

# Postdoc Profile: Dr. Kelly Slay

University of Michigan (B.A. and Ph.D. Psychology); DePaul University (M.S., Public Service Management and Higher Education Administration)

## Faculty Mentor: Dr. Kimberly Griffin

The passion that drives Kelly Slay has its roots in a seminal experience. During graduate school at DePaul University in Chicago, Kelly had the opportunity to work for GEAR UP Chicago Alliance, coaching Black and Latino high school juniors and seniors in the Chicago Public School system. What she saw intrigued her. “I was working with these bright, talented young students, yet, when it was time to look at colleges, many were choosing to attend the local community college, when they were more than qualified for a more selective school. How do students make these decisions?” A first-generation college student, Kelly always remembered this experience, which later informed her research for her Ph.D. at the University of Michigan. Now a Presidential Postdoc at the University of Maryland, Kelly continues the work that began with that question she first asked in Chicago: how do Black students decide where they will enroll in college and how do they navigate that college experience, particularly in the current racial and socio-political climate? Below, Kelly talks about her research, creating impact, and good advice:



Talk a little about your research focus and what inspired you to pursue this topic: My research explores issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion in higher education in various educational contexts, particularly campuses and states that prohibit race-conscious affirmative action. My work primarily focuses on three areas: the implications of campus racial climate for Black students' college enrollment and wellbeing; enrollment management policies and practices (e.g., admissions, recruitment, financial aid, etc.) aimed at improving campus diversity; and organizational practices and conditions that facilitate the success and wellbeing of underrepresented students in STEM at the undergraduate and graduate levels.

At the heart of my research is a passion to improve access and equity for students traditionally underserved by our educational systems—an interest that was cultivated by my own background as a first-generation college student from a working-class family. After graduating from the University of Michigan, I worked at the Sargent Shriver National Center on Poverty Law, as a GEAR UP Coach in Chicago public high schools, and with other organizations and initiatives aimed at expanding opportunities for low-income and first-generation students. These experiences were the catalyst for my interest in graduate education and eventually, helped inform my research agenda as a Ph.D.

Why did you choose UMD for your postdoc? The postdoc at UMD was actually my top choice. I believed that the presidential fellowship would provide the opportunity, resources and structure to facilitate my development as a researcher and lay the foundation critical to successfully transition into a tenure-track faculty position. I was intrigued by the Counseling, Higher Education, and Special Education department's longstanding commitment to equity, diversity and organizational change, which resonated with my own values as a scholar. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, I was a huge fan of the work of many of the faculty in the Higher Education, Student Affairs and International Education Policy program, including that of my mentor Dr. Kimberly Griffin. In fact, when I thought about my own program of research, I saw several critical intersections with the scholarship of Drs. Kimberly Griffin, Sharon Fries-Britt, and Julie Park, among others. I admire their contributions to the field and thought it would be an incredible opportunity to have them as colleagues, to learn from them, and to collaborate on research projects.

Can you paint a picture of today's landscape for an African American high school student? What obstacles do they face, and what influences their decision and ability to pursue a college degree? Truthfully, there is a lot of diversity within this group. I know the tendency is to think of African Americans as one large group but there is a great deal of complexity there and as a result, the issues and influences that affect these students are also quite complex. Overall, I can say that African American high school students have made gains in their levels of academic preparation; however, inequities in K-12 schools has often meant diminished access to college preparatory curricula and college counseling, which can also affect students' college-going. These inequities are then reproduced in higher education. So, while there is evidence that African American students enjoy greater access to higher education than in decades past, the question is, access to what type of institution? They remain underrepresented at the most selective institutions which, in addition to K-12 factors, is the result of the increasingly competitive nature of college admissions, changes in financial aid policies and practices, and the rise in for-profit institutions.

I believe another issue that is especially salient right now is racial climate on college campuses. My research in this area suggests that African American students who are admitted to highly selective, predominantly white institutions are concerned about whether they will be safe and supported on their college campus. And while racial incidents are not anything new (their occurrence on college campuses is well-documented), through the rise in social media, these incidents are a growing part of African American students' consciousness and thus an additional consideration in their decision-making. But again, I want to reiterate the complexity within this group. I've highlighted their experiences with broad strokes; there is a lot of nuance depending on where students live, the type of high school they attend, social networks, and socio-economic status.

