Midwest Cultural Institute

African American Studies Program
University of Iowa
Iowa City, IA 52242

Venise Berry, Coordinator
DEO, African American Studies
venise-berry@uiowa.edu
Introduction

In the spirit of excellence, the Midwest Cultural Institute will serve as a prominent resource for interdisciplinary research and community engagement. The Institute will serve as a collective to educate, engage and empower research and activities around issues of cultural difference. The Institute will draw on the historic national reputation of the UI African American Studies Department (AAS), one of the first AAS departments established in the United States in 1968. At the time of its founding and for decades that followed, the UI was viewed as a leader in the study of African American culture and experience. The purpose of the Institute is to bring together faculty, postdoctoral fellows, and undergraduate students to develop and promote research and creative projects that foster a holistic understanding of diversity issues in the Midwest.

The strategic vision of the Institute not only seeks to foster research across the state of Iowa but also sets its sights on neighboring Midwestern towns and cities with diverse populations. As the 2016 presidential reminded the nation, there is much to study in middle America.

The Midwest Cultural Institute will contribute to trailblazing research and discussions around race and culture. There is a crucial need to increase and nurture diversity in both the state of Iowa and on the UI campus. As the U.S. becomes increasingly diverse and anticipates a majority-minority population by 2043—public research universities must play a crucial role in studying traditionally underrepresented minority culture.

According to a 2015 U.S. Census Bureau report, Iowa is about 90.5 percent White, 3.5 percent Black, a little more than 2 percent Asian, approximately 6 percent Hispanic, and almost 2
percent mixed-race persons. In 2015, traditionally underrepresented students (this does not include Asian students) accounted for 12.7 percent of the UI student body. African American students comprised 2.9% of all students and Hispanic students comprised 6% of all students. While these numbers roughly reflect the state population, the faculty numbers are starker. In 2014, there were 28 tenured African American faculty, 7 tenure-track black faculty, 16 clinical track faculty, and 41 non-tenure-track faculty out of a total of 5,349 UI faculty. This means that only 1.7% of all UI faculty identify as African American.

The 2017 Board of Regents report finds that the six-year graduation rate for non-minority students at the UI is 72.6% while the rate for African American students was 53.2% (is this number switched?). This almost 20-point disparity highlights the magnitude of the challenge the UI faces in serving its minority students.

Research Opportunities

Over the last ten to twenty years, Iowa City, Coralville, and North Liberty have experienced major population shifts. These and other Iowa communities have been impacted by large numbers of African Americans migrating from the Chicago area. The changing demographic of local cities and towns brings both new challenges and opportunities. Urban spaces in neighboring states also provide possibilities for important research and engagement. Geographically, the University of Iowa sits in the middle of prominent Midwest cities where large minority populations face formidable challenges. Crises abound and include the increased level of killing among African American youth in Chicago; the Black Lives Matter protests in cities like St. Paul, Minnesota, Milwaukee, Wisconsin, and Omaha, Nebraska after unarmed
Black men have been killed by police; and the University of Missouri upheaval after several administrators mishandled racial incidents and were forced to resign.

Institute Design

**Undergraduate Research Assistants**

The Midwest Cultural Institute will support one to three undergraduate research assistants through the ICRU program (https://uiowa.edu/icru/icru/icru/icru/article/icru-research-fellows-program-information). Although preference will be given to African American Studies majors and minors, any undergraduate student will be welcome to apply for the positons. In addition to working with individual AAS faculty, research assistants will participate in the ongoing research that takes place within the Institute. As undergraduate research assistants, they will gain valuable experience working closely with assigned faculty on specific research or creative projects in relation to their academic interests and career goals.

**Programming**

**AAS Seminar Series** – The Institute will organize three lectures each semester. Speakers will include the Visiting Fellow, Post-Doctoral Fellow, invited scholars, and UI faculty. The Colloquia will establish consistent scholarly conversations on campus around issues related race and culture in the Midwest. Presentations will also include post-discussion lunch conversations with invited graduate and undergraduate students. In addition to invigorating discussions with students, this series will showcase and enrich African American Studies and other cultural programs at the UI, in the state of Iowa, in the region, across the country and around the world.
**Midwest Cultural Think Tank** - This think tank will use social media to connect practical application and public advocacy. Bringing diverse perspectives together through conversations on Twitter, Facebook and other activities. A primary goal of the Institute is to addresses important cultural issues and strive for a significant impact on the changing local and regional environments.

**Public Engagement & Community Outreach** – An important component of the Institute will be public engagement and community outreach. The Institute will collaborate with the Office of Engagement, Public Policy Center, and Obermann Center to bring diverse perspectives together through the support of campus and state efforts such as local discussion groups, seminars, a newsletter, and youth-oriented projects.

**Conclusion**

The Midwest Cultural Institute supports several of the University of Iowa’s strategic plan initiatives such as increasing and improving diversity on campus and in the surrounding communities; recruiting and retaining a diverse faculty, staff, and student body; and cultivating a distinguished and diverse community of scholars that actively involve graduate and undergraduates. The strategic plan argues for the need to strengthen relationships and build bridges and declares, “…we act on our belief that engagement across differences – whether cultural, interdisciplinary or individual – enhances the quality of our work.” That is what the Midwest Cultural Institute will do.
This Institute will not only contribute to the body of knowledge documenting cultural issues in the Midwest, but it will also strive to improve the experience and advocate practical solutions for the problems identified. It will examine and explore cultural life in the Midwest by bringing together scholars and professionals from a wide variety of traditional research areas like education, history, sociology, politics, religion and language, along with non-traditional areas such as media, athletics, law, public health, and business. This Institute could also enhance the University’s diversity recruiting efforts based on the visibility it can bring to campus. As we rebuild the reputation of the UI African American Studies program through the Midwest Cultural Institute we can, ultimately, bring the University of Iowa back into local, regional, national, and even international visibility when it comes to issues of diversity.