

URGE

Unlearning Racism in Geoscience



Deliverable 4: Policies for Working with Communities of Color

This is what was developed by Gund/UVM URGE Pod at The University of Vermont on Policies for Working with Communities of Color as well as plans for improved processes. In order to summarize a range of experiences, we reached out to faculty and students (within and outside of our pod) for their feedback on the example prompts. Three faculty, one staff member, and two grad students responded. We crafted this deliverable around the responses we received. The responses are summarized in the beginning, and the full text of responses is presented and color coded to correspond to each prompt. The members of the Gund/UVM URGE Pod team that compiled this deliverable also provided our own responses to the prompts, representing the grad students.

General summary:

1. Provide a summary of previous interactions with communities of color at our organization.

Faculty, staff, and student members surveyed have done research and connected with communities of color in the US, Latin America, the Caribbean, the Middle East, and in Africa. The quality of interaction ranged from low (research conducted without meaningful interaction with communities of color; research conducted near protected grounds of Indigenous people without the knowledge of the scientist) to high (research mentoring of local undergraduate students resulted in attainment of graduate degrees and science careers; locals involved in fieldwork were compensated; local Indigenous people were compensated; an employee of Latin American heritage connected with graduate students and colleagues from Latin America).

2. What worked well in these interactions?

Person-to-person connections worked well, involving a high level of mutual respect. Learning the language and local culture was key for one researcher. Involving local community members in (compensated) fieldwork and other aspects of work led to positive interactions. Equality was important within these interactions, to help build respect and trust. Donating equipment after the fieldwork was complete also increased the positivity of the interaction. Being spacious with time and following the lead of Indigenous ceremony leaders allowed an interaction with local Abenaki people to succeed.

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



Unlearning Racism in Geoscience

One scientist noted experiences with “inviting someone to the table” in the Broader Impacts of an NSF proposal did not work nearly as well as “setting the table together”. Space restrictions and financial limits meant that another faculty member could not invite as many locals to do (paid) fieldwork as they would have wanted. UVM administrative barriers made collaboration difficult, including obtaining receipts in very remote, rural areas, and the refusal of the UVM legal team to sign an MOU of collaboration in any language except English (in the example given, Spanish was said to not be “legally binding”). Anti-Indigenous racism is pervasive throughout the world, and one researcher described encountering oppressive policies against Indigenous people in Latin America. This researcher went on to note that “permission from Indigenous communities to access study areas is usually not required by local authorities so it is easy to overlook interactions with them”. This colonial attitude is pervasive in the US as well. One graduate student noted that working relationships with women in the community were not created, only with the men, something that could be changed moving forward.

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

One researcher is on an NSF grant that was developed with an “invite to the table” mindset, but NSF allowed the approach to change to a co-developed framework that shares money, power, and visibility. This will inform future projects going forward. Another researcher noted that acknowledging community partners in footnotes in presentations/papers is not enough. Full access to data and results is important, and frequent communication paramount. There have been no students of minoritized groups in the Geology Department for quite some time, and that needs to improve.

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

There are already a number of resources we can use without reinventing the wheel. White researchers should take advantage of readings and training. One researcher noted that many “best practice” resources pertain to confronting racism in the US. With international research common in Geology, additional guidelines are needed for working in other parts of the world to overcome racist practices and collaborate with Indigenous communities worldwide. In addition, funding professionals from minoritized groups to reach out to high schools to encourage participation in geosciences could go a long way. UVM administration needs to improve its processes to allow for greater flexibility in compensating communities of color and co-creating MOUs in multiple languages.



Unlearning Racism in Geoscience

Finally, the below guidelines for working with communities of color were synopsized from publications:

- Form relationships with communities of color without a motive to work on a project or grant together, but rather as fellow community members with the same concerns about a local problem or shared vision for the future
- From here folks can join together as equal stakeholders at the table and approach a project, grant, program from equal footing that benefits First Nation and other communities equally
- Ask the BIPOC community members involved to help guide what the research questions are, how data is gathered and analyzed so that their worldview helps guide the approach
- Invite Indigenous people of that land who you already have relationships with to share their observations, their traditional knowledge, their chosen strategy of what should be done and then honor and incorporate this following their lead
- Create an environment of mutual respect for multiple ways of knowing
- Scientists make an effort to go to any Indigenous venues they are invited to such as talking circles at tribal meetings
- Fostering regional and national information networking
- Promote partnerships that foster effective climate solutions from both western and Indigenous perspectives.
- Directly assist communities in achieving their adaptation goals

Cochran, Patricia, Huntington, Orville H., Pungowiyi, Caleb, Tom, Stanley, Stuart, F., Iii, C., Huntington, Henry P., Maynard, Nancy G., Trainor, Sarah F., Julie, A., P, R.E., Colombi, B.J., Cochran, P., Huntington, O. H., Pungowiyi, C., Tom, S., Iii, F.S.C., Huntington, H. P., Maynard, N. G., Trainor, S. F., 2012. Climatic Change DOI 10.1007/s10584-013-0735-2 Indigenous frameworks for observing and responding to climate change in Alaska.

