



COMMUNITY PERSPECTIVES

The Importance of Funding Communities Directly

We are the ICBOs (Independent Community-based Organization), a group of fifteen community representatives from across North America. We have been working on community-led De-Colonial Participatory Action Research for eight years now under two NSF AISL awards: (DRL #1422022) Collaborative Research: Examining Contextual Factors that Influence the Implementation of Projects Designed to Improve Cultural Diversity in Informal STEM Programming and (DRL #1811234) Developing the Processes and Potential to Engage Historically Underrepresented Communities in Public Participation in STEM Research Through Authentic and Impactful Collaboration. The focus of our research has been to better understand collaborations between STEM institutions and community-based organizations representing communities historically excluded and exploited by the sciences. These findings, recently published in BioScience (<https://doi.org/10.1093/biosci/biac001>), and our lived experiences are presented below (our community codes for themes appear in bold):

- The scientific enterprise is systemically structured such that large scientific institutions (SIs) receive the majority of available funding and set programming, research, outreach, and engagement priorities for communities and their members. Dominant-culture institutions are **gatekeepers** to the sciences.
- Community-based Organizations (CBOs) rarely receive funding to develop scientific research and outreach programs in their communities because they typically are perceived by funders as lacking fiscal stability to support large awards or having insufficient academic expertise.
- CBOs have very little direct access to funding streams, research opportunities, or networks, making it nearly impossible for our community voices to be heard directly in the sciences, especially without the filter of SIs. The system creates a funnel that makes CBOs dependent on dominant-culture institutions for funds and representation in science.
- Most CBOs in our studies believe that SIs primarily place their funding and staff into programming and research benefitting dominant-culture audiences. The institutions hope the benefits will simply **Trickle-Down** to minoritized communities or they **Dabble in Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI)**. We see evidence of Dabbling in EDI when SIs have one or two programs or research efforts in which they superficially use Justice, Equity, Diversity and Inclusion (JEDI) terminology and obtain photos of minoritized participants for annual reports and websites, but where there is no true equity in the distribution of power, exchange of expertise, or desire to dive into institutional racism or systemic barriers in any meaningful way.



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- Results of dominant-culture research focused on understanding diverse communities often yield inaccurate results because the research questions, data collection, and interpretation of results all lack the “unfiltered” worldviews of our communities (Minkler 2005).
- Little progress has been made in creating a more equitable, just, and accessible scientific enterprise, including the field of Public Participation in Scientific Research.

Not only does our research strongly point toward a critical need to change the existing **Status Quo**, but rigorous documentation of two NSF AISL awards we have led and participated in exemplifies this need in true colors.

- Dominant culture SIs will interfere with community-led research efforts that lead to findings that expose **Institutional Racism, Power Inequities**, or have the potential to make SI staff feel **Fragile**. When one considers the strong need to maintain the perceived institutional public image and the interests of powerful dominant-culture leaders and board members, there is a clear conflict of interests. Since SIs control the funding, research priorities, and evaluation, if they do not see the value of community leadership in research, and they fear the public consequences of the work, there is little hope for creating meaningful change in addressing inequity in science.

“So that would be the greatest fear, that it's just – that we're being just used to get the grant. And it looks really nice on paper and doesn't go into the real life. We are leading it. We are making it, but to what extent can they go along with it for now. And that they truly do not really make it part of the system to bring that change. That would be the biggest concern that I have and being used.” ~Community perspective

Furthermore, more in-depth research on our current AISL award indicates that:

-Institutional practitioners show a willingness to participate in EDI efforts as long as they do not interfere with traditional approaches or take additional time.

-There is a gap between institutional and community understandings of equity work. There is a strong institutional preference for surface-level EDI work or **Dabbling in EDI**, while community preference, on the other hand, often stresses the importance of EDI work moving into action.

“You're just checking a box and trying to say, 'Hey, I'm doing something,' but you're not. And oftentimes it's [institutions] and individuals who kinda dabble in it. They actually make things worse. So you could have actually done better by not doing anything at all. But when you dabble in it, you actually make things worse.” ~Community perspective



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-Institutional practitioners often have **Good Intentions**, demonstrating a desire for equity and change, but suggest solutions that are **Top-down** or led by dominant-culture approaches meant to *study* or *save* communities (**I Know What You Need/Savior Syndrome**). There is a desire for increasing equity via top-down practices that keep researchers and community separate, instead of embracing processes that give the community as much ownership of the research as it gives institutional partners (**Ownership Inequitable**).

-Institutional practitioners show a hesitancy to speak about race, racism, and institutional racism, and express fear in saying something offensive or perceived as wrong. White Supremacy Culture Characteristics such as **Fear of Open Conflict, Right to Comfort, Objectivity,** and **Paternalism** are often seen in SI practitioner responses about collaborations between SIs and CBOs.

“I just have an overall frustration [...] with the institutional racism that comes from them, and their defensiveness and white fragility around running away – some of 'em, not all of them. Some of the individuals, especially leaders, running away from the topic, especially when we start talking about racism or institutional racism, and not taking ownership. And that doesn't help at all. Running away just ends up avoiding the topic and just makes it worse.” ~Community perspective

Institutional practitioners who are fearful of confronting issues of race are more likely to **Dabble in EDI**, which sets up added barriers by taking a **Color-Blind** approach to race, confounding equity vs. equality, or by self-excluding. *Community responses instead view centering and openly communicating about race and racism as one of the core ways that communities build trust with institutions.*

