URGE Policies for Working with Communities of Color, Indigenous Communities, and Local Researchers

Here, we present our findings from a synthesis of 20 survey respondents' answers following the URGE discussions, including voices from LDEO, IRI, and CIESIN.

Audit of previous interactions with communities of color

There is a wide range of experiences of working with communities of color of the researchers and staff on the Lamont campus, from highly integrated to not at all. Mentoring students on campus has created opportunities for working for local communities of color, such as in the classroom, internships, REU programs, and Lamont Open House. Abroad, the nature of the specific work plays an important role in the interactions with local and Indigenous researchers, where some work very closely with scientists, tribal communities, and translators in their work, and others work on oceanographic or paleo studies, making the potential for integration of Indigenous knowledge more abstract. However, multiple members of URGE mentioned that due to the nature of their work, Covid, or simply the lack of previous opportunities, they are very eager to form these relationships in the future.

Successful interactions with communities of color at LDEO, CIESIN, and IRI

Successful experiences in engaging local communities included taking advantage of downtime in the field (such as time in port, for those who work at sea) to engage local students and other interested parties in what work is taking place, investing years in building relationships with local partners or working with imbedded partner organizations (both before and after the actual time scale of the research project itself), and including local partners and discussions of data sovereignty in the project development phase. A particularly successful example of community relationship maintenance included operating an annual community youth science camp.

Engaging local scholars within a given field leads to mutually beneficial research collaborations, especially when local partners can continue with field projects while pandemic travel restrictions prevent international travel. Including BIPOC students and interns in research projects on campus worked best when time was allocated for one-on-one and group mentoring, goals and expectations were clearly communicated by both parties, and BIPOC students were actively recruited and included in the project.

Unsuccessful interactions with communities of color at LDEO, CIESIN, and IRI

There are several things that are not working, including the duration of time researchers are spending engaging and retaining relationships with communities. Concerns were raised about parachute science: not investing in communities long-term or past the time of the proposed project. It was also noted that long term involvement with Indigenous communities before and after a project is often not supported by funding agencies. Additionally, funding agencies are often unwilling to pay local community members unless they are providing a service that they consider work (opposed to sharing knowledge, etc).

PI-community cohesion was addressed on the basis of student-faculty interactions and how to improve relationships between those groups, although success in this venture may not

translate 1:1 to success when trying to build relationships with Indigenous communities. There are calls for more action-oriented programs where communities are involved in data collection and analysis instead of engaged passively by “academic talk”. One example is when a recent IODP cruise in South America invited local students and researchers to tour the research ship, however this is not active collaboration on a project. There is importance of bidirectional conversation and collaboration from the proposal stage to results and data sovereignty of a project, and forming these relationships takes time (often on the order of years) before stages of a project such as field data collection can even begin. This implies that relationships with Indigenous communities need to start even before seeking funding or assigning a graduate student (who works within the range of a 5 year program) to a project involving these communities. At worst, one responder lamented that nothing seemed to work well in previous interactions with the researchers in their group who study Greenland and the local communities of Greenland.

Ways to improve outcomes of current relationships

Developing an educational component to share research findings with the surrounding community in schools or at STEM events could be a way to form relationships with communities of color and share the ways that we are learning about the future effects of climate change in their communities and more broadly. Implementing requirements for the scientists to aid each community they work in could be beneficial, such as school visits, sharing educational pamphlets regarding our research, proper compensation, etc. We must center the community's needs and serve to protect them by starting the process of recruiting local, Indigenous collaborators. Improving the project involves increasing the overlap between the two as much as possible, yet this means relinquishing some control.

Establishing a community engagement activity (say 20% of all project funds) and advisory committee may also lead to a solution. Oversight is critical to embed the science within the community and to listen to community interests and how they can be assimilated into the research. Increasing the number of funds and opportunities to work locally will surely have a large impact: make funds available for hiring local interns/workers without requiring background checks (which can be very limiting), make funds available for local community college students to work in labs, and make funds available for project collaborations between Lamont scientists and MSIs (CUNY etc).

Impediments and suggestions for making these improvements

Soft money can impede an in-depth connection with communities of color/Indigenous communities. This type of funding tends to not lend itself to long-term commitments required to make those connections. Guidelines were suggested; several respondents simply did not know how to go about making mutually beneficial connections. This speaks to the colonial approach to scientific study up until recently, and the lack of change to this approach. Others said that there are guidelines, but vary greatly from place to place. One respondent mentioned that they were disturbed to think that they were not required to know anything about a country they were sent to for work; there was no bar for cultural sensitivity or background information.

Moving forward, our scientific community needs to develop best practices, train a cohort of co-production specialists, and reward that work beyond scientific publications.

Impacts of research on local communities

Some on our campus have been thinking about this for a long time, but do not have the resources (time or money) to take action. Others on campus have only started to think about forming good relationships with local communities in the past year or so. Engaging with students of local communities is likely the best entry point for more beneficial impacts. To begin to work towards more equitable research, we should examine whether or not a supervisor is considering these things within their mentoring relationships, and then how that impacts the time and space the students have to focus on integrating local communities within their own research..

Western Science and Indigenous Ways of Knowing

Respondents generally viewed Western science as more quantitative, logical, mechanistic, and instrumentalist. Several identified it as emerging from and embedded in extractive capitalism, European colonialism, and the philosophical underpinning of European modernity, including the dualist split of man and nature, dominion, and exploitation of nature. It was noted that the Western approach others non-Western approaches, and has both alienated and exploited Native peoples.

In general, people described Indigenous knowledge as being embedded in local communities, admitting a wider range of specific approaches, being qualitative in its descriptions, being more closely connected to nature, often having an explicitly animist tradition. It was noted that Indigenous ways of knowing are holistic, and often integrate non-human beings into its view of community and ‘persons’.

There needs to be more partnering between Western and Indigenous approaches, but there are a range of attitudes about how to go about doing so. Some see Indigenous knowledge as contributing context or qualitative information to projects with quantitative outcomes; others saw the two ways of knowing on an equivalent footing, more-or-less two different approaches to science; others saw the rupture as fundamental, implicitly calling for a reckoning in Western approaches before integrating with Indigenous approaches.