Gewin, V., & McGregor, D. (2021). RESPECT AND REPRESENTATION.

Response from Geology Faculty Member 1:

One faculty member in Geology has worked in Cuba, Namibia and the Middle East, noting that the only meaningful interactions with communities of color occurred in Cuba. Getting to know people and customs on a person-to-person level worked well. There were occasional clashes of culture, like when or if to stop for lunch when doing fieldwork. The professor says that there might be ways to improve the outcome of projects undertaken, but that the suggestions in the fourth question seem almost tokenistic and not sincere. We need to do better and improve going forward. In terms of improving the process, the Geology faculty member says there needs to be better awareness on the part of the administration--for example, the UVM legal team would only



Unlearning Racism in Geoscience

sign the MOU of collaboration in English, despite objections, saying that Spanish was not “legally binding”.

Response from Geology Faculty Member 2:

I have done very little research in countries or regions with communities of color and none of them included meaningful interactions. For example, when I was a postdoc, I did field work in an area that was close to protected grounds of indigenous people but at that time it did not even occur to me that, I am working on land that was stolen.

I also must admit that early in my career I did not engage deeply with the meaning of “broader impacts” in funding proposals and treated this section as ticking a box. This has completely changed as I'm learning about the difference between “inviting somebody to the table” versus “setting the table together”.

Right now I'm working on a project where we have collaborations with an HBCU to develop education programming in STEM. The way this educational component was written originally was still quite “inviting somebody to the table”, i.e. the dominantly white institution decides, has all the power and the dominantly black institution comes in after the fact. However, since we got funding, we completely rethought this approach and NSF allowed us to change our approach. We are now co-developing this educational programming with the faculty of the HBCU institution, sharing power, funds and visibility. As was described in the interviews last week, this approach allows for much more meaningful interactions and is entirely based on relationships. We thus take time and care to develop these relationships. In the future I do want to write proposals very differently, focus on co-developing ideas from the get go, and budget adequately for time but also equitable use of other resources.

As mentioned in the interviews last week there are already a number of resources that we should use. I am very glad to be made aware of these resources, we really should not reinvent the wheel but take advantage of what people have thoughtfully compiled.

White researchers who have very little awareness on how race and racism impacts science and their work should begin educating themselves and take advantage of workshops and trainings.

Response from Geology Faculty Member 3:

- I have worked with communities of color in the Latin American country of Chile. During one 4-year project along the Beagle Channel and in Tierra del Fuego, I invited three Latino students to join me and helped mentor their undergraduate thesis research. The students were enrolled at the University of Chile and worked closely with my Master's students and I in the field. Most did not speak English, at least not well. Each was a full participant in the collection and processing of all information, sharing in the international collaborations with other participants (Australia, England), and using the research

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Unlearning Racism in Geoscience

experience to complete their undergraduate degrees. Their roles were as students and colleagues rather than as guides or sources of local expertise. The experience helped them gain confidence, build their skills, go on to graduate programs, and obtain jobs in science.

- During another project in the same area, I worked closely with locals and hired some of them as guides and compensated them for the work. None spoke English. They were equal partners in the field.
- First, I learned the language and local culture well. Doing this was a blast and introduced me to new friends. A secondary benefit was that later, it helped me show good will and build trust. It also allowed me to conduct field operations and discussions completely in the local version of Spanish, which is quite different than, say, Spanish in México.
- Second, involving local people in field work was a real plus for almost everyone involved (I say almost because there were a small few who wanted to either do harm or benefit themselves at the expense of the group). The effort on both sides helped most of us get to know one another well and established positive relationships.
- Compensating hired guides worked well too. But it wasn't just the employment that made people happy. We were equal partners and trusted one another. Encountering survival situations several times helped build that trust as well. Not that I recommend bringing people into survival situations! It's just that, looking back, shared experiences, especially if they are intense, help people build lasting, valuable relationships.
- I also donated the equipment I used for the project after it was finished. This took some explaining back home. People on the US side weren't too happy about it. But I thought it was the right thing to do.
- One problem I encountered was that I could not invite more than a few people to participate in field work due to space restrictions and financial considerations. There is a perception in Chile that all Americans are financially very wealthy. It was difficult to help people understand that the money we were granted from federal agencies has restrictions on how it is spent.
- The problem of getting receipts from locals who live far from anywhere to satisfy UVM accounting sounds trivial but it was a major problem.
- Another problem is that racism is pervasive in Chile and in most other Latin American countries, including México. There are openly hostile attitudes and policies in place that discriminate against indigenous peoples and people with dark skin. Augmenting the problem, many indigenous communities have been marginalized or erased. Perhaps because of this, permission from indigenous communities to access study areas is often not required by local authorities, so it is easy to overlook interactions with them. One of my good friends in Chile was an indigenous man. He was instrumental in teaching me about local customs, indigenous points of view and about life in general. He helped me



Unlearning Racism in Geoscience

understand the depth of racism in Chile. Spending more time with indigenous communities would have been beneficial to almost everyone.

