The Lawrence Hall of Science
UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, BERKELEY

RESEARCH BRIEF

Working Towards Racial Equity: Exploring Systems Change in Environmental Learning

By Valeria F. Romero, Kelly Grindstaff, and Aujaneè Young

Introduction

Working Towards Racial Equity (WTRE), funded by the National Science Foundation (NSF-AISL Award #2005829), is a collaborative project of the Lawrence Hall of Science, Justice Outside, and Informing Change to develop and implement a model focused on building individual and organizational capacity to center racial equity in environmental learning organizations, with a particular attention to cultivating racially-just and equitable work environments for professionals who identify as Black, Indigenous, or People of Color (or BIPOC, as used below). The WTRE model draws on a *Water of Systems Change* *(Kania et al., 2017)* framework, which posits that in order to enact transformative change, organizational efforts must occur at three levels: structural (policies, practices, and resource flows), relational (relationships, connections, and power dynamics) and mental models (guiding ideological paradigms, values, and beliefs).

As part of the NSF-funded project, the Lawrence Hall of Science, in partnership and collaboration with Informing Change, Justice Outside, and WTRE participants, led a research study that aimed to understand how the WTRE experience shaped systems change and racial equity efforts. Utilizing a mixed-methods approach, we specifically were interested in understanding the varied ways in which the WTRE experience influenced:

(1) participants' perceptions about equity, inclusion, and cultural relevance in the work environment.
(2) organizational practices and policies related to equity, inclusion, and cultural relevance in the work environment. Which additional factors (e.g., organizational, contextual) contribute to or act as barriers to institutional change?

(3) the organization's capacity to support Professionals of Color to pursue or advance in leadership pathways in organizations.
(4) the varied ways in which professionals of color experience a sense of belonging to their organizations.

This research brief focuses on a case study component of this broader study, wherein we partnered with three organizations that participated in the WTRE project (hereafter referred to as "WTRE learning organization partners") and their staff communities to gain a deeper understanding of their racial equity journey. This research brief provides an overview of the purpose of this study and describes key learnings from each of our WTRE learning organization partners. We then offer a discussion of how these learnings contribute to both theoretical and practical understandings of systems change and racial equity in the field of environmental learning.

Program Context

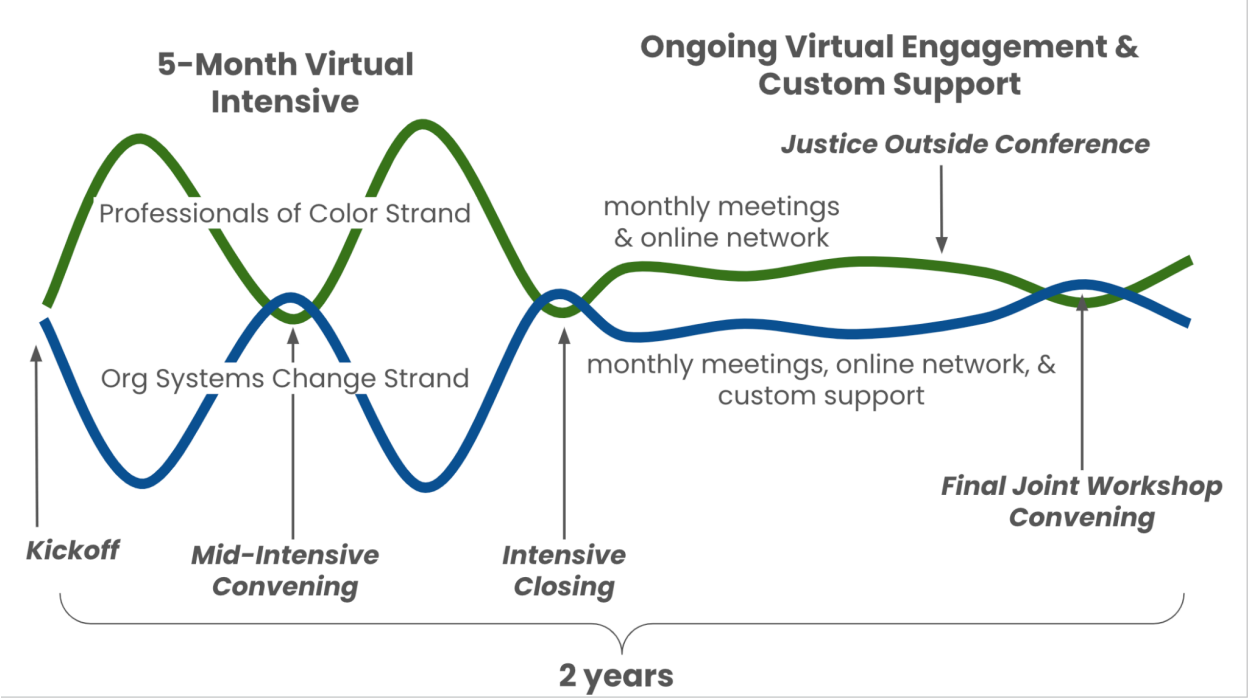
Working Towards Racial Equity is a capacity-building model that invites staff members from outdoor and environmental science education (OESE) organizations to learn about race and white supremacy culture (Okun, n.d.) as a means toward enacting organizational change efforts that center on racial equity and justice. While WTRE is a program that has iterated to a slightly different model, this brief is situated within a cohort-based model that operated from 2020 to 2023. WTRE engaged two cohorts of 10 organizations each (20 organizations total) over the course of two years. Central to this model were two strands of participation: (1) an organizational systems change strand (OSC), and (2) a professionals of color (PoC) strand.

