IU students’s research plans recognized by NSF in spring 2017:

We are delighted that IU PhD student Kristin Otto has just received a 3 year graduate research fellowship from the National Science Foundation to pursue her project “The Sowei Diaspora: Producing Knowledge about and for Sierra Leone”.

Project Abstract: The aesthetically distinctive, helmet-style sowei masks worn by the women of West Africa’s Sande society are now so ubiquitous in museum collections around the world that they simultaneously serve as material transnational icons of Sierra Leone as well as the quintessential icons of feminine power and beauty in all of African arts. Sowei masks are consequently examples object diasporas, where material culture disperses from its point of origin, mirroring human diasporas. This project proposes to research three key institutions within the sowei object diaspora—the Sierra Leone National Museum, the British Museum, and the Mathers Museum of World Cultures—with a methodology combining participant observation fieldwork at each site, interviews with staff and community audience, and object-centered analysis of the sowei in collections. By doing so I hope to determine how the sowei serves as a transnational icon of Sierra Leone as well as a connecting force in museum assemblages producing knowledge about Africa for public audiences.

Kristin has been planning her research with Beth Buggenhagen, Jason Jackson and Anya Royce, as well as colleagues in the Mathers Museum and the African Studies Program.

Kristin’s Fellowship was one of only 6 NSF GR fellowships awarded to students at IU this year, and one of only 17 awarded to Cultural Anthropology students nation-wide!

We are also pleased that a former IU undergraduate, Rebecca Bedwell, has also just received a GRFP fellowship to pursue her interests in medical anthropology at the University of Arizona. She did lab research with Virginia Vitzthum and also worked with Sarah Phillips while she was at IU, and reviewers noted that her undergraduate record of research highly impressed them. Her timely project will track networks of medical care across the US-Mexico border.