- Acknowledging partners as footnotes in presentations and papers is inadequate. Full access to data and results is important for many partners. Frequent, meaningful communication goes a long way to improving outcomes
- Geoscience by nature is often global in scale and international in scope. Most of the resources and policies, including what are termed “Best Practices” are designed for use in specific parts of the U.S. and U.S. communities and may not apply well in other settings where systems are different. Better guidelines for interacting with indigenous communities outside the U.S. and overcoming racist practices in other countries would be helpful.

Response from PSS Graduate Research Assistant 1:

- One UVM researcher whose business also collaborated in the project (and through the mutual aid branch of the business) in summer 2020 partnered with local Abenaki people through a NE grassroots grant that paid their organization (Alnobaiwai) in conducting a repatriation ceremony. This organization is working on remembering and reclaiming their ceremonies so members stated that they were pleased to participate, practice, and contribute to their organization’s economic vitality as well.
- It worked well that one of the tribal elders organized and led the ceremony with the clan mothers. The researcher invited local community members and volunteers on the project and we all followed the lead of the Abenaki in a COVID safe manner.
- We offered a bundle of gifts in addition to a large check that involved local tobacco, and herbs sacred to their tradition as well as rocks from the site to each member.
- We were spacious with time.
- At the end of the ceremony when we were all by the water remarking on the beauty, rock formations and how good we all felt...there was not as much exchange between the community members and the clan mothers as could have been. There was dynamic exchange among the younger folks in the groups. In retrospect, more effort to honor and connect with the clan mothers would have been wise and foundational. The researcher is still only in touch with the men of that group and has not yet developed working relationships with any of the elder First Nation women. She will be reaching out to the tribal elders she knows and asking them if anyone is open or interested in connecting.
- Yes to continue and deepen the collaboration at the next phase of research involving: willows in basketry and native plants in food and medicine in ways that foster community sharing and exchange. We are going to reach out to a few different members of the



Unlearning Racism in Geoscience

group in the coming season and see what we can grow together in our evolving relationships

Response from PSS Graduate Research Assistant 2:

- I work at an LTER in New Hampshire, which has started to put more effort into collaborating with local Indigenous groups this year. The existing narrative of this LTER site has denied the fact of Indigenous habitation and stewardship of the land, and in my work I have not specifically worked with local communities of color. I have collaborated with researchers of color through the LTER.
- The LTER community is a big group, mostly composed of scientists with long careers behind them. Some deny the effects of racism, and some ecologists have spoken of Indigenous communities using racist language, and as if Indigenous communities no longer exist. In addition, the climate of the institution can be exclusive. These are barriers to working with local communities of color. However, a DEI group is working on addressing the existing problems with the institution, and there are opportunities for synchronization across institutions (UVM and other institutions working at the LTER can share resources to improve connections with communities of color). Going forward, there are plans to improve recruitment and build stronger relationships with communities of color.

Response from Geology Staff Member:

- I have worked with graduate students from Latin America that were enrolled at UVM at the time. There are also some graduate and undergraduate students that are interested of learning geologic terms in Spanish and sometimes stop by my office to have a Geology chat, practice the language or even to request a recipe.
- I was able to spend time with a graduate student that did not have writing skills in English. I read the first few drafts of his Master's thesis and made comments.
- In 2020 I was able to connect with Mexican colleagues from the National University of Mexico (UNAM) while I was researching material for a book chapter.
- It is always nice to be able to speak your birth language in a stress-free environment and learn different expressions from other parts of Latin America.
- Helping a graduate student with his Master's thesis was a great opportunity for me. He felt comfortable enough to ask me for help and that experience is priceless.
- Writing the book chapter gave me the opportunity to reconnect with professors and friends on the advancements of Mexican Geology for the past 15 years.



Unlearning Racism in Geoscience

- Sometimes I am not able to spend quality time with the students as usually they drop by when they see my door open. I do always appreciate when they want to spend time just saying hello.
- Due to the Encyclopedia of Geology publication format, I was not able to thank properly my colleagues as there was no acknowledgement section at the end of my chapter. I did spend time thanking properly each one of my colleagues.
- There have been no minority students in our department for quite some time. We need to improve that!
- Funding minority professionals to have the ability to reach out to high-schools so they can learn about Earth Sciences would go a long way. It is important to show students that studying the Earth is fun and accessible to everyone.