OSC. The OSC strand was composed of teams of staff members from each organization who represented different departments, roles, and positions of power within their organization. It was also encouraged that there be representation across racial and ethnic identities, though not all organizations had professionals of color on their respective OSC teams. Together they would lead change efforts at the organization along with their colleagues.

PoC. The PoC strand was composed of any professional(s) of color at each participating organization. This group of people had distinct programming that focused on centering joy, healing, and liberation while working in predominantly white institutions. Although they could engage in change efforts with and/or be a member of the OSC strand team, this was not an expectation.

Participants in both strands engaged in a series of programming over the course of two years. Beginning with a five-month virtual series (with both OSC and PoC members), organizations then received ongoing coaching and support for 19 months. Over this 19-month

period, each strand (i.e., OSC and PoC) also received differentiated programming that aligned with the goals for each strand.



Study Design and Purpose

The purpose of this study was to explore the varied ways in which WTRE positions participants from various outdoor and environmental science organizations as well as their larger staff community to enact systems change efforts as a means toward advancing more racially-just and equitable work environments. Utilizing a case study approach (Hartley, 2016), the Lawrence Hall of Science invited three participating organizations to be WTRE organization learning partners. Specifically, the case study component was guided by the following:

> What evidence do we see of organizational change efforts attending to racial equity, as articulated by the *Water of Systems Change* framework? For example, do we see changes at the structural, relational, and/or mental models level(s)?
>
> (a) Which types of examples of organizational change do staff members identify as meaningful in advancing racial equity?
> (b) How does the sociocultural and organizational context of WTRE case site organizations influence change efforts?

Utilizing a qualitative, case study approach, the Lawrence Hall of Science partnered with each learning organization partner, beginning after their time in the intensive portion of the

workshop series (March 2022) to a few months after the final workshop event (October 2023). Throughout this process, we conducted a series of semi-structured interviews and focus groups, and then reviewed organizational artifacts (e.g., equity statements, policies that were revised, and action plans). Central to our approach was centering the experiences and perspectives of professionals of color working in these organizations, while also learning from the perspectives of staff across different departments, roles, and positions of power. Therefore we purposefully invited staff of color to participate in interviews and/or held focus groups that were specifically for staff of color in the organization. In addition, while we were interested in hearing from those who were directly involved in WTRE, we also invited staff who were not actively participating in WTRE to be interviewed so as to explore how they were observing or experiencing change efforts in the organization.

Guiding Framework

Working Towards Racial Equity draws on a systems change framework, The Water of Systems Change (*Kania et al., 2017, see Figure 2*), which posits that transformative change can only occur when change efforts happen at the structural, relational, and mental models levels. The structural level refers to policies, structures, and resource flows that guide the organization, such as HR policies, hiring practices, or compensation. The relational level refers to the ways in which staff members foster relationships and connections with one another and attend to how power dynamics impact their interpersonal interactions. The mental models level refers to the guiding values, beliefs, or ideologies of an organization or its individual people. This might include beliefs about the value and benefits of environmental learning.

