year's fellows are:

- Corey Abramson, assistant professor in the School of Sociology
- Kevin Anchukaitis, associate professor in the School of Geography and Development
- Melanie Hingle, assistant professor in the Department of Nutritional Sciences
- Christopher Weber, associate professor in the School of Government and Public Policy

Applicants submit proposals, which are then considered by a committee made up mostly of former fellows, Scott said. The committee considers criteria such as how innovative an applicant's proposal is, how well the research can be translated to real-world policies and how feasible the project is.

Fellows receive a one-semester release from teaching and other major responsibilities to devote as much time as possible to their projects.

"We felt we got a good, robust group of fellows and we're looking forward to seeing what they come up with," said Scott, who was a fellow during the 2012-13 academic year.

The projects that will be taken on by the incoming fellows involve a wide range of topics:

Abramson will investigate disparities in health care, particularly cancer treatment; Anchukaitis
will examine the connection among climate, water and indigenous forest management in Guatemala's highlands; Hingle will help create a model for delivering healthy food to food-insecure areas; and Weber will research the effects of authoritarianism and its role in the 2020 election.

Hingle's research includes community-based solutions for preventing diet-related disease, particularly among children. She will spend her fellowship partnering with the Community Food Bank of Southern Arizona and El Rio Health to develop a model for delivering healthy food to people in areas where it isn't accessible. Because the two organizations serve clients who have low incomes and suffer from food insecurity, Hingle plans to create a structure for collaboration.

"These organizations are natural partners in a lot of ways because they serve very similar groups of people, they realize that their folks have similar issues, and they want to do something about it," Hingle said. "What's missing from that picture is the connecting-the-dots part, and that's the part that I hope to help with."

One component of Hingle's project will be to help the food bank develop a policy to inform decisions about the types of food that are best to accept from donors and what should go to clients. She also plans to work with El Rio Health on ways that its health clinics can prescribe healthy foods as part of treatment plans. The food could then be distributed by the food bank.

Her work with El Rio Health will include developing a prototype for a "therapeutic food box" that could be given to patients at risk of diet-related diseases, which could include healthy food as well as recipes, can openers and other items that can support a healthier lifestyle.

The project, which is in the early planning stages, could take between two and five years to fully roll out, she said. But her time away from teaching, which is planned for next spring, will allow her to do research and write a grant proposal to help fund the project.

The fellowships, Hingle said, provides a framework for a project that would otherwise need to be tackled in smaller pieces, and therefore could have much less impact.

"It's hard to find that dedicated person to bring stuff under one umbrella and have a theme that you're generating as a group. That's why Udall is really helpful because it's a formal project that we can all hang our hat on," she said. "I'm really thrilled to have that opportunity."

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