Interdisciplinary Teams to Address Inequality With Innovation Farm Grants

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Three interdisciplinary teams led by UA faculty will undertake projects to address issues related to inequality — locally and on the other side of the globe.

The projects are funded through Innovation Farm, a program coordinated by the Confluencenter for Creative Inquiry. The program, which began in 2014, has a twofold mission, said Javier Duran, director of the Confluencenter: to foster collaboration among faculty at different colleges across the UA, and to provide funds that allow the projects to have greater impact.

Innovation Farm provides up to $15,000 per team. Most applicants, Duran said, already have well-established ideas and may have already received some funding for them.

"I think what our funding does is it facilitates the actual implementation of the ideas," said Duran, who is also a professor in the Center for Latin American Studies.

The program’s impact can be seen in several UA colleges. Past projects "facilitated the conversation," Duran said, that laid the groundwork for the establishment of the Center for Buddhist Studies in the College of Humanities. Another project helped lead to the College of Social and Behavioral Sciences' Human Rights Practice Program.

For this first time, this year's program had a theme — inequality — that each project, in some way, had to address. The idea behind the theme, Duran said, was to look at inequality through the lenses of disciplines that don't traditionally examine that issue.

"We felt this was a very relevant issue that is in the national conversation in many different ways," Duran said. "We were curious about how our colleagues would see that, especially people who are not working in economics or in the traditional areas where you expect that to be analyzed."

Fostering local collaborations

"Toward a Vision of Community Wellness: Reclaiming Agency, Self-Care, and Connection to Place" is one of the three new projects selected for Innovation Farm funding. The project will provide talks, workshops and classes to address health and food-related inequalities in Tucson's African American community.
The project is an ongoing collaboration among the Dunbar Coalition, El Rio Health, the Coalition for African American Health & Wellness, and the UA Center for Regional Food Studies, and was originally funded with nearly $102,000 from the Agnese Nelms Haury Program in Environment and Social Justice at the UA.

Building on that seed funding, the Innovation Farm grant will support student research assistants and visiting speakers.

The project grew out of discussions between Megan Carney, director of the Center for Regional Food Studies, and Debi Chess Mabie, a community impact fellow in the College of Social and Behavioral Sciences, about Tucson's history of health inequality and racial segregation. Chess Mabie is the acting executive director of the Dunbar Pavilion, which aims to be the home for celebrating and preserving Tucson's African American heritage.

The project, Carney said, aims to answer this question: How might we utilize a lens of racial justice or food justice to redirect the negative health outcomes of communities of color, and really with a specific focus on the African American community in Tucson? The African American community in Tucson has been socioeconomically disadvantaged for decades, she added, citing the community's dwindling numbers and underrepresentation in local politics.

The project also includes Jerome Dotson, an assistant professor in the College of Humanities' Africana Studies Program whose research includes studying the social and political significance of food choice among African American populations throughout history.

"I was especially interested in this grant because it allows me to kind of, in some ways, use my personal research interest outside of the classroom," Dotson said.

The workshops the project will offer, he said, will feature experts and activists from the community and elsewhere who will discuss ways to promote health and wellness in the Dunbar community. As an example of the types of speakers and topics the program might highlight, Dotson pointed to Ron Finley, an activist in south central Los Angeles who teaches urban gardening to empower communities to take control of their health.

"I was excited to potentially bring someone like that here to Tucson," Dotson said.

The two other projects selected for Innovation Farm funding this year are:

- **Indigenous Inequalities: Intersections of Property, Place, and Rights in the United States and Australia.** The project will bring together legal scholars and anthropologists at the UA and the University of Queensland in Australia, as well as indigenous community partners in both countries. The project is led by School of Anthropology Director Diane Austin. The group will explore legal protections of indigenous land, knowledge and property rights in the U.S. and Australia. Researchers will discuss their findings in two workshops, one in Tucson and the other in Brisbane, Australia. The Innovation Farm funding will support student employees, honoraria and web design web conferencing.

- **Trans ± Sex: Rethinking Sex/Gender in Trans Studies.** The project asks this question: Why were certain conceptualizations of sex/gender championed over others? The project, led by Z Nicolazzo, an assistant professor in the Center for the Study of Higher Education, and Eva Hayward, an assistant professor in the Department of Gender and Women's Studies, will include a two-day symposium in the fall. Innovation
Farm funding will go toward supporting invited speaker honoraria, graduate assistant staff, and archiving the symposium for later discussions.

"Inequality is one of the grand challenges of our 21st century society," Duran said. "The more ways that we can find to address that grand challenge, the better off we're going to be."

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