

Williams College URGE Pod Deliverable Session 4: Working with Communities of Color (for submission)

What We Have Done So Far

The Williams Geosciences Department has a history (1993 to the present) of working with indigenous communities and communities of color, both nationally and abroad. Research has involved members of local communities as integral collaborators and local students as research assistants. In some cases, community members have been involved in framing research objectives and approaches in funding proposals. Research presentations and publications were made in collaboration and with approval of community members and local collaborators. The work also ensured that all data collected had buy-in from the community, and that such research was not simply extractive, but that the findings and results were relayed back to the community in ways they empowered and guaranteed community ownership. Our work has at times incorporated indigenous and community knowledge and data, for example using observations from local hunters in the Arctic to validate remote sensing imagery. Our experience has shown that meaningful community-centered research requires time for building trust and ensuring accountability.

While we have had a history of community-centered research, the work has been uneven across the department. For example, some of us work in uninhabited environments, where it is not always clear how to engage the local community. Another challenge is that often our areas of expertise are not aligned with the most pressing needs of local communities, or the communities most pressing needs may not be something that our research can solve (e.g., climate change). Similarly, when working at the nexus of social/environmental justice and the geosciences there can be tension between advocacy and impartiality. This can bring a complex nuance to community engagement and affect how our science is viewed by various stakeholders. Also, it can take time to fully understand the local dynamics and power structures, which often goes beyond our specific skill sets as physical scientists.

In summary, strategies that have been used so far to engage with local communities, include:

- Funding for local scientists and students in community-centered research, including for equipment that can later be donated to these communities and scientists;
- Stipends for local students to work as research assistants;
- Funding to bring international collaborators, both scientists and students, for extended stays at US academic institutions;
- Co-develop proposals with local collaborators to ensure their priorities and interests are well represented;
- Provide opportunities/forums for collaborators of colour to be heard, such as conference presentations or panels;
- Give public talks at community centers for the local community and obtain feedback from community members;
- Weave social justice relevant to the research area into grant proposals;
- Approach communities deliberately and with respect for local knowledge and understanding;

Plans for Improved Process

Building on our history of community-centered research, as well as implementing what we have all learned through the URGE process, there are a number of steps we can take to better include local communities and marginalized communities in our work. However, given the nature of our work, how we engage and the level of engagement will likely vary significantly across our research programs.

Moving forward, our work on social justice will be intimately tied to local communities, and it will be important to consider all the steps below. Our work on indigenous land, but not directly relevant to the needs and interests of local communities should consider the points below, as appropriate. It is also important to acknowledge that some of our research will not be relevant to or conducted within communities of color. In these circumstances we may want to consider how the results of our research could be applied to such communities, and at a very minimum ensure that such research does not contribute to ongoing injustices.

Steps that we will consider in our work:

- Add land acknowledgements to our talks and papers, as appropriate.
- Include local scientists and students as active collaborators and co-authors for all research conducted within their countries or on their lands, as appropriate.
- Develop education materials in other languages, as appropriate. This often will require budgeting for translation services (and other “broader impacts”) in proposals.
- Reach out to indigenous or local communities before conducting any research on their lands or in their countries. Where appropriate and of interest to those communities, ensure that local people, scientists and students are included in the research design from the very beginning. Understand that such community engagement may take time, and try to build this into grants and research timelines.
- Engage local scientists, students and community members in research, as appropriate. As noted above, this engagement will start during the research design phase to ensure local perspectives, interests and capacities are included in the design and any grants that are developed.
- Include meaningful budget allocations for local collaborators in grant proposals, including, for example, stipends, travel funding, conference fees, etc
- When working on social justice issues, engage with social scientists to ensure we fully grasp the internal politics and power dynamics within the communities we are trying to support.
- Use scientific papers written by scientists of colour within the classes we teach.
- Be ok with local communities not wanting to be involved
- When working in or with communities, buy local, hire local.
- Use local knowledge and interpretations in our classes, as appropriate.
- Build these ideas and approaches into our teaching philosophy and practice to help grow sensitive awareness in the next generation of researchers.
- Enter into dialogue with tribal representatives at the [new Stockbridge-Munsee Mohican Tribal office](#) in Williamstown.