Principles of Anti-Oppressive Community Engagement for University Educators and Researchers

A Perpetual Work in Progress as We Learn to Do This Work Better in Community With Others

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About

The Principles of Anti-Oppressive Community Engagement for University Educators and Researchers are the product of many minds and several years. In 2016 Rebecca Riccio, founder and director of the Social Impact Lab at Northeastern University, convened a group of Northeastern University faculty and staff to examine the case for adopting campus-wide standards for ethical community-engaged teaching and research (CETR). The group reflected a diverse and growing ecosystem of people in a variety of community-engaged roles across campus who wanted to establish a coherent and shared framework of accountability for the unintended harms and inequity that can result from CETR. An ad-hoc community of practice was established, and while its composition has shifted over the years, members continue to share scholarly literature and research, best practices, discipline-specific applications, and our own experiences as educators and practitioners who share a commitment to racial and social justice.

In the aftermath of George Floyd's murder in 2020, three of us, Riccio, Becca Berkey, and Giordana Mecagni, began articulating these principles and practices more concretely as a commitment to holding ourselves accountable for practicing antiracist and anti-oppressive CETR. Our roles at the university - Mecagni in University Archives and Special Collections, Berkey in CETR within the Education Innovation team of the Office of the Chancellor, and Riccio in the Social Impact Lab, human services program, and School of Public Policy and Urban Affairs - call for deep community engagement and interdisciplinary collaboration on and off campus. We were therefore able to draw on years of lessons learned from the circle of colleagues described above and other collaborators with diverse identities, roles, and experiences with CETR, including community partners, faculty, staff, and students at Northeastern and other universities. Our work was also informed by a wide range of scholars and practitioners in the fields of critical service-learning and CETR, antiracism, antiracist pedagogy, and social movement building. After drafting the principles, we workshopped them through a collaborative and iterative review process, again including a wide range of university and community stakeholders. We are abundantly grateful to everyone who has been part of this journey so far.

Fully acknowledging the limits of our lived experiences and perspectives, we share the principles as an aspirational offering and invitation to continue improving upon them. Our hope is that this living document will further evolve as we continue to learn from and with others who share our commitment to reimagining CETR. Manifesting the principles in action and context will require us to build a culture that values humility, accountability, and reckoning. Toward that end, our next step will be to co-create an accountability toolkit to facilitate dialogue between university faculty, staff, and students and our community partners to co-define and then practice what accountability means in our specific disciplines, fields, or contexts. Our hope is that these conversations will help foster an environment where the use of an agreed-upon set of principles is common and expected, much like the Institutional Review Board process is.

To the many people whose wisdom and experience have informed these principles and whose friendship and collegiality have inspired us to be bold, thank you. We hope we have captured the purpose and spirit of our work together.

In solidarity,

Rebecca Riccio, Juffali Family Director, Social Impact Lab
Giordana Mecagni, Head of Special Collections and University Archivist, Northeastern University Library
Becca Berkey, Director of Community-Engaged Teaching & Research

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Our Commitment

As faculty and staff associated with the Social Impact Lab at Northeastern University, we aspire to make a positive contribution in the communities where we live, work, and visit. We are mindful that community-engaged teaching and research (CETR) are not neutral acts; they can both benefit and harm the people they touch on and off campus. We recognize our obligation to optimize the benefits while also anticipating and mitigating the unintended negative consequences that can result from inserting ourselves and our students into other people's lives and communities with the intention to learn, "do good," and effect change. This awareness is especially important when we do not share the identities and lived experience of people in the communities we enter.

While honoring the important history and essential role of the Institutional Review Board (IRB) in human subject research protection, we seek to supplement the safeguards it provides by raising awareness that many impacts of community engagement not addressed by IRB are nonetheless harmful to historically oppressed communities. We must learn to do better. We begin by acknowledging that legacies of slavery, genocide, white supremacy, and oppression of individuals based on their social identities have caused harm in many of the communities we

engage with in the U.S. and accepting responsibility for learning how we can actively support the survivors and descendants of these phenomena. When engaging with communities outside the U.S., we are equally obligated to understand how the harms of colonialism, imperialism, and other oppressive dynamics manifest in the local context.

