

**In August of 2019, the faculty and staff of the Center for the Study of Southern Culture, including its three institutes (Living Blues, the Southern Documentary Project, and the Southern Foodways Alliance), engaged in a two-day visioning session conducted by Ari Weinzweig of Zingerman's. The following document is the result of that effort. We have composed it as an aspirational description of the Center in 2029, not as a reflection of the Center in this moment. We catalogue benchmarks internally and are happy to share those accomplishments upon request.**



## **Vision Statement for Spring 2029 Center for the Study of Southern Culture**

Since its founding in 1977, the Center for the Study of Southern Culture has been a focal point for innovative education and research on the U.S. South, strengthening the University's instructional program in the humanities and social sciences, promoting scholarship on many aspects of southern culture, and encouraging public understanding of the South as a diverse and complex space. The Center's curriculum teaches about a new South, honestly confronts troubling histories, and attracts innovative leaders and thinkers for faculty, staff, and student positions. Center scholars have received prestigious awards for teaching and research, and alumni of the Center work in a broad range of fields. As a result, institutions of higher learning all over the world use the Center as a model for regional studies programs.

### **DEVELOPING MEANINGFUL COLLABORATIONS**

In 2029, the Center continues its work through meaningful collaboration, both among its individual units and with outside partners. Each year the Center selects and concentrates on a shared theme that spans our classroom offerings, our public-facing programming, our documentary work, and the scholarship that we produce, even as faculty members continue robust pursuit of independent research projects. Faculty, staff, and students actually have so many ideas for shared themes that we keep a list of future possibilities. The Center provides funding to support individual and group research projects, and it has created initiatives enabling the transformation of interdisciplinary classroom work into scholarship. We initiate partnerships with other units on campus, academic groups at other institutions, and with community groups who hold a stake in our focus areas.

### **BUILDING STUDENT COMMUNITY**

The annual graduating class is an impressive 15 undergraduates, 10 Master of Arts graduates, and 10 Master of Fine Arts graduates. The group is markedly diverse; their backgrounds and life experiences reflect our region and our world. They are innovative and smart; many are graduating with academic honors and a resume that boasts conference presentations and published work. They arrived at the Center

via several paths; some credit the 100-level Southern Studies courses for shifting their thought paradigms and inspiring their studies, while others cite their initial interest to study with faculty whose work reflected their own ideas and experiences. All are graduating with firm plans for internships, employment, or further education. Teaching and mentorship by Center faculty prepared them for many career options, and alumni networks proved useful. Additionally, thanks to fully funded graduate stipends, no Southern Studies graduate students are leaving the University of Mississippi with educational debt. They are compensated fairly for their contributions to documentary projects and Center initiatives that are bold and South-changing.

## **INVESTING IN PEOPLE**

The Center's reputation attracts top scholars, documentarians, and subject area experts. The Center offers competitive salaries and, when coupled with research freedoms and the Oxford community's quality of life, the Center has become a top choice for academics working in cultural studies of the American South. The Center intentionally hires a diverse faculty and staff, and has completed job searches for three new tenure-track positions in Southern Studies specializing in African American studies, Latinx studies, and Native American studies. The Center's hiring practices are a model for other universities and national institutes, particularly because of the support it offers to scholars doing significant original research and writing, both within their own disciplines and across interdisciplinary lines. Paid leave for creative work, much like that of sabbatical, is extended to both nontenured faculty and staff, and job satisfaction and employee retention is predictably high. Faculty take advantage of opportunities for funded travel and research. Staff attend conferences and workshops that further develop their skill sets. All benefit from the Center's investment in technology and technology training. The Center regularly works with campus organizations, including the Black Student Union, the Sarah Isom Center, the United Campus Workers, and the Center for Inclusion and Cross Cultural Engagement to offer programs that spotlight and work to address issues of inequality on campus and in the larger community.

## **CREATING TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING AND ENGAGING COMMUNITIES**

The Center works to transform understandings of the South both on campus and in Oxford and Lafayette County, in Mississippi, and throughout the South more broadly construed. At the university level, the Center attracts a racially diverse student body to its undergraduate and graduate courses and regularly hosts town hall-style gatherings, robust political debates, and community events focused on facilitating conversation at a local level, especially with communities of color.

Planting seeds for systemic change, the Center has partnered with Southern Echo in Jackson and the UM College of Education to revise Mississippi's social studies curriculum. The new curriculum broadens student understanding of the region through various media, including Center-produced films, podcasts, oral histories, etc. As part of this revised curriculum, the Center offers small grants to schools seeking assistance with travel to local historic sites. The Center also works with the College of Education to incentivize their students to take Southern Studies courses, with a concurrent commitment to offer accessible Continuing Education Units (CEUs) for teachers in North Mississippi and the mid-South.

