Session 4: Racism & Justice
Deliverable: Working with Communities of Color
Harvard EPS/ESE URGE Pod

URGE Policies for Working with Communities of Color for Harvard EPS/ESE

This is what was found by the Harvard EPS/ESE URGE pod on Policies for Working with Communities of Color in the Earth and Planetary Sciences (EPS) and Environmental Sciences and Engineering (ESE) Departments:

Nature of research in EPS/ESE:
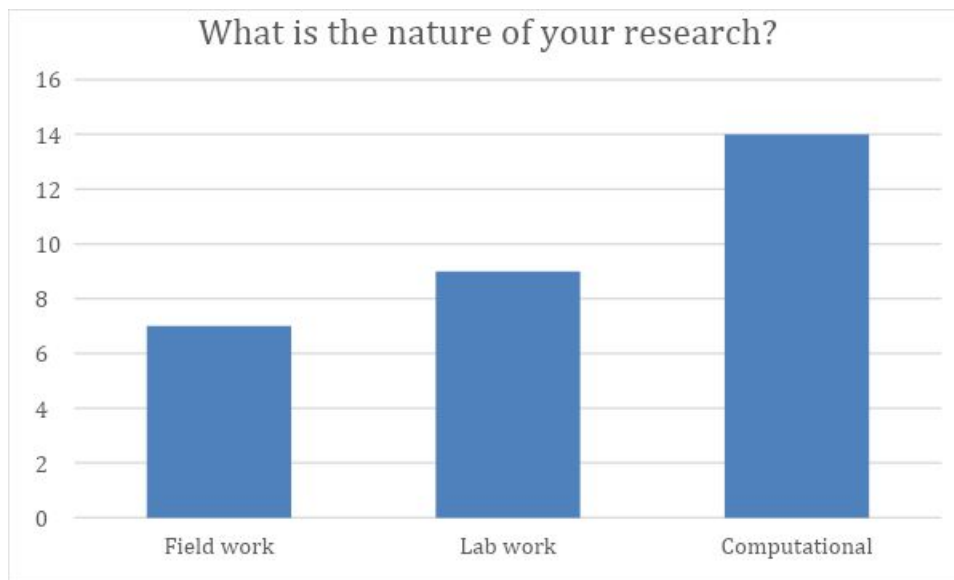
A plurality of people who completed the survey in the department do primarily computational-based research. Field scientists, who are most likely to focus on place-based research and to engage with local communities during sample collection, were the smallest fraction of survey respondents.

Origins of data:

Are you involved in research or use data that originated with communities of color in the United States or abroad?

19 responses
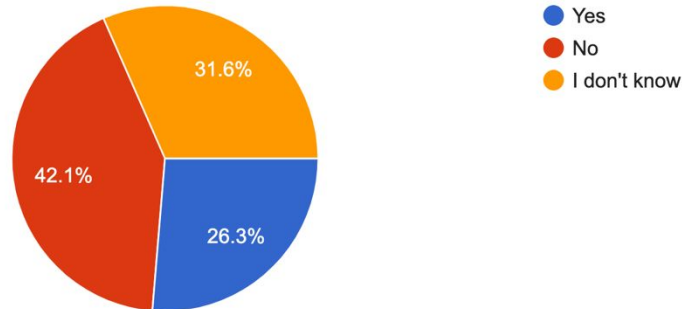
A plurality of respondents did not use data that originated with communities of color. However, a third of respondents did not know the origins of the data they use.

We asked a follow up question "Do you think collaborating with communities of color on your current projects would improve the quality and impact of your current projects and why?" Many respondents indicated they worked on data/datasets that focused on large spatial scales (regional, continental, planetary) and thus had not thought about engagement with specific communities. However, the same respondents believed that their work would be more societally relevant or improve the quality of their data by getting more detailed or accurate placed based data.

Interestingly, only half of the respondents who indicated they performed fieldwork for their research indicated that they used data that originated with communities of color.

Research priorities:

Do you consider and prioritize research questions and locations based on the needs of local communities in addition to how impactful they are seen within academia?

17 responses

- Yes
- No

58.8%

41.2%
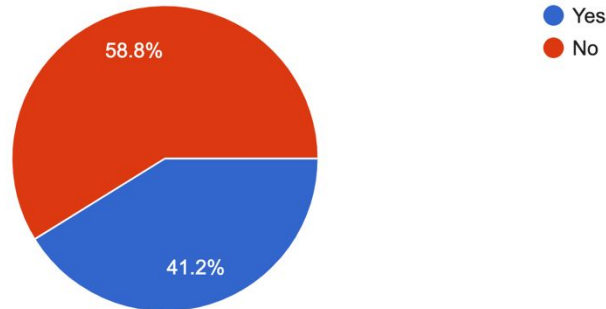
Time and resource allocation to working with communities of color:

A common concern expressed among graduate students was that they did not feel adequately supported by their mentors to engage in research collaborations with communities of color. More than half of respondents indicated their PIs did not promote such collaborations during normal working hours, and thus any personal interest in forming and maintaining networks within communities of color would have to be performed on their own time. This finding reinforces the response to research priorities, where a majority of respondents did not prioritize research questions and locations based on the needs or interests of local communities.