Are there areas of research in this field you haven't yet explored that you hope to tackle in the future? Yes. I'm very excited about collaborating with Dr. Griffin this semester to explore the experiences of postdocs in STEM and their decisions to pursue faculty careers. Up to this point, my

work has focused on STEM in undergraduate and graduate contexts.

I also hope to explore the ways in which the current socio-political environment and racial climate on college campuses affects Black students' mental health and psychological wellbeing. This will actually be an important component of a longitudinal project that I will be launching next semester that examines the college transition and experiences of 35 black students at select four-year institutions. From an organizational standpoint, I would also like to research what campus leaders can do to better support those students who may be suffering under the weight of micro-aggressions and increasingly overt forms of racism in their college environments. I believe the provision of mental health services on campuses is critical for student success and wellbeing.

How do you hope your work will impact others? Connecting research to practice is a critical goal of my work. By centering the voices of student communities that are often pushed to the margins, I hope my work will provide support for policies and practices that foster more racially diverse, inclusive, equitable environments on university campuses and within departments. I also hope to contribute to a more complex, strengths-based narrative about Black students in higher education by foregrounding the role of racial identity, resilience and agency in how these students transition into and navigate predominantly-white institutions.

As for the underrepresented students that are often the focus of my research, I hope that they feel validated and affirmed by my scholarship and the opportunity to share their experiences. I've often heard my participants question whether they are crazy or just imagining the things they perceive and encounter on a regular basis. I want them to know that they are not alone or crazy. Their experiences are valid and supported by empirical evidence.

What's the best piece of professional advice you've ever received? That's a hard question; the advice that I've received over the years has, in many ways, been tailored to where I was in my life. But one piece of advice that has always served me well is to learn as much as you can, wherever you are. I try to be conscious about growing and developing in each chapter of my life.

What's the last great book you read or show you binged? "The Crown." I actually watched 8 of the 10 episodes in one day over winter break! Netflix really needs to consider making more episodes; 10 just isn't enough! I plan to catch up on "This is Us" over spring break.

When not under a mountain of work, where's your favorite spot (campus or off-campus) to decompress? Rock Creek Park. It's not far from where I live and I enjoy going there for a nice, long walk.

Article by Maggie Haslam

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## Leading by Example: The Big Ten Academic Alliance

# Academic Leadership Program Nurtures Professional Advancement of UMD's Faculty

When the University of Maryland joined the [Big Ten Conference](#) three years ago, it opened a lot of doors—and not just for athletics. Its academic offshoot, the Big Ten Academic Alliance, provides unique opportunities for its members to share expertise beyond their campus borders and offers fertile ground for collaboration. One of its most successful initiatives is the [Academic Leadership Program](#), or ALP. Launched in 1989, the ALP brings faculty members and administrators from each of the 14 member universities together for an intensive—and often illuminating—course in leadership and professional development, as well as for candid discussions about the challenges facing universities today. ALP fellows are nominated by each university for their desire and potential to consider taking on a larger role in shaping their university, as well as to hone their skills for their current positions.

The 2018 fellows—[Daryle Williams](#), Associate Professor of History; [Doron Levy](#), Professor of Mathematics; [Philip Joyce](#), Professor and Associate Dean at the School of Public Policy; [Jason Geary](#), Professor and Director at the School of Music; and [Mike Faulkender](#), Associate Dean of Masters Programs and Professor of Finance—are two-thirds through their program, having attended symposiums at the University of Iowa in the fall and the University of Michigan in February. “This program exceeds all expectations,” said Professor Joyce. “Not only has it added to my own development, it’s allowed me to forge truly meaningful connections with my peers. This could be a valuable exercise even if you don’t pursue a career in academic administration.” Below, UMD’s 2018 ALP fellows reflect on some of the benefits of the program:

It’s a diverse network of experts at your disposal. One of the greatest benefits touted by this year’s fellows is the opportunity to learn how other people approach challenges at both macro and micro scales; through ALP, you are gaining a network. High-caliber speakers at the seminars share their depth of experience to help make sense of today’s most pressing campus challenges. Smaller group discussions with colleagues can offer ideas for solving problems in programs, departments, and colleges. “The symposiums and on-campus discussions offer plenty of opportunities to actively engage with other fellows,” said Professor Geary. “It allowed me to become attuned not just to the issues but multiple perspectives. There is a wide range of experiences and positions among the fellows, which really enriched the conversations.”

