

UW-Madison: Odyssey Project celebrates 20 years of transformation through education

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MADISON — When Corey Saffold applied for the UW Odyssey Project in 2005, he had no idea it would change his life.

Prior to attending Odyssey — an award-winning University of Wisconsin–Madison educational access program — he’d never taken a college course and considered himself a passive person. During his Odyssey experience, he engaged in discussions of works by Frederick Douglass, Emily Dickinson and Socrates; acted out scenes from Macbeth and A Raisin in the Sun; and got an editorial published about disproportionate incarceration rates for Black and Latino men in Wisconsin.

The Odyssey course flipped a switch for Saffold.

After completing the program, he joined the Madison police department, went back to school to receive a bachelor’s degree from UW-Whitewater, served a term on the UW Board of Regents and was accepted to the University of Wisconsin Law School.

“One of the most impactful programs in our state, the UW Odyssey Project has completely transformed my life and the lives of many others,” Saffold said.

Over 20 years, more than 2,000 people of all ages have participated in the Odyssey Project, with many going on to further their educations, improve their livelihoods and contribute to their communities in a variety of ways.

“It’s a multigenerational approach to breaking the cycle of poverty through education,” said Odyssey Executive Director Emily Auerbach. “We’re proud to celebrate the 20th anniversary of this groundbreaking program.”

Odyssey invites the community to celebrate this milestone at the Chazen Museum of Art from 5 to 7 p.m. on Thursday, April 20. Speakers will include Odyssey alumni as well as the Honorable Judge Everett Mitchell.

The ultimate Wisconsin Idea

Twenty years ago, poet and journalist Jean Feraca and English professor Emily Auerbach had an idea to develop an outreach program in the humanities for nontraditional students. It turned out to be a quintessential Wisconsin Idea.

Feraca featured the Clemente Course in the Humanities on her Wisconsin Public Radio program. Clemente was established in 1995 by the late author and educator Earl Shorris, who believed the gateway out of disenfranchisement would come through exposure to powerful works of philosophy, literature, art history and American history.

Auerbach had already spent two decades developing outreach programs in the humanities for nontraditional students. She also found inspiration from Berea College, a tuition-free institution for low-income students that both her parents attended.

In 2003, Feraca and Auerbach founded the UW Odyssey Project, a pathway to education that would address disparities and provide a place where students could not only find their voices but become leaders, mentors and advocates for themselves and their families.

“We took inspiration from Clemente and Berea College, but we did things a bit differently and put our own spin on supporting and empowering students,” Auerbach said.

In 2013, President Obama awarded the Clemente Course the National Humanities Medal. When leaders from Clemente visited the Odyssey Project, they called it the ‘gold standard’ of these pathway programs.

Expanding access

The core of Odyssey is a college course: Each year, 30 new students enroll in a two-semester class taught by UW-Madison faculty in English literature, philosophy, American history and art history. Students receive free tuition, textbooks, childcare and a weekly dinner. One-on-one tutoring is available for Odyssey students and

alumni, along with their children and grandchildren.

During the Wednesday evening classes, students engage in discussions inspired by prominent historical figures and read their own work aloud in front of their classmates. They gain 6 college credits from UW-Madison, skills in critical thinking and writing, and a sense of empowerment.

Ninety-four percent of Odyssey course students are from ethnic minorities and 75 percent are parents. The students' median age is early 30s but has ranged from 18 to 71. Since the inception of that core course, Odyssey has expanded access to new audiences through five more programs:

- Odyssey Junior, supporting Odyssey students' children and grandchildren ages 0-18 in self-discovery, literacy and expression through writing, speaking, visual arts, music, movement and theater.
- Odyssey Senior, serving Odyssey students and relatives 60+ with a new noncredit, five-week program to explore oral history and memoir writing.
- Odyssey Beyond Bars, offering college jump-start programs — credit and noncredit — to students incarcerated in Wisconsin state prisons.
- Odyssey Beyond Wars, a new program serving veterans challenged by their transition from military to civilian life and looking for a community of peers to help further their education.
- Onward Odyssey, connecting Odyssey alumni to other UW courses taught on or off campus and providing mentoring and aid as they pursue degrees and dreams throughout the U.S.

About 600 students have gone through the Odyssey's core course; 600 infants, children and youth have been involved in Odyssey Junior; and more than 800 people incarcerated in Wisconsin prisons have benefited from Odyssey's educational opportunities.

"During a time in the world when things seem bleak, Odyssey students offer us a reason to be optimistic about the future," Auerbach said. "Twenty years of Odyssey has provided a beacon of hope."

'From homelessness to bachelor's and master's degrees'

Most Odyssey students are from racial and ethnic minority groups and are often overcoming incredible obstacles. Auerbach added, “These outstanding students often report transformative outcomes, and some have even moved from homelessness to bachelor’s and master’s degrees.”

A 2017 independent evaluation of Odyssey demonstrated that students progress from a newfound sense of hope and belonging to the achievement of college degrees and personal goals. This has a ripple effect on their family, friends and communities.

Researchers found these major impacts from Odyssey on students:

- Greater likelihood of continuing in college and earning degrees
- Improved economic stability
- Increased skills in writing, reading comprehension and speaking
- Heightened sense of hope, fulfillment and civic engagement
- A profound influence on their children, family and friends

In evaluation surveys, 100 percent of Odyssey students believed their writing skills improved and 99 percent felt more confident to pursue further education. Seventy-five percent continued enrolling in college coursework and as of 2017, 24 percent of students have earned a degree or certificate, with more on the way.

“The report found — and students have shown us — that they are more civically engaged and satisfied with their living, financial and career situations,” Auerbach said.

After Odyssey, 97 percent felt they were more aware of current events, and 89 percent voted more in local and national elections. Students also reported increased volunteerism and engagement in social justice issues. Odyssey students’ household incomes have risen, too.

Over the years, Odyssey and its leadership have received numerous awards, including from the Association of Public and Land-Grant Universities, ATHENA International, the Association for Continuing Higher Education and numerous Madison-area organizations.

But Auerbach says the biggest achievement of the Odyssey Project is seen through the accomplishments of Odyssey students, often multiple generations from one family. Corey Saffold's daughter and grandson both went through Odyssey programs.

"After attending the Odyssey Project, I felt empowered, and I knew I had a voice," Saffold said. "I just can't say enough about this program. There should be an Odyssey Project on every campus in the state, giving more families access to higher education."

For more information, see the Odyssey Project website and join in the 20th-anniversary celebrations, including an April event and the May graduation ceremony of the Odyssey Class of 2023.