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

The Vanderbilt AWG pod at Vanderbilt University has found the following information on Policies for Working with Communities of Color and plans to improve processes and/or needed resources.

● Audit of previous interactions with communities of color at our organization:
  ○ Three projects have been undertaken in regions with communities of color, all of which have included meaningful interactions. Two examples include a multi-year set of projects in Bangladesh and multiple projects in the Nashville area. The group working in Bangladesh has established several long standing relationships with local Universities, academics, local NGOs and environmental organizations across the area. The group working locally has engaged with Cayce homes, a nearby housing project, on monitoring air quality as well as created a partnership with Tennessee State University, a nearby historically black institution, to strengthen the pathway for minority students entering into geoscience careers and graduate programs.

● What worked well in these interactions?
  ○ Intentionality of relationships, spending time with locals, being patient with people
  ○ Feeling and showing respect for local culture- learning some of the language, recognizing some customs in terms of dress
  ○ Compensating local research assistants and students through pay, support, or work.
  ○ Linking up with an individual or partner organization who is known within the community and knows the people well.
  ○ Sharing data with the local community. For the Cayce homes project, making data accessible online in real time for residents has worked well. For Bangladesh, a former student created and shared a children’s story book with the local community that had been translated into the local language.

● What did not work well, and how can this be better addressed in future plans?
  ○ We need to make sure all students and researchers working on the project know about cultural norms before arriving. We must allocate more time and hold a formal meeting to discuss the governance, culture, and customs of the community we are working with for each project. Vanderbilt students working on the Bangladesh project felt like they were prepared enough not to offend but more preparation was needed to maintain good relationships and feel comfortable in interactions. One example is being very clear about cultural expectations with dress code.
What did not work well, and how can this be better addressed in future plans?

○ Due to the difficulties of working on an academic calendar and incorporating new students into projects, several individuals find it difficult to create long-term connections on some levels. Local projects in Nashville have worked well largely due to the help of partner organizations and an individual well known in the community. Maintaining and strengthening these relationships will be vital. We must maintain a constant contact with community organizations and make sure other potential PIs are looped in on conversations about project plans. Hopefully this will help buffer the turn over that may happen with undergrad, graduate, and other research partners.

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

○ Specifically for the work in Bangladesh, we need to improve on our prioritization of community needs prior to developing research questions. We must make sure that we value community and local researcher expectations and needs as much as we do our own while creating not only our questions but our procedures.

○ We need to be diligent about sharing findings in ways that are accessible. We have been successful in this in some capacity thus far but many of the formal papers still end up behind paywalls.

○ We make sure to include people and groups in the acknowledgements but we are skeptical about how helpful this is for some, especially students from the community who worked on the project. Professors have been included in the authors list, but can we also include research assistants? We should discuss this and other possibilities prior to starting research. Each group must create a guideline for discussing this subject with collaborators and a clear timeline for when these discussions should be had during the project process.

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

○ We should establish some sort of resource for the event a point of contact is no longer living or available. This may include making sure we know our local contacts well and have a contact they work with or recommend.

○ Create additional support/funding for the early planning process of projects to include forming productive and mutually beneficial connections with communities.