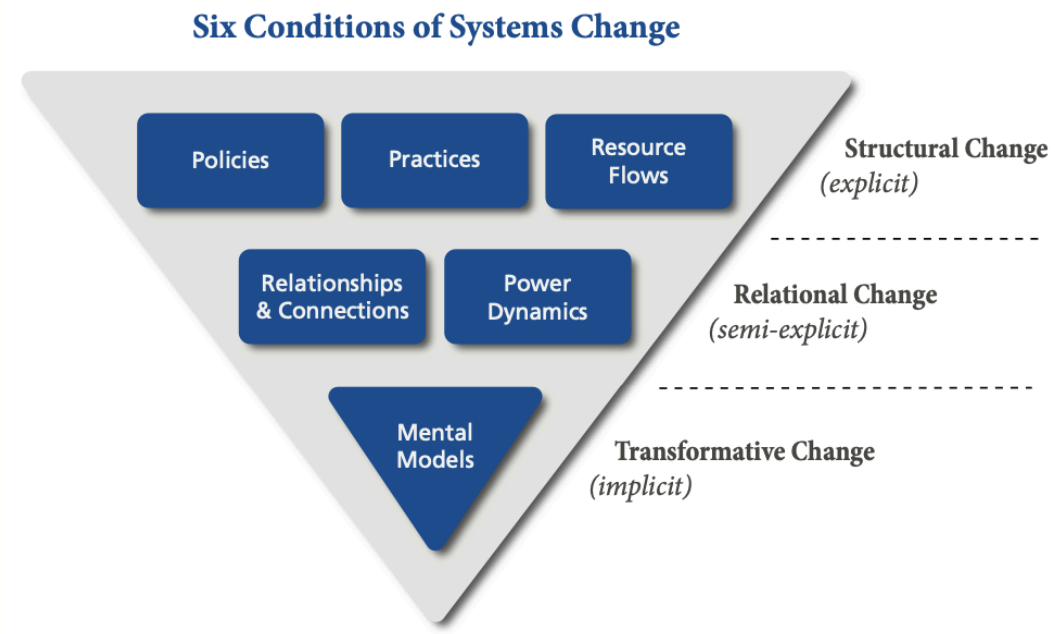


Figure 2. Water of Systems Change Framework, Kania et al., 2017 p. 4

In this study, we draw on the Water of Systems Change Framework as a guiding lens to deepen our understanding of how organizations both approach and enact systems change efforts. Given that this project is focused on racial equity, we also aim to understand how race and power might influence change efforts or individual experiences. For example, we are interested in how understandings of race might influence how teams frame or identify issues of inequity. We also are particularly attuned to how change efforts are impacting the experiences of people of color who work in the organization.

Organization Learning Partners

In this research study, we had three learning partners, each of which was situated in different geographic regions (and sociopolitical contexts) and had varying organizational features, such as the number of staff members,the programmatic focus, and leadership structures. Notably, all three organizations were white-led, nonprofit institutions with an executive director and a board of directors. Here we provide a brief overview of each organization from information gathered at the time of the study, some of which may have since changed since.[1]

[1] The names of organizations and individuals are withheld to protect the confidentiality and privacy of participants. We use gender-neautral pronouns of "they/them" to further protect the confidentiality of individuals.

Laurel	Tamarack	Juniper
• Small organization[2] • Primary focus is on restoring and promoting stewardship of local habitats through conservation research, restoration efforts, and education programs with youth, families, and community • Located in the West, in a Democratic state • Surrounding community is majority Latiné • White-led; 25% of staff identified as Indigenous and/or Latinx	• Large organization • Primary focus is on programs for youth throughout the state that promote stewardship of and joy in the outdoors • Located in the Pacific Northwest, in a Republican state • Surrounding community is majority Indigenous • White-led; 39% of staff identified as Black, Indigenous, or a person of color	• Medium organization • Primary focus on providing outdoor adventure and learning opportunities for individuals of all ages, backgrounds, and abilities • Located in the Southwest, in a Republican state • Surrounding community is majority white • White-led; 14% of staff identified as Black, Indigenous, or a person of color

Centering Equity in Systems Change: Key Learnings

Re-imagining Hiring to Center Inclusivity

One prominent strategy we observed at each of the case sites was addressing inequities and biases in hiring practices. Across each of these organizations, this effort was driven by a primary goal of addressing a desire to have a more-diverse staff that reflected the communities with which the organizations engaged, particularly communities of color. All organizations struggled with ensuring that their staff better represented the populations they were serving or wanted to better serve. To this end, all three organizations used their heightened awareness of race and their recognition of the need to hire more professionals of color in their efforts to focus on hiring practices, employee evaluation, and in some cases even compensation, as areas in which to make changes.

