URGE Policies for Working with Communities of Color for University/Organization

This is what was found by Geosciences Faculty at Smith College on Policies for Working with Communities of Color as well as plans for improved processes and/or needed resources.

- Audit of previous interactions with communities of color at our organization:

Sara Pruss’s work in Namibia involved working with the Namibian Geological Survey, so we worked in partnership with local communities and abided by all structures and processes for handling samples and exporting materials. In northern Namibia, we worked closely with local farmers making sure to get clearance for access to land and explaining our work to them. We often brought villagers food or drove them to local clinics or other places as needed to be helpful when we were working there.

Greg de Wet’s work on Baffin Island in the Canadian Arctic involves collaboration and cooperation with local Inuit communities in the region. In some cases these interactions take the form of employing local community members as guides and/or as polar bear guards while in the field. Greg has also participated as a guest instructor in an Environmental Technology field course run by the Nunavut Arctic College, which caters specifically to local (primarily Inuit) students. It was particularly meaningful to be able to include students in a demonstration of sediment coring, as that served to both introduce students to the technique as well as increase understanding of our research in the region.

Amy Rhodes’ research and teaching has taken place in Monteverde, Costa Rica. This work was conducted in collaboration with a nonprofit, community outreach organization, “The Monteverde Institute.” The Monteverde Institute (MVI) hosted our research group (typically 2 faculty and up to 4 students), facilitated meetings with landowners, and connected us with community groups interested in local water quality and water usage of local rivers, which was an outgrowth of our research project. To help educate and integrate us into the community, MVI provided a background orientation for us about the different communities and businesses in the Monteverde region, hosted community speakers about various local topics, as well as local social events, both of which we attended. MVI’s programming was bilingual, and MVI offered classes in Spanish that our students could attend. Finally, MVI facilitated homestay experiences for our students with local families. In return, we offered public lectures on our research at MVI, we made our weather station data available as a yearly report for the MVI Library, we trained MVI personnel to operate the weather station (for as long as they saw institutional benefit to collecting the data), and we provided our hydrologic data to a community...
group that was concerned about water withdrawals by local businesses. We also created an institutional connection between Smith and MVI, with Smith students attending some of their study abroad courses and MVI arranging short-course visits for subsequent Smith field courses in Costa Rica.

- What worked well in these interactions?

In Namibia, we followed the advice of one of the URGE session leaders, and we always showed up with food and/or other supplies that villagers needed. We asked for permission before ever accessing anyone’s properties, and shared our work with anyone who was interested. On Baffin Island, our contribution to the field course seemed to be valued by the students, who appreciated that we traveled out to their field site and were there specifically to contribute to the course (we subsequently traveled to our research location). We also have worked carefully to cultivate long-standing relationships with community members (one member of our team, Dr. Gifford Miller, has been working on Baffin for 50+ years). We keep in contact with friends/community members throughout the year (not just before we head North), and will always bring gifts/supplies that can be hard to come by in the Arctic.

In Costa Rica, The Monteverde Institute served as the liaison between us and the community. MVI oriented us to the community and culture. There was a contractual arrangement between Smith and MVI that outlined commitments of both institutions prior embarking on the work. MVI also hosts a number of visitors from U.S. educational institutions each year. MVI arranged the homestays with local families, which added a cultural component to working abroad. The homestay experience was a rich cultural experience that deepened our students’ experience and understanding of the local culture and deepened involvement within the community. The homestays also were a source of extra income for the homestay families. Our students shared conversations about their research with their homestay family members.

- What did not work well, and how can this be better addressed in future plans?

My colleagues and I have made a commitment to involve more Namibian students in our future field seasons and field projects.

It has been challenging to effectively communicate the outcome of our work on Baffin to the local community. In the future we would like to have a plan in place prior to conducting our fieldwork for effective and meaningful dissemination of results in an accessible fashion.
Communication and maintaining relationships and connections with partners abroad takes considerable time.

● **Are there ways to improve the outcome of projects already undertaken?**

We can improve our communication efforts and work on including community members in our field activities. We will always make sure that the community members are adequately compensated and that we acknowledge their contributions in any research publications and presentations. We can also consider translating the results of our work into local languages to make them more accessible. Planning of future research activities can also involve community members in order to better understand their needs and priorities.

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

Prior to this URGE session we were unaware of specific resources or guidelines for improving the process of working with local communities. We found this URGE session to be extremely valuable in providing concrete information and examples for how to work on developing more productive and mutually beneficial relationships.