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Funding the Future We Want: Leveraging University Funding to Support Black and Indigenous Communities

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Introduction and Background

For more than a decade, critical service-learning and community-engagement authors and scholar-activists have been pushing for a more race-aware, critically informed view of the work of community-based learning (e.g. Mitchell et al., 2012; Cann and DeMeulenaere, 2020). Increasingly, scholars and practitioners are articulating and writing about the ways whiteness and supremacy are embedded in many elements of community-engaged work that we take for granted (Vidal-Ortiz, 2017; Okun, 2021). New thinking on anti-racist community-engaged pedagogy “seeks to counteract the persistence and impact of racism on our campuses and in our community-engagement” (Massachusetts Department of Higher Education, 2021). These calls encourage, support and validate the hard work of individuals across campuses who teach and practice in ways that support students of color and critically challenge systems of oppression.

But since racism is structural, it is also important to pay attention to the ways institutions of higher education incorporate the values of anti-racist teaching and learning into everyday practices and policies. For years, the field of community-engagement has argued that tracking funding for community-engaged learning (CEL) activities is a key metric for understanding whether an institution’s work successfully promotes the values of CEL (Holland, 1997; Furco, 1999; Eatman et al., 2018). Critical philanthropy has been making a similar argument, noting that we cannot expect systemic change without funding it (Davis, 2020). Major funding bodies like NIH acknowledge that funding is “not immune to the systemic racism that pervades American society” (Taffe and Gilpin, 2021). Funding is critical to changing racist structures. It is a literal demonstration of values and commitment.

Our goal in this paper is to provide a timely discussion about the role of university-based funding to address or ignore issues of equality. We provide insight into the questions: how are communities of color affected by funding *without* a focus on anti-racism? And how can we change our grant making processes to make them more equitable? This focus on funding is our way into better understanding how to live out the values that underpin anti-racist teaching and learning in a demonstratable, structural way.

For the past six years, our university has invested heavily in culture change experiments via a well-funded and supported community-engaged learning initiative, with the goal of creating a campus environment where all students encounter high-quality community-engagement teaching and learning opportunities. One approach has been to provide grants to faculty to increase and expand the use of community-engaged learning in courses, curricula, and research. These grants have been accompanied by professional development opportunities to learn more about the values of the field, especially valuing multiple forms of knowledge, cultural competence, and equity. However, from 2015-2019, these grants were not driven by the ethos of a values-engaged assessment that focused on racial equity (Bandy et al., 2018). That is not to say these grants were not values-based; they were. But the primary value was placed on student learning broadly, without a specific focus on equity.

A specific anti-racist values lens was brought to bear on the grants when the university was forced to respond to demands from students, and community, for change towards being more explicitly anti-racist. In 2017, the university Black Students United presented the university’s President with twelve demands to

ensure a “full, wholehearted, and steadfast commitment to ensure that every student in every school and college has the resources, the love, and the support to survive and thrive the rigors of our institution and the trials and triumphs of life” (Bogel-Burroughs, 2017). Our community-engaged teaching and learning initiative was named explicitly in these demands.

In 2020, in response to the murder of George Floyd and the ensuing protests throughout the summer, including on the streets of our hometown, the community-engaged learning and teaching office released a public statement in support of the Black Lives Matter movement. In this statement was a commitment to

- Review funding processes and participatory programs to support faculty, staff, students, and community partners in their efforts to move towards antiracism and improve the opportunities for community-engaged learning in this area.
- Interrogate community-engaged learning values through an anti-racist lens.
- Encourage partners and applicants to integrate antiracism into community-engaged learning proposals, to advance the educational environment for every student and to create more just communities.

Since then, that unit has taken steps towards addressing the demands of Black students and prioritizing the unit’s own set of commitments. We immediately recognized that very little data existed about how our funding strategy was being used to drive forward our commitments. We could only make changes with clarity and focus to make our funding more equitable with baseline data to understand what our grant making without a specific anti-racist lens looked like. Our problem of practice was both foundational—we needed a new framework within which we would make our programmatic decisions—and logistical—we needed to change how the program operated.

The rest of this essay describes how we operationalized our commitment to understanding how the program funding was being used to support Black and Indigenous communities. We lay out our method and findings, and discuss implications for both our program and lessons that other programs can implement.

Method

Jump-started by the pandemic in March 2020, we began the process of integrating anti-racist practices

into funding, by modifying the program that supports student travel for community-engaged learning experiences. As students were not allowed to travel, it became imperative to support their place-based community-engaged projects and research, rather than their travel as part of global service-learning experiences. Thus, the Serve in Place Fund replaced the Community-Engaged Student Travel Grants. We used the Serve in Place Fund to explore a place-based framework of engagement and encouraged students to develop projects that could be done at home, virtually, or (in accordance with local public health guidelines) in the communities where they were living during the pandemic. As this Fund went live in the Summer of 2020, the murder of George Floyd and subsequent protests inspired the office to center anti-racism in programs and funding. But we needed to assess it. Creating the new Serve in Place framework provided a space where we could investigate whether our programs were intentionally aligned with our commitments and address gaps in practice where they existed.

