URGE Policies for Working with Communities of Color for the Geographical Sciences Department at UMD

Note: One of this week’s co-leads had a medical emergency that resulted in the delay of submission.

This is what was found by GEOG-pod at the University of Maryland on Policies for Working with Communities of Color, as well as plans for improved processes and/or needed resources.

1. Audit of previous interactions with communities of color at our organization:

Between human and economic geography projects (domestic/abroad) as well as global and regional remote sensing, our department has collectively undertaken many projects (past and present) in regions with communities of color. Some projects are specifically designed to benefit these communities, while others have given them little or no thought in the design or implementation process. Thus the extent to which these projects include meaningful interactions with communities of color varies considerably. For example, please see the following testimonials:

“During my previous work in India, I was on the receiving end of being a “local organization.” I felt a lot of interactions came from the sense of superiority from organizations from high income countries, even though they could not do research without the help and the knowledge of the local institutions. For this reason, in my current interactions with local partners, I usually go out of the way to thank them for their help (as we cannot pay them and their students for their work). I give them presents, and buy them meals as a thank you at my own expense. They usually appreciate it. However, this is something that everyone needs to do because without their help, we will not be able to do our work.”

“There are no required courses for graduate students to undergo training for responsible research conduct or working with communities of color. Typically, the only research ethics-related training they receive is through mandatory training necessary to be part of a human subjects research project.”

“Within our department, we lead and implement NASA’s food security & agriculture program (Harvest). We work extensively outside the US, with particular emphasis in Eastern Africa. The Harvest Africa Program is led by a Ugandan woman who did her PhD at UMD, and is now an Assistant Research Professor within our department. She spends the majority of her time in Uganda, engaging directly and consistently with stakeholders in the region. Her leadership has been the key to the success of the program - she has strong personal ties to the area, steeped in respect and a first-person lived-experience of what the challenges and organizational set-ups
in that region are. She maintains personal relationships with ministers in Uganda, Kenya, Tanzania, and Rwanda (in particular), with all conversations starting with a recognition that each is a person first and a scientist/politician/worker second. “How are you? Is your family well?”

Further, Everything she does is in response to an articulated need. This is true across all of Harvest, not just our Africa Program; nothing we do with any community - including communities of color in the US and abroad - comes from our first initiative. We wait to be asked, and then we co-develop a solution that fits into their needs, with an emphasis on long-term relationships not limited by a grant timeline.”

2. What worked well in these interactions?

Our department has several human geographers on the faculty, who are experienced in setting up equitable research collaborations with local communities, many of which face specific constraints and vulnerabilities. Some best practices in setting up these collaborations are listed below. However as mentioned above, there could be better cross-pollination within the department regarding these best practices, as many grad students may not be familiar with them (particularly given that most of our department does not conduct fieldwork). There could also be opportunities to utilize these practices even when there is not a fieldwork component.

- Engaging local partners as consultants and paying them for their services. Seeing out co-funding opportunities to ensure monetary compensation in the face of potential budgetary restrictions of the PI.
- Reaching out to local partners early on in the research process to ensure that their feedback is considered in the project design.
- Ensuring that ethical practices are followed in fieldwork including informed consent and confidentiality.
- Communicating research outputs back to the community for their feedback; leaving some research outputs with them (e.g. physical maps from participatory mapping).
- Incorporating insights/methods from participation action research.

Below are NASA Harvest’s Lessons Learned for interacting with stakeholders. Not all stakeholders are communities are color, but many are. Note that “EO” means “Earth Observations” - principally satellite, but also incorporating in situ and agromet data.
3. What did not work well, and how can this be better addressed in future plans?

- Projects are likely to be less effective without inclusion of these communities at all stages of projects (design, implementation, interpretation, conclusion). Explicit commitment for local input before goals and methods have been established is recommended.
- Lack of awareness of how we, as researchers from outside the community may be perceived, despite our intentions. Intentionally recognizing that we do not have the same lived experiences, and are not superior in any way, to these communities might be a good start.
- Researchers undertaking methods-based projects, and research that is ‘remote’ (GIS, remote sensing) may believe their research is ‘unbiased’ or doesn’t influence communities of color. While this may actually be true it is unlikely, as geospatial research has a history of oppression with respect to communities of color. Thus recognizing these biases and how these fields have contributed to systems of oppression at the onset of a project, and continuously throughout development and implementation is crucial.
- Ensuring that research results are disseminated back to these communities in a respectful and useful format is important. This is many times overlooked.
4. Are there ways to improve the outcome of projects already undertaken?

- We need to address differences between types of research projects done within our department, and how the methods (e.g. surveys vs satellites) and goals (e.g. targeted information for a given area/community vs global data product generation) differ between them.
  - How can remote sensing projects involve and interact with communities of color?
  - Differences between domestic and international research?
  - Others?

5. Are there specific resources or guidelines that are needed to improve the process for planning ahead and working with communities of color?

- Engaging dept funds or non-profits for supplementary funding for participants in research
  - PIs should be encouraged to establish line-items to cover this in their grant proposals.
    - This is not always allowed - e.g. NASA solicitations do not allow it in international contexts.
      - Action: This is an institutional barrier we can address with granting agencies, but will likely require congressional approval.
    - At PI level when writing grants - maybe add questions about impacts on communities of color to grant submission compliance questionnaire?
      - This can help ensure that methods/physical geographers - who don’t have to go through IRB approval - don’t simply get a pass for not having human subjects.
      - Action: Ask Office of Research Administration and departmental grant administrators if this can be incorporated?
  - Can we establish a fund for graduate students, in particular, who may not have access to larger grants, in order to compensate their collaborators?
  - Enhancing graduate education in for ALL grad students (not just those who define themselves as human geographers) around ethics for working with communities with differing levels of power (potential incorporation in required coursework e.g. GEOG 601)