A new Community Engagement staff member assists the Center in developing relationships with neighbors in Oxford and Lafayette County and in the state of Mississippi. That person publicizes Center work, encourages participation in Center activities, and coordinates the Center's engagement with local communities.

With advisement from UM's Division of Diversity and Community Engagement, the Center has developed public programming that addresses contemporary issues and facilitates dialogue about inclusion and diversity. The Center also sponsors community workshops in documentary techniques—oral history, field work, film and photography—throughout the year. For youth, short summer sessions teach fieldwork techniques, and mini-classes address topics from today's modern, complex, and diverse South. Much of the content for these courses is based on the 100-level course content.

There is a greater Center presence at existing local events, evidenced by a "Mississippi Musicians" block at the Double Decker Festival, multiple film screenings at the Oxford Film Festival, and numerous Center volunteers at the Oxford Community Market. Biennially, the Center hosts a conference on a broad topic where all Center institutes, student groups, and community organizations are invited to share the work they've done that addresses the common theme.

## **DESIGNING INCLUSIVE INFRASTRUCTURE**

The Barnard Observatory annex thrives as a unified physical home for all of the Center's institutes and includes expanded facilities for cultural and academic functions, maker spaces and galleries for documentary arts, and state-of-the-art technology to support research and creation. Digital panels throughout the building display examples of the Center's best work and highlight upcoming events and exhibitions. A communal study space and generous patio beside the renovated kitchen all welcome conversations, meetings, and a variety of evening events, including live music. Our back patio functions as a gathering space for faculty, staff, and students and is occasionally the site of seminars and meetings.

The Documentary Arts Wing boasts high-tech teaching labs and multimedia production facilities on-par with industry standards. Center-affiliated and internationally renowned visiting artists are all delighted to show their work in the large flexible gallery space capable of 2D, 3D, and digital installations. A full roster of events including concerts, film screenings, performances, lectures, and the Center's SouthTalks series keep the auditorium a much sought-after space for weekly and annual co-curricular activities. The Center's in-house library and digital archive hosts a large collection of materials centered around our research and engagement with the South. There are dedicated listening and viewing stations available to explore oral histories, photography, and films. The reading library contains published works by faculty, students, and alumni, as well as a catalog of course curricula and projects. A fulltime archivist/librarian administers the collection and assists researchers in locating the best materials for their queries.

The Center's online presence has a clean design that clearly identifies Center institutes and their relationships to academic programs, helps visitors understand the scope of Center work, shares upcoming events and semester-based calendars with course offerings, and offers a virtual tour of the Center's world-class facility. Furthermore, the website is a portal for research and scholarship and integrates the Center's multimedia components: podcasts, films, *Study the South*, and the digital archive.

## **FUNDING THE FUTURE**

The Center's full-time fundraiser successfully administers an annual giving campaign and works with the Center Director and Advisory Committee members to solicit gifts, both large and small. Matching donor interests with Center projects, as well as instituting a monthly payment pledge program, has proven fruitful for the Center and all of its institutes—*Living Blues*, SouthDocs, and the Southern Foodways Alliance. The increased funding covers basic operating expenses, freeing faculty and staff to invest more time in creative thinking and work. Granting agencies also help fund big-picture Center endeavors, including public symposia and digital archive initiatives. Innovative Center work, shared in the printed annual report and in quarterly e-reports crafted by the fundraiser, encourages alumni and friends to donate.

Importantly, donor dollars support graduate student funding and faculty research. Funding possibilities are crucial to the Center's record of success in attracting top faculty, staff, and students. The position of the Center's director is endowed, and new positions meet developing programmatic and academic needs.

The Center Advisory Committee (CAC) plays a robust role in promoting the Center's mission. Composed of eighteen to twenty members appointed for once-renewable three-year terms, the CAC meets twice annually, once in the fall and once in the spring, and in order to remain active, members attend at least one of these sessions. CAC members are evenly divided among these subgroups: Fundraising and Grants; Events and Outreach; and Alumni Relations and Advertising. The Fundraising and Grants subgroup assists the Center in locating the means to finance programming and other academic initiatives, including support of students. The Events and Outreach subgroup helps to organize and host "CSSC on the Road" programming highlighting the work of our three units and assisting us in building or strengthening relationships to other academic institutions. The Alumni Relations and Advertising subgroup assists in growing and maintaining ties to graduates and in helping to spread the word about our degree programs.

## **EARNING GLOBAL RECOGNITION**

The Center influences the study and interpretation of the U.S. South both nationally and internationally, and is a recognized repository of research resources. The Center functions nimbly and innovatively as a think tank. We invite scholars and other individuals with subject-area expertise to engage with a range of challenging issues facing the region.

When issues related to the U.S. South arise, national and international media contact the Center first, due to its strategic media plan and knowledge base. Our web resources—which include curated lists of scholarly resources and lists of experts—have placed us at the top of internet searches for southern topics, including music, food, culture, and politics.