

Special Report: Emerson Program Anti-racism Initiatives

The Emerson Program has been steadily working for the last 6 years to incorporate an anti-racist approach to all aspects of our work. What began with an effort to have more racially and economically diverse classes of fellows has evolved over the years into what is now a strong programmatic commitment to anti-racism. This commitment is also the foundation for our current and future work to establish a broader anti-oppression framework including other forms of oppression, such as sexism, classism, and homophobia.

What?

Anti-racism is “the practice of identifying, challenging, preventing, eliminating, and changing the values, structures, policies, programs, practices, and behaviors that perpetuate racism.”¹”

Why?

The Emerson Program is very intentional about addressing the root causes of hunger and poverty, including eradicating social oppression in all forms. Oppression and inequality permeate all parts of our society and we must commit all we can to eliminating it if we are to ever be truly successful in creating a just, hunger and poverty-free society. Therefore, cultivating an understanding of both the history and current manifestations of racial oppression is critical for Emerson Hunger Fellows to be effective in their field and policy placements. It is also important to address issues of racism and other manifestations of social inequality, including classism and homophobia, within the community of Fellows. The Fellows themselves are such a diverse group of young leaders that we must provide space to explore how issues of oppression impact each Fellow and the class as a whole in order to build the strong learning community that has become the hallmark of the Emerson Program.

How?

Over the last 5 years, the Emerson program has examined all components of the program, including recruitment and selection of Fellows and field and policy sites, the training curriculum, Fellow advising, and program administration, to determine where we could make changes that would ensure that the Emerson Program is 1) addressing hunger and poverty in communities of color in a thoughtful, effective way, and 2) providing young leaders of any race, class, ethnicity, gender and sexual orientation a place to learn, thrive, and contribute. In order to reflect this commitment, we needed to make significant changes to how we work with fellows, field and policy sites, and internal program systems. Below we highlight select program changes that are moving us toward our anti-racism goals.

Field and Policy Sites

The focus of our field site recruiting efforts has shifted to building relationships with organizations in urban areas with high rates of hunger and poverty in communities of color, including New Orleans, New York City, Chicago, Boston, Los Angeles, and Oakland. We have also increased the number of field and policy projects specifically focused on the intersections between poverty, race and inequality. Examples from the 15th Class of Emerson Fellows include:

- Michael Richardson’s policy work at RESULTS, where he is working to recruit more volunteer groups in communities of color around the country and organize a day-long diversity training at the RESULTS annual conference.

- Sarah Custer’s work to address racial health disparities in New Orleans by working to increase access to healthy food in communities of color.
- Nico Quintana’s report on how discrimination and injustice against lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people impacts poverty rates in those communities at the policy site Center for American Progress.

The Emerson program has established new partnerships with policy site organizations focusing on racial justice and poverty, including the Joint Center on Economic and Policy Studies, National Council of La Raza, and Migrant Legal Action Program. We also encourage field and policy sites to address issues of oppression internally and within the communities in which they work, and provide technical assistance and resources on anti-racism. Some of our strategies as we work with partners have included:

- Changing field and policy site applications in order to gain more information about how organizations applying to host fellows address racism and other forms of oppression in their work.
- Redesigning orientation meetings with field and policy site supervisors to include discussions of the importance of openly challenging racism, sexism, homophobia and other forms of discrimination, and shared best practices for doing so.
- Recruiting sites with people of color in leadership positions and ensuring that Fellows work with supervisors of color.

Fellows

The Emerson Program has also made some changes to fellow training, selection, and recruitment. We have developed an intensive anti-racism curriculum and integrated it into all program training components—including field training, program retreat, policy training, and professional development days—and begun to expand that framework to include other forms of oppression, including sexism, classism, and homophobia. The views and voices of people who have experienced poverty themselves are incorporated into training sessions on hunger and poverty in the U.S. and a series of new training sessions exploring identity, privilege, and oppression are woven throughout the year of training. We also provide space for fellows to develop their own anti-oppression goals and encourage their ongoing intentional analysis of race and racism in all areas of training. Other changes include the selection of Fellows and host sites who share the Emerson Program commitment to anti-racism and the implementation of a new recruiting plan designed to increase the number of people of color who apply for the Emerson program.

Program Administration

A final critical area of change is that of how we administer the program. The program staff team has increased its class, race and gender diversity. Fellowship advisors are required to have a commitment to anti-racism and experience dealing with oppression issues so that they can be helpful partners with fellows as they work toward their anti-oppression goals throughout the fellowship year and beyond. Finally, to address class disparities, the living stipend has increased to a more reasonable level so that Fellows with personal experience with poverty are more likely to apply and/or be able to participate.

So What?

The Emerson Program commitment to anti-racism has had a tremendous impact on the program so far. Half or more of the fellows in each of the last 3 classes are people of color and we had the most

racially diverse applicant pool in the history of the Congressional Hunger Center for this year's incoming class. We have supported field and policy sites working alongside communities of color to end hunger and poverty and we have encouraged those organizations that do great work in communities all over the U.S. but that may not fully share our views on anti-racism to explore these issues and find common ground. As part of our work to address class issues, we have also significantly increased the number of fellows with personal experience with poverty. Most importantly, *we have provided the space for Emerson Fellows--the emerging leaders in anti-hunger and anti-poverty work--to explore these challenging issues together and begin developing ways to address oppression in their lives and in their current and future anti-hunger and anti-poverty work.*

What next?

The Emerson Program will continue to deepen our work around anti-racism and incorporate more fully other forms of oppression into the work of the program, including sexism, classism, and homophobia. To learn more about these efforts, please call Aileen Carr, Shana McDavis-Conway, Dara Cooper, or Jon Wogman at 202-547-7022.

¹Source: [Strategic Framework for Action, British Columbia Multicultural Advisory Council](#)