Each symposium is unique and topical. Each of the three symposiums follows a unique agenda that covers a wide range of issues, from free speech and academic freedom to the decreases in funding for public universities to recruiting a diverse and excellent faculty. This year’s programming has also addressed how the nation social climate has brought new challenges into campus life. “A lot of the national focus and challenges have shifted in the past year,” said Professor Levy. “It was unexpected to see university presidents be challenged in the ways that they are.” These discussions offer a

better understanding of the role leadership plays in addressing critical campus issues and explore the components to good leadership and problem-solving for those in a variety of positions. “It’s also a good reminder that these issues can’t be treated top-to-bottom,” Levy adds. “We need people at all levels talking about these issues.”

Administrative experience is not a prerequisite. In fact, you don’t even have to be certain that a career in academic administration is right for you; many individuals use the fellowship as an exploratory exercise. Each of this year’s fellows agreed that what really matters is the interest, curiosity, and desire to impact the greater university community. “While there are individuals already engaged in some level of administration, many fellows are not,” explains Joyce. “The program is a great opportunity to simply explore if this is a path of interest.”

ALP forges connections with a diverse set of peers—both across the Big Ten and right here at UMD. A challenge that plagues many on campus is finding the time—and venues—to connect to colleagues in a meaningful way. ALP balances structured programming with plenty of opportunities for more informal discussions, both at the multi-university symposia and within the smaller UMD cohort discussions. “This experience has allowed me to make connections on campus that I wouldn’t have the opportunity to otherwise,” said Joyce. “We tend to be very stove-piped with the demands of our individual colleges. Opportunities like the ALP fellowship offer big payoffs in the cohesion of the campus and help connect us to the university as a whole.” They also provide a sounding board and source of expertise. “I was looking for some advice on an upcoming program we are implementing and there was a colleague at the symposium who headed a similar program at Ohio State. We connected a few weeks later and she was able to give me some really great suggestions,” said Professor Williams. “I wouldn’t have known to contact her without that interaction at the ALP program.”

There is strength—and good ideas—in numbers. Think the University of Nebraska doesn’t face the same challenges as UMD? Think again. All of the 2018 fellows remarked that many of the issues facing college programs today are similar at similar institutions, and that the range of perspectives and responses is inspiring and instructive. “It’s reassuring to know that as a campus, we aren’t the only ones dealing with these issues,” said Joyce. “By learning from each other’s experiences, we aren’t re-inventing the wheel.” “Whether it’s the formal program or just casual conversation during meals or some of the exercises, what you realize is that all of us are big public institutions, and we all share this land grand size and scope,” says Williams. “Regardless of the geography, we all suffer the same challenges; through this forum, we can talk about them with our peers in concrete ways.”

No canned rhetoric. The symposiums are largely led by high-level administrators—including university presidents and provosts—speaking very candidly about the challenges they face at their institutions. Real case studies are offered, often presented by the actual people involved. The atmosphere of safety and non-judgmentalism, as well as the “Las Vegas rules,” reigns at both lectures and small group discussions; which allows for the honest responses that are catalysts for

deeper discussions. “At both symposiums, I was particularly struck by the strong sense of cohesiveness of the leadership team and how that sets the tone for the core understanding of the university’s mission,” says Williams. “It was really inspiring.”

ALP offers skills that you can use now and as you develop your academic career. While the stories and perspectives shared by the symposium speakers help fellows envision possible career trajectories, many of the ideas gleaned through ALP activities are applicable to situations they face right now, not just in the future. “It’s been very instructive to see how other units function in ways different from my own. These big-picture discussions allow me to see how what I do fits into a larger context and why it is relevant,” said Geary. “It’s really compelled me to think about ways to tweak my work to be more aligned with the University’s larger goals.” “This program has helped me think more deeply about my career path in general,” said Levy. “It’s been very useful to speak with people who have similar aspirations and learn their trajectory.”