To provide some baseline data to make future decisions, the Travel Grants/Serve in Place fund became the first grant program evaluated to determine whether our funding was effectively supporting Black and Indigenous communities. The goal was to determine which communities were being served *without* an explicit anti-racist commitment and determine what could be changed and improved *with* anti-racist intentionality.

Through an inductive meaning-making process, our student researcher determined three criteria for examining funded projects:

- The project is explicitly impacting Black/ Indigenous individuals
- The work is being done in a primarily Black/ Indigenous neighborhood
- The work will impact minority and/or low-income people, in which Black/ Indigenous individuals can benefit from.

These three criteria were applied to 38 student projects that had been funded from 2019-2020, before the pivot in the program. This was to establish a baseline—to understand what was occurring without an anti-racist focus. The review consisted of reading the application materials, as well as doing more in-depth research into the organizations and community partners named in application. This research uncovered whether the organization was run by a person of color, for example, or was located in a neighborhood

predominated by underrepresented people. 40% of the funded projects met the new criteria.

The criteria developed to examine the projects provided a useful model for other grant mechanisms run by the office to develop baseline data about the impact of those funding programs on Black and Indigenous communities and was applied to an additional two grant programs. The Engaged Research Grants and the Engaged Opportunity Grants differ from the Serve in Place funds as they fund faculty and staff, rather than students. However, the general goal of that funding is the same: to support community-engaged learning, teaching and research. As with the baseline findings from Serve in Place grants, findings were shared with individual program managers of each grant, along with the general staff of the unit.

Findings

In total, 258 individual projects were reviewed from three different grant mechanisms. 105 (40%) of the projects were identified as working with or to support Black and Indigenous communities. We reviewed projects that were part of three grant mechanisms: Serve in Place Grants, Engaged Opportunity Grants and Engaged Research Grants.

Serve in Place Grants

The first round of funding given to students through the 2020 Serve in Place grants resulted in about 25% of the funding going to Black and Indigenous communities (n=64). In 2020, over half of the Black/Indigenous projects self-selected the theme of “access, equity, and justice” and nearly a third self-selected the theme of “education.” For those projects serving Black and Indigenous communities, 75% worked with community partners in our home state. Projects not identified as serving Black and Indigenous communities had an increase in the diversity of states and several international community partners.

Following this review, \$20,000 was reallocated to projects that were serving Black and Indigenous communities and changes were made in both the application and the review process. The established criteria were explicitly described in the application and language was added that prioritized projects that met the criteria, and asked applicants to describe the ways the proposed project could meet any of the criteria. In the review process, reviewers were also explicitly asked if the project met the criteria and that answer became part of the final review formula.

After changes were made in programming, another

one hundred Serve in Place grants were reviewed. 58% of these projects were identified as impacting Black and Indigenous communities (see Table 1).

Table 1: Review of Serve in Place grants

| | PRE CRITERIA SUMMER 2020 | POST CRITERIA SUMMER 2020 |
|-------------------|-----------------------------|------------------------------|
| # funded projects | 64 | 100 |
| # B/I projects | 16 | 58 |
| % B/I projects | 25% | 58% |

Engaged Opportunity Grants

Engaged Opportunity grants provide up to \$5000 to seed community-engaged learning projects, research and courses. These are open to all faculty and staff and are used for a wide range of projects from creating partnerships to paying student research assistants. Our student researcher reviewed grants from Fall 2019, Winter 2020 and Spring 2020 using the same criteria as that we used to analyze the Serve in Place grants. Of the thirty-eight projects, nineteen were identified as impacting Black and Indigenous communities (47% of the total). Each application cycle closely reflected that percentage (see Table 2).

Table 2: Review of Engaged Opportunity Grants

| | FALL 2019 | WINTER 2020 | SPRING 2020 |
|----------------------|--------------|----------------|----------------|
| # of funded projects | 13 | 9 | 16 |
| # of B/I projects | 6 | 4 | 8 |
| % of B/I projects | 46% | 44% | 50% |

As with the Serve in Place grants, the theme most commonly self-selected by grantees was “access, equity and justice”; however, the second most commonly selected theme was “children, youth, seniors and families”. Again, over 75% of community partners on the grants that impacted B/I communities were located in our home state.

Engaged Research Grants

Engaged Research Grants support faculty to enhance undergraduate experiences through community-engaged research. Thirty-two grants from 2016-2020 were reviewed and twelve grants (37%) met the criteria of serving Black and Indigenous communities. Even with a smaller sample size, each cycle of these grants reflected similar percentages, ranging from 33% - 43%. For the Engaged Research Grants, only two Black and Indigenous community partners were in our hometown, with another three located in our home county. Generally, these Black and Indigenous partners were in larger cities than our hometown. This differed

greatly from the Engaged Opportunity Grants, where 40% of community partners were located locally.