“At least what I've seen here at the Lab is that white people who are at the Lab that are in any way associated with this project are terrified of saying the wrong thing. Suddenly they realize that there are lots of wrong things to say. That the way in which we go about doing business as usual suddenly is – may not be okay. That we might need to look a little bit deeper. And so the way I've seen it play out here at the Lab is that people either clam up or they complain about the fact that they can't just say what's on their mind or that they don't feel like they can say what's on their mind. And so they either disengage or they clam up or they do things like not wanting to be recorded or not wanting to participate or all of these things. Oh, god, I might say the wrong thing and then it might become – I might become exposed as someone who isn't perfect, as someone who – is a player in institutional racism.” ~Institutional perspective

-Institutional and systemic racism is not easily identified by institutional practitioners. This means that SIs do not see any urgency in addressing racism they cannot see. A strong sense of



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scientific elitism (**Science=Elite**) and a desire for **Objectivity** without an understanding of dominant culture biases, coupled with **Fear of Open Conflict** and **Fragility**, lead to barriers to inclusion, justice, and equity in the sciences that may be insurmountable by communities. Communities generally must tip-toe around barriers and inequities in collaborations **Walking on Eggshells** when navigating collaborations to avoid negative repercussions.

“Because my work is across the USA, I feel that it is detrimental to address racism among the audience that holds the purse strings.” ~Community perspective

-Finally, we see a strong sense of **Savior Syndrome**, or **I Know What You Need** in institutional approaches to working with communities historically excluded from the sciences. This leads to deficit-based approaches that do nothing to balance power and privilege, address systemic racism, or provide direct access to otherwise exclusionary networks.

“I thought that this project could just increase people's knowledge and then hopefully their willingness to behave differently to promote biodiversity.” ~Institutional perspective

We believe CBOs should have direct access to funding streams so that money is not channeled through dominant culture STEM institutions and CBOs are able to control and build equitable projects that use community-centered approaches that benefit their communities. The infrastructure to support this model does not currently exist within the scientific enterprise, yet. CBOs want access to resources, networks, and channels currently available only to dominant-culture institutions, which will allow them to create or co-create programming that their communities want and need. Communities are tired of being studied, used, or “saved”. Power inequities and lack of transparency will not be confronted, and race will not be centered if we do not change the system from a top-down, deficit approach to a bottom-up approach based on community strengths and priorities. We must fundamentally change the scientific enterprise by providing direct funding to communities historically excluded from the sciences so that their leadership, expertise, and voices are not filtered by the existing system.

Our work demonstrates that the co-creation of equitable processes in collaborations and scientific research is critically important. In our work, the ICBOs have co-created processes such as [Working Agreements](#) and [Non-Negotiables for Doing Research and Evaluation in Minoritized Communities](#). CBOs understand that taking the time to co-develop equitable processes and trust is essential to the success of STEM research and programming in their communities in view of the field's long history of exploitation, abuse, extraction, exclusion, and neglect. Direct funding must also be paired with community-led evaluation. Our research and experience have led us to understand that the success of STEM research and programming focused on communities historically excluded from the sciences is best evaluated by community-led teams and must include indicators such as how much ownership the communities have over the



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results. Evaluators (particularly BIPOC evaluators) may feel like they need to be cautious in their reporting due to the power that SIs hold and the repercussions that may come if they call out inequities. It is important that there are no mediating institutions with their own motivations and unseen biases. Given these results, we believe that unless community organizations are funded directly by the National Science Foundation, the field of science, Public Participation in STEM research, and STEM programming will not make significant advances in increasing Justice, Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion.

How could the NSF take the lead in creating access, promoting more equitable processes, and providing direct funding to communities historically excluded from the sciences?

1. Ensure that the NSF begins with a clear goal to balance power, create access, center race, and intentionally promote and reward equitable processes before beginning this work.
2. Ensure that funds are set aside specifically for community organizations that want to lead PPSR and STEM Research and Programming in their communities.
3. Ensure that enough funding is given specifically to help CBOs create the infrastructure needed to receive and manage funding.
4. Split funding between CBOs as in collaborative awards between dominant culture institutions.
5. If necessary, grant smaller amounts of funding, divided over time in increments for smaller CBOs.
6. Help create and fund BIPOC-led non-profits created specifically to receive and transparently and equitably manage funding for CBOs, provide infrastructure for CBOs, support community-led research, and promote community-centered PPSR and STEM programming. These organizations must be selected by communities themselves, provide direct access to communities, be accountable to the communities they serve, and must use equitable and transparent processes that center communities.
7. Ensure that equitable funds are set aside specifically for projects led or co-led by Historically Black Colleges and Universities; Tribal Colleges, American Indian & Alaska Native colleges, and American Indian science-focused organizations; as well as Hispanic Serving Institutions, and other such institutions that historically center minoritized communities and have a proven track record of doing so.
8. When funding dominant culture STEM institutional collaborations, ensure that there is a history of equitable work, budgets are transparent and equitable (particularly for infrastructure), community co-PIs are included, and community voices are heard directly in annual reports, technical reports, outcome reports, meetings with Program Officers, funding correspondence, and project dissemination.



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9. Require that evaluation of AISL NSF projects focused on community leadership includes community ownership as one of the markers of success.
10. Ensure direct access to Program Officers by community practitioners and participants involved in AISL awards.
11. Require the use of Community Review Board of Non-Negotiables for doing Research and Evaluation like those co-created by the NOISE Project: <https://noiseproject.org/process/>
12. Require research results to be distributed in communities via accessible formats and published academic manuscripts to be freely available to communities.
13. Require Open Access formats for all publications with AISL NSF funding.
14. Require that pay for community advisors be equitable to pay for academic advisors.
15. Ensure direct access by participating communities to AISL PI meetings.

The ICBOs would welcome the opportunity to sit down with NSF and other funders to discuss these ideas, challenges, and best practices.

The ICBOs

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