

Emerson Program Racial Equity Work

Overview

As we work to end hunger, the Emerson Program has a specific focus on equity. Our analysis of the problem of hunger in the U.S. is that poverty and inequality, particularly racism, are the conditions that contribute most to the problem of hunger in America. The expertise of our partners on the front lines of hunger and poverty and the experiences of many classes of Fellows in field and policy sites all over the country have helped us understand this. As we develop leaders to fight hunger, we strive to integrate racial and class equity into our anti-hunger work.

We do this for very practical reasons. The policies and programs that are really making a difference to folks experiencing hunger in the U.S. also address the racial and class inequities present in their communities, and such efforts are weaker when they don't.

Equity means that all people have full participation and access to the benefits and institutions of society and are free from discrimination. Given the existence of structural barriers to equity, achieving racial equity requires a proactive policy agenda that addresses racialized, classed institutional outcomes. Equity creates a path from hope to change. (Definition adapted from PolicyLink and whatsrace.org.)

The program's racial equity focus is action oriented and results oriented. We work to 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 all races and ethnicities a place to learn, thrive, and contribute.

Examples of program priorities and practices that advance racial equity

Field and Policy Sites

Emerson Program field site recruiting efforts build relationships with organizations in areas with high rates of hunger and poverty in communities of color, including New Orleans, New York City, Chicago, Boston, the District of Columbia, Tucson, San Diego, Jackson, and Oakland. We prioritize field and policy projects specifically focused on the intersections between poverty, race and inequality as we choose host sites.

We value partnerships with policy site organizations focusing on racial justice and hunger and poverty in communities of color, including PolicyLink, Center for Community Change, the Joint Center on Economic and Policy Studies, National Council of La Raza, and Migrant Legal Action Program. We also provide technical assistance and resources on racial equity to our field and policy sites and encourage them to address equity issues internally and within the communities in which they work. Some of our strategies as we work with partners have included:

- Collecting information during the field and policy site application processes about how organizations applying to host fellows address racism and other forms of oppression in their work, and using that information to help us select sites that share our focus on equity.
- Providing training to field and policy site supervisors on equity issues.
- Recruiting sites with people of color in leadership positions and ensuring that Fellows have opportunities to work with and be mentored by supervisors of color.
- Recruiting and highlighting the work of supervisors who are incorporating an equity approach into their anti-hunger efforts

Training and Advising Fellows

Emerson Program training features an intensive curriculum focused on race and class equity that is integrated into all program training components—including field training, program retreats, policy training, and professional development days. The views and voices of people who have experienced poverty and racism are incorporated into training sessions on hunger, poverty, and race in the U.S. Models of successful interventions are highlighted and discussed. A series of training sessions exploring identity, privilege, and oppression are woven throughout the year. We also provide space for fellows to develop their own equity goals and encourage their ongoing intentional analysis of racial equity in their fellowship projects and community work.

All Emerson Fellows receive a staff advisor to guide their work during the program; advisors have significant expertise as anti-racism activists, advocates and organizers. In advising Fellows, Emerson staff support the development of Fellows as leaders engaging in hunger work poverty work with an equity framework. All Fellows identify their personal goals for developing as racial equity leaders and work with staff throughout the year to complete those goals. Staff connect Fellows and their supervisors to alumni leaders across the country to help mentor and problem solve challenges their host community may be facing. Fellows also organize professional development trainings and other peer-learning opportunities for one another.

Impact

In our most recent alumni survey, 100% of the 2103 graduating Fellows reported that participating in the Emerson Program increased their knowledge of the connections between hunger, poverty and social inequality, especially racism, “to a great extent.” In a retrospective study of the five years of alumni who graduated 2004-2009, 78% reported that their current work focuses on racial equity or racial justice, and more than 40% reported that what they learned about racism and oppression through the fellowship had “a great deal” of impact on their work, studies, and other post-fellowship activities.

Half or more of the fellows in each of the last 7 Fellow classes are people of color and we had the most racially diverse applicant pool in the history of the Congressional Hunger Center for the 2014 incoming class. We have supported field and policy sites working in communities of color as they work to end hunger and poverty. We have also encouraged those organizations that do crucial local hunger work but that may not fully share our commitment to racial equity to explore these issues and find common ground, improving the quality of anti-hunger practice through critical interventions. 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 actively address inequities in their current and future anti-hunger and anti-poverty work.

“The program helped me realize my potential as a leader. As a person of color and a person who has experienced poverty first-hand, the program gave me the courage and skills necessary to utilize and share my experiences constructively with others to diversify the discourse of anti-hunger and anti-poverty.”—Emerson Alumnus, Class 15