If you are a graduate student, does your PI promote time during normal working hours to collaborate with local communities?
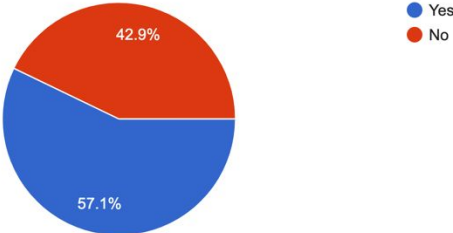
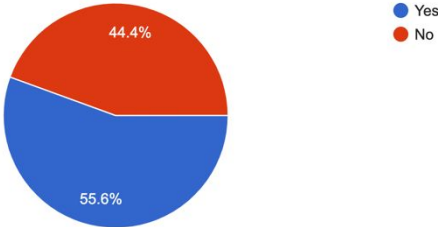9 responses

- Yes
- No

55.6%

44.4%
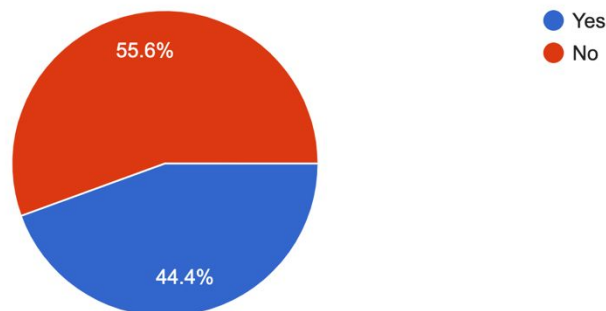
Another important concern that was raised by the respondents was the lack of capacity to form and maintain collaborations with communities of color because nobody around them was engaged in this kind of work. The lack of capacity highlights a systematic barrier within EPS/ESE to work with communities of color.

However, the majority of the respondents who work with communities of color indicated that they actively seek out local collaborators, liaisons, and guides, build trust to establish long term relationships, and allocate sufficient time to work within these communities.

Do you build trust and long-term connections and collaborations with local institutions if the project is multi-year / ongoing?
7 responses

- Yes
- No

42.9%
57.1%

Do you allow sufficient time to the process of working with in community's governance, customs, and priorities?
9 responses

- Yes
- No

44.4%
55.6%

Do you actively seek out local collaborators / liaisons / guides?
11 responses

- Yes
- No

45.5%
54.5%
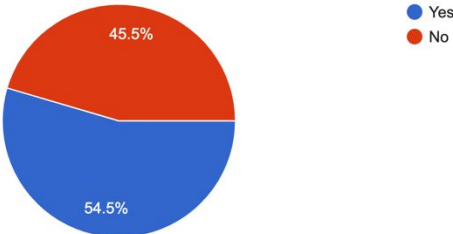
One area of improvement that respondents who work with local communities indicated was engagement with local students. Most respondents indicated they did not actively seek local students out in research. However, several people expressed that they would try harder moving forward to include local students in their work.

Do you actively seek to include local students in your research?
12 responses

Legend:
- Yes (blue)
- No (red)

75%
25%
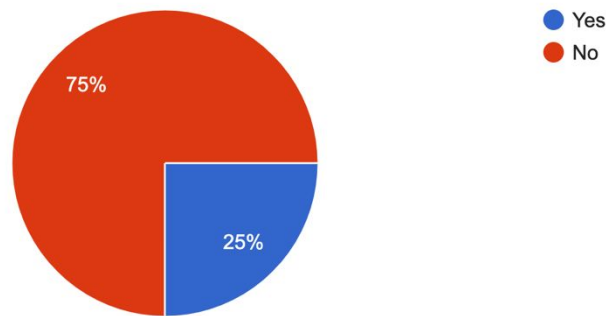
.
Self-education regarding history, politics, and culture of local communities:

Do you educate yourself / team about local politics, culture, customs, and knowledge including the history of colonialism / settler colonialism in the regions of your projects and data sources?
14 responses

Legend:
- Yes (blue)
- No (red)

28.6%
71.4%
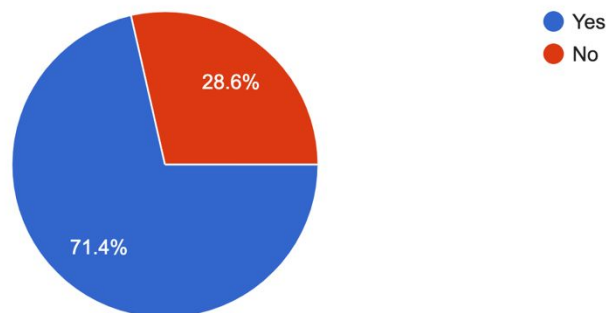
A majority of respondents indicated trying to educate themselves and others about the history, politics, and culture of local communities they work with. The extent of this education varied widely among respondents. Several of the respondents who engaged most with education on these issues indicated they worked in Arctic communities. They sought out both western and Indigenous understandings of issues on climate change and pollution through literature reviews that were not limited to the Earth and environment science journals they typically read. One respondent indicated that this was an important practice in "decolonizing the research I conducted, since doing this kind of science in a white Harvard bubble as a non-Indigenous student was ethically fraught."

Additional comments:
Some responses dismissed the possibility of meaningful scientific collaboration with communities of color. In group discussions, the Harvard EPS-ESE pod agreed that these collaborations are essential to science both ethically and practically. We look forward to continuing such conversations with department leadership and community members going forward.