URGE Policies for Working with Communities of Color for the Department of Geological Sciences, University of Alabama

This is what was found by the University of Alabama Department of Geological Sciences URGE pod 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

An audit of our department’s previous interactions with communities of color was conducted in the form of an informal survey sent out to faculty members. We received 9 anonymous responses, and the results are synthesized below.

- **Have you undertaken research projects in countries or regions with indigenous communities and/or communities of color? How many of those included meaningful interactions with those communities? Briefly describe one or more example projects to provide context for the following questions.**
  - 9 DGS faculty members responding to the survey have undertaken research projects in regions with indigenous communities and/or communities of color, with at least 2 of the faculty involved in more than one such project.
  - 5 faculty members report that all of their research projects in these communities have included meaningful interactions with those communities. 4 faculty members reported that some of their projects included meaningful interactions.
  - The following table summarizes the stage(s) at which the indigenous community and/or community of color was involved in the research projects, with each row indicating a faculty member (in random order, 1 missing response).
Table 1 - Summary of Research Engagement with Indigenous Communities and/or Communities of Color

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<th>Before developing the proposal</th>
<th>During the execution of the project</th>
<th>After the project</th>
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- Synthesized characteristics of the relevant research projects discussed in the survey are as follows:
  - Various (previous or planned) research and field work in areas with indigenous communities or communities of color or on traditional lands of some American Indian tribes (including sites in Asia, Africa, South America, and North America -- including local Alabama)
  - Interactions (when they occur) with those communities are varied, and include:
    - Collaboration (e.g. co-PIs, conference presentations, fieldwork assistance, equipment maintenance, software training, etc.)
    - Employment (e.g. navigation, fieldwork assistance, etc.)
    - Cultural considerations (consulting on respectful behaviors)
    - Conversations/Discussions (planning projects or field work)
    - Explanations/Educations (sharing results)
    - Collecting biological samples (i.e. studying chronic disease)
    - Invited visits to homes for meals or tea
    - Group selfies
What worked well in these interactions?

- Some of the research projects discussed in the survey are planned projects and have not yet occurred. For completed or ongoing projects, faculty reported the following successes (synthesized responses):
  - Employing local indigenous community members to navigate the terrain and the culture in a respectful and productive way.
  - Conversations at the start of a project (especially with village elders or other spokespeople).
  - Educational opportunities (museum program, radio interview, lecture at local university, student training opportunities; informal conversations with locals about the land/geology/methods of field work were especially well-received)
  - Collaborations were successful, resulting in co-authored publications.
  - Patience, politeness, having an open heart.
  - Showing respect.
  - Asking what the locals and university professors hoped to gain from the interaction. This helped ensure a mutually beneficial interaction.
  - Listening to needs.
  - Acknowledging contributions.

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

- For completed or ongoing projects, faculty reported the following challenges or (synthesized responses):
  - Language barriers (e.g. faculty member not able to speak the local language well or at all; multiple languages in the region where field work was being conducted that required multiple steps of translation to relay information; basic information could be conveyed, but not nuance).
  - Urgency misconstrued as impatience (can occur in cases where field work is constrained by limited permits and time).
  - Being viewed as “outsiders,” and not having enough local “ownership” of the knowledge and/or the opportunities.

- Faculty provided the following recommendations for improving future projects (synthesized responses):
  - Allowing more time for communication (when language barriers are present).
  - Taking time to learn local knowledge, even if language barriers make it difficult.
Faculty provided the following recommendations for improving future projects (synthesized responses) continued:

- Involving at least one local community member/connection in all stages of the project, to ensure a greater sense of ‘ownership’ by that community in the project
- Better communication about timelines (when urgency is needed)
- Inform team members about what they might encounter before it occurs (context helps prevent misunderstandings)
- Improvement to proposal development (making sure the proposal reviewers understand the importance of diversity outreach and engagement)

Considerations for Future Policies in the Department of Geological Sciences:

- **Ways to improve the outcome of projects already undertaken:**
  - Acknowledgements in publications or presentations of research (community or tribal ownership of land/samples, recognition of assistance and contributions, etc.)
  - Return of samples to original communities when appropriate
  - Sharing data and outcomes of research with affected communities (including publication PDF, raw data, powerpoints)
  - Writing plain language summaries to better share research findings with communities

- **Resources, guidelines, or policies that are needed to improve the process for planning ahead and working with communities of color:**
  - Planning research timelines that allow for the extra time that is needed to communicate with the relevant communities (both to involve them in the early stages of planning, and to allow for communication/translation in the field)
  - Updated department policy is needed for assessing cases where it may be appropriate to return samples to the communities they belong to, and for sharing data/results with relevant communities
  - Better dissemination of available resources already on campus (e.g. Army Corp Tribal Nations Technical Center of Expertise (TNTCX))
  - An indigenous land acknowledgement on the department website
  - More training for current graduate students in writing plain language summaries