General Findings

When this review occurred, the Engaged Research Grants had the lowest engagement with Black/Indigenous communities. On average, 40% of Engaged Research Grants met the criteria, as opposed to 50% for both the Engaged Opportunity Grants and post-programmatic changed Serve in Place grants. This was possibly due to a smaller sample size than the two other grants. In addition, we theorized that faculty applying for research grants, even those with a community-engaged focus, would be more likely to focus on race “neutral” and “objective” language and partners.

Through our analysis, we found several important findings that are being integrated into funding mechanisms, professional development for faculty and staff, classroom dynamics, and research practices. Overall, the Black and Indigenous communities most impacted by these grants were in the state where our university is located. This is interesting because grant funds to local, state, and national partnerships make up 50% of the overall funding portfolio, the other 50% funds international partnerships. In addition, the majority of projects that support Black and Indigenous communities are urban.

Students tend to work more directly with Black and Indigenous individuals, whereas faculty and staff tend to list organizations as partners. This may have to do with the fact that students found local and personal connections throughout the pandemic, whereas faculty and staff were interested in supporting organizations that serve Black and Indigenous communities in order to spread impact. Lastly, we found that projects with smaller amounts of funding tend to focus on Black and Indigenous communities. Our Engaged Research Grants have the least reach into B/I communities, and yet represent the largest financial investment of the evaluated mechanisms.

Implications

By creating anti-racist infrastructure and holding ourselves accountable via funding, we are working to create a university culture where anti-racist teaching and learning is supported. This process exposed for our staff and students several new learnings. We reflected on how important it is to have baseline data that is informed by an anti-racist perspective. We are incapable of changing practices and programs if we do not have a sense of how well (or not) we are doing in living out anti-racist values. We must continue to

collect baseline information; we are committed to utilizing the criteria across our entire grant portfolio.

In addition, a demonstrable commitment—in this case reallocating \$20,000, changing applications, and bringing an anti-racist lens to the review process—led to demonstrable change towards supporting more Black and Indigenous communities. Including the criteria and asking applicants to answer for themselves the ways that their project could address those criteria provides space for applicants to explain themselves and serves as a reflection moment for them to ask themselves why their project does not serve those communities and if it could or should.

To make these practices systemic, we have shared our criteria with other departments who also give out grants and are in conversation about the ways that departments can create anti-racist programs and evaluation. One department has incorporated the criteria into annual faculty evaluation plans. Our university supports departmental level anti-racist action plans, and we would like to collaborate further to share our process and learn from others. We would especially like to reiterate to others across campus that incorporating students as co-researchers and co-investigators in this process is essential. They bring an immediacy to the work that helps us hold ourselves administratively accountable. Our data clearly demonstrates that students are committed to anti-racist community-engagement and our duty as staff and faculty is to provide pathways into living out that commitment.

We took specific steps to examine our funding with an anti-racist lens:

- Worked with a committed student researcher and listened to her expertise
- Identified the need for baseline data
- Created criteria that explicitly named Black and Indigenous communities
- Evaluated past projects based on the criteria
- Changed program practices and applications
- Allocated direct funding towards anti-racist projects
- Reflected throughout.

These are examples of the kinds of activities other units can take to live out their anti-racist

values. The ways that community-engagement units spend our money and how we determine the impact of funding can be focused to create stronger, more vibrant communities for people of color and others facing systemic oppression.

Conclusion

Specific and focused anti-racist assessment of and changes to policy and practices of our funding allowed us to identify where we committed to communities of color without a values-based approach, and where we could continue to do better. We realized that we get to create anti-racist applications, our grantees must answer questions that make them think about the impact of their community-engaged teaching and learning on Black and Indigenous communities, and we get to decide to fund projects and courses that do a better job of fulfilling the anti-racist teaching and learning principles and values that we want to move towards. Hopefully, we can use this structural approach to increase the number and quality of those doing that work.

Our criteria considered the reality that projects are along a spectrum of support for communities of color. We wanted to name that some projects will be done directly with B/I community partners and that some will focus on creating larger environments where people of color can thrive. Thus, our criteria was not ranked, but allowed for community-engagement at many levels. Again, those criteria are

- The project is explicitly impacting Black/ Indigenous individuals
- The work is being done in a primarily Black/ Indigenous neighborhood
- The work will impact minority and/or low-income people, in which Black/ Indigenous individuals can benefit from.

Black Lives Matter, the pandemic, anti-Asian hate crimes, the continual and daily reminders that supremacist systems are at work around us makes it even more important we individually, and as units committed to community-engaged teaching and learning, seek out ways to understand racism and its impact on communities, students and ourselves. We must recognize and work within supremacist norms that dictate policies and practices that we take for granted in higher education. To be explicitly anti-racist requires reflection and action. ■

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