We recognize that acknowledging these truths is not enough; we must strive to uphold antiracist and anti-oppressive values as a way of being on and off campus. To that end, we commit to these Principles of Anti-Oppressive Community Engagement for University Educators and Researchers and aspire to develop practices and systems of accountability that allow us to uphold them as we learn and grow as educators and humans.

Principles of Anti-Oppressive Community Engagement for University Educators and Researchers

1. Honor Communities' Autonomy and Right to Self-Determination

We will acknowledge when we are visitors in other people's communities and respect their autonomy, agency, and right to make their own decisions about matters affecting their lives and futures; and

Respect that communities have the right to define the challenges and opportunities they face, set the priorities that will allow them to thrive, and define success on their own terms.

2. Respect Communities' History, Culture, Lived Experience, and Expertise

We will enter communities as listeners and learn as much as possible about the history, culture, lived experience, and assets of the communities we engage with; and

Honor the legitimacy and value of diverse forms of knowledge and expertise without placing the burden of teaching us on community members.

3. Recognize the Limits of Our Lived Experience, Expertise, and Perspectives

We will acknowledge that we are not the first or only people to problem-solve in the communities we engage with;

Educate ourselves about individuals in the community and in other disciplines and fields who already address the challenges and opportunities we are working on; and

Question the frameworks, narratives, and assumptions that have shaped our understanding of the world and the disciplines and fields in which we work.

4. Reflect on Our Social Identities, Positions, and Power

We will cultivate self-awareness and do the work of grappling with our own social identities, biases, motivations for doing community-engaged work, and elements of discomfort we may feel working in and with communities not our own;

Recognize the power and privilege associated with our positions in higher education; and

Question whether our engagement in community settings is welcome and adds value.

5. Build Authentic, Mutually Beneficial Relationships with Patience and Humility

We will center community members' voices and perspectives in our understanding of our shared endeavor;

Recognize our collaborators as co-educators and practice co-design, co-creation and co-ownership of ideas, data, publications, credit, and profit resulting from our work in community; and

Build open and transparent communication channels and accept feedback with appreciation and a commitment to learn.

6. Manage Resources Equitably

We will recognize that control of resources is a form of power that can perpetuate inequity in our relationships with community partners;

Ensure that our collaborators are recognized and appropriately compensated for their physical, emotional, and intellectual labor and other contributions to our work; and

Be cognizant of limited resources available to many community-based organizations and consider how best to deploy the resources available to us as equitably and effectively as possible.

7. Hold Ourselves Accountable

We will hold ourselves accountable for the impact of our words and actions, regardless of our intentions, with grace, courage, and constructive dialogue about how we can do better; and

Recognize that institutions of higher education play complex roles in the communities they occupy and work internally to promote values and practices that center community interests and well-being.

8. Rethink Our Relationship with Time and Urgency

We will acknowledge that the pace of building trust and relationships cannot be hastened by the academic calendar, grant deadlines, funding opportunities, and other sources of urgency; and

Cultivate patience and value the work of building and stewarding each relationship, which may involve the efforts of many individuals on and off campus.

9. Hold Ourselves Accountable to the Values and Practices of Anti-Oppressive Community Engagement in our Relationships with Students and in Our Classrooms

We will respect the diverse identities and lived experiences of our students and recognize the harm that can occur in classrooms and labs because of unconscious bias and the power imbalance among instructors and students;

Give deference to students' experience of racial and social injustice and relationships with the issues and communities we are addressing; and

Study and practice antiracist and trauma-informed pedagogy to minimize the risk of such harms.

10. Prioritize Patience, Perspective-Taking, and Joy

We will accept that doing the work of anti-oppressive CETR can be emotionally challenging for us while also recognizing that the burdens of social change weigh far more heavily on the people and organizations on the front lines of this work;

Embrace vulnerability and gracious listening to feedback as fundamental elements of this work, knowing we will make mistakes and accept them as lessons we can build on to improve relationships and our collaborative work;

Practice self-care, gratitude, compassion, and grace with ourselves, each other, and our community partners; and

Find hope, joy, and meaning in this work and the relationships it allows us to build on and off campus.

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