Isolated Research Scenario Safety Plan: University of Minnesota Duluth

These are the Pod’s recommendations for a Field / Lab Safety Plan for UMD / Swenson College, and areas where improvement is necessary.

We acknowledge that BIPOC students and researchers are often put in situations where they are uncomfortable or unsafe, and our goal with the discussion this week was to begin to outline a plan to present to university administration at the end of the semester. Our URGE pod consists of faculty from multiple departments in the College of Science & Engineering, some who rely on fieldwork for their studies and some who do not. So, for this discussion, we widened our definition of “fieldwork” to include any isolated research scenarios, including traveling for conferences or workshops, being in the field, visiting a collaborator’s lab, or giving a talk off campus: anything that would take a student away from their usual support system close to home.

We do have some field work safety training that already exists and is required for PIs at UMD. However, none of this training addresses the real issues that BIPOC scientists face to their safety beyond the physical environment. Some small changes have been made in Swenson College over the past couple of years, including:

- Purchasing official UMD vests, car decals, and business cards for students to take with them when they travel
- Equipment like satellite phones and garmins that can be checked out if students are going to remote areas

However, these initiatives are not sufficient to ensure the safety of BIPOC researchers from UMD in their isolated research scenarios, nor enough to ensure they feel comfortable. So we have a variety of recommendations for our administration for structural changes going forward:

- A College or University-level emergency fund to support travel or hotel expenses for students who need to remove themselves from unsafe conditions. Ideally, this would be a fund that students can tap into with little or no notice or justification, to avoid students having to front their own money and be reimbursed later.
- More diverse vehicle options from the UMD vehicle fleet. Right now, there are no truck or SUVs available, meaning students or researchers must use their own personal vehicles. This puts an unfair burden on students who do not own vehicles, and means “non-official” vehicles are often used, with no UMD markings.
- A more cohesive effort needs to be made to involve disabled students in field experiences, perhaps by collaborating with Disability Services. Right now, students are often excused from field or outside experiences, which protects their grade in courses but does not give them the opportunity to participate.
PIs should be required to take awareness and equity training before sending students on isolated research projects. All students should have the ability to contact their support systems, and PIs should be prepared to speak openly with their students about any issues they face. This may be the hardest goal to reach - it requires changing the thinking of quite a few researchers at the university to value the mental and emotional safety of their BIPOC students as much as the baseline physical safety of their students due to physical fieldwork dangers.