It re-thinks the definition of leadership. The skills that help a professor lead in the classroom and succeed in their research may not be the same as those demanded by leadership positions. ALP exposes its fellows to experts in the fields of leadership and management, and arms them with the tools they need to nurture new kinds of skills. But the training goes beyond making leaders; it speaks to the very foundation of discovering others with leadership potential by creating opportunity. “I am fundamentally here to serve others,” explains Williams. “That’s an important mindset. As a leader, one of the best translations of that service is by providing others the opportunity to thrive, succeed, and advance.”

Academic Leadership Fellows are chosen each year from different disciplines across UMD. Interested in learning more? Visit their website [here](#) or the UMD’s ALP page, [here](#). Eligible faculty must be nominated by a program dean. To learn more about applying, contact Faculty Affairs at [faculty@umd.edu](mailto:faculty@umd.edu) or 301.405.6803.

Article by Maggie Haslam

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## Recognition & Awards

### Campus Awards

**The call for nominations has been extended for the following award:**

Kirwan Faculty Research and Scholarship Prize

Nomination Deadline: April 1, 2018

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# Faculty Development



## Calls For Nominations

The Office of Faculty Affairs is seeking applicants for the 2018-2019 Big Ten Academic Alliance's [Academic Leadership Program](#) (ALP) and [Department Executive Officers](#) (DEO) Program. Each year the Office of the Provost provides funding for a select number of tenured faculty members to participate in these [leadership development initiatives](#). We encourage deans to nominate current chairs for the DEO program, and deans and chairs to nominate tenured faculty members who may have an interest in and potential for leadership on campus at any level for ALP. The nomination deadline is Friday, April 13. For more information on the eligibility and nomination process, click [here](#) (ALP) or [here](#) (DEO).

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## UMD at Home and in the World: Ability and Disability

The February 21 session covered new and important perspectives on ability and disability including new and accessible technologies, the use of prosthetics in virtual reality environments, and understanding disability through the framework of ableism as a systemic form of structural violence. Speakers included: Bradley Hatfield, Kinesiology; Paul Jaeger, Information Studies; and Alexis Lothian, Women's Studies.

The UMD at Home and in the World series explores crucial topics of local, national, and international concern related to the research conducted by your colleagues. It also provides a great opportunity to network with new and current faculty members on campus.

## Faculty Tips and Resources



### 2018 Orientations: Save the Date!

- August 14 & 15: New Administrators (0100 MMH)
- August 21 & 22: New Faculty (1202 ESJ)



### The Future of College Park

Learn about the many projects and plans on the horizon for the University and surrounding community. See the changing landscape of



### "Everybody with Me?" and Other Not-so-useful Questions

"Any questions?" "Is everybody with me?" "Does this make sense?" I have asked my students these vague types of questions many times and the most common response was...silence...[Read more](#)

## News

University of Maryland Recognized as the Top Public College in the Washington D.C. Area

University of Maryland Achieves Record Number of Donors on Annual Giving Day

UMD's Division of Information Technology Moving to Growing Discovery District

New Technology for Use in Military Vehicles May Protect Warfighters from Blast-induced Brain Injury

College Park... [read more](#)

**EXCELLENT**

**GOOD**

**AVERAGE**

### Creating a Culture of Excellence for Graduate Teaching Assistants

Any academic program relying on TAs in any capacity must dedicate resources to building a successful program...There are several steps a program can take to create a successful TA program (or improve an existing one)...[Read more](#)

## Events

March 28 Open Forum: Update on Implementation of Activity Insight

March 28 UMD @ Home and in the World: Disaster and Disaster Response

April 3 Interdisciplinary Dialogue: Big Data

April 10\* APT Workshop: Pre-3rd Year Assistant Professor

April 12\* APT Workshop: Post-3rd Year Assistant Professor

April 17 Preparing for Activity Insight: Telling Y(our) Story Using Google Scholar and ResearcherID to Track Publications (co-sponsored with UMD Libraries)

April 19\* APT Workshop: APT Administrators

April 19\* APT Workshop: Associate to Professor Promotion

\*Registration opens soon. Check our website for additional details.

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