[2] Organization size is defined by small = fewer than 25 staff members; medium = 25-70 staff members; large = more than 70 staff members

At Laurel in California, much of the immediate community is Spanish-speaking. In efforts to be more representative of the community and then to respond to its needs, leadership at Laurel reevaluated and revised the education and community engagement responsibilities job descriptions as well as the hiring processes for these roles. This change was designed to both encourage and compensate Spanish speakers and also those with knowledge of and ties to this community. Whereas the policy change was directly connected to language (fluent communication skills in Spanish), in reality it was not just about the skill of speaking the language but rather was about the experiences and cultural knowledge that Black and brown Spanish-speaking staff bring to their roles in the organization.

In the Pacific Northwest, at Tamarack, similar policy changes were made as a result of growing awareness of the experiences of professionals of color in the organization and how race operates in the larger society. One professional of color in a manager position at Tamarack corroborated the need for these changes. They noted that they had witnessed judgments being made by white staff, based on limited knowledge of non-dominant cultural behaviors such as differences in communication styles or unspoken norms of interaction, thereby essentially applying a white lens to evaluate what is considered "professional behavior." This has critical consequences for people who do not fit within this dominant cultural norm or who do not bring experiences and expertise that may challenge this dominant culture. One staff member observed that this was inherently not fair and impacted the experiences of staff of color, asking:

> "Do we give everybody the same amount of chances? Would you be as hard on them if they were white?"

Tamarack staff felt that one positive step toward addressing some of these biases would be to revise job descriptions and processes to attract, hire, and then support individuals who shared Tamarack's values and mission. With input from professionals of color, Tamarack thereafter enacted changes to job descriptions, interview questions used in the hiring process, and onboarding practices.

Similarly, at Juniper, the Education Director worked with professionals of color to revise the description and venues for their job posting, in an attempt to make the description more welcoming to individuals with various types of expertise and certification levels, as well as to honor consideration of how people from different backgrounds access job postings (e.g., on free sites like Indeed as opposed to boards hosted by career networking organizations with paid memberships). While initially the staff felt that they needed to make their hiring practices more inclusive, they realized over time that this was only one aspect that influenced their efforts to recruit and hire more staff of color. Compensation, costs of certifications tied to positions, and affordable housing were also critical barriers for staff members who went to work at Juniper. As such, Juniper increased compensation for educators, and also covered costs associated with any required certifications. Given the site's location in a tourist destination, and the associated expensive and limited long-term housing options, Juniper

offered free housing at the Juniper-owned bunkhouse, something not previously offered to employees.

These shifts in policies and practices signify changes that can have real impacts on an organization's becoming more racially equitable. For instance, some Juniper staffers shared that while they were not aware that free housing and compensation were relatively new policies and practices in some organizations, they believed that compensation had played an important role in their decision to work at Juniper. At Laurel, staff also shared that the "pay bump" felt affirming, and validated the different ways in which they were contributing to the organization. In this way, these policies are creating more-equitable conditions where people felt valued for their contributions and were able to make a living wage. In addition, we also see how these policies affirm the humanity of the people who are central to carrying out the organization's mission.

While we see the positive impacts of these policy changes, leaders of the organizations shared that these changes came with many challenges they had to overcome. For example, federal policies (such as reduced emphasis on DEI in the current context) exclude hiring on the basis of demographic markers, like race, which "highlights the dynamic between wanting to do something that feels like an equitable practice, but then you have legal restraints" *(Staff member Laurel)*. This is a critical point of tension that many institutions must navigate, particularly in the context of the United States where we see sociopolitical conditions (e.g., the 2023 Supreme Court ruling that struck down the legality of affirmative action in college and university admissions, recent executive orders prohibiting federal funding being directed towards diversity, equity, inclusion work) setting some boundaries for what is possible. At Laurel, leaders had to carefully craft this policy to meet the needs of the organization to focus on the skillset (Spanish-speaking) and not explicitly tie the policy to race or ethnicity (e.g., Black and brown staff). One of the unintended consequences of this is that the policy can be interpreted in different ways that ultimately could still benefit White people and thus reinforce inequitable compensation gaps. Laurel's extra compensation for staff who speak Spanish also inadvertently opened the door for White people to continue to benefit from policies that are actually designed to repair historical racial harms and inequities. For instance, if a white staff member were to learn Spanish, then they presumed they would be eligible for extra compensation, even though they likely could not provide the desired knowledge, community connections, and shared experience. What this elucidates is that while an organization may make a structural policy change, this does not always mean that its individual staffers' mental models reflect a shared understanding of why such a policy is necessary. Thus, new policies could inadvertently reinforce the status quo. Therefore, to achieve desired outcomes, structural changes need to be accompanied by efforts that invite people to reflect on their mental models.

Even if laws and policies pose no barrier, changing practices at one organization does not happen in a vacuum. Enacting new practices may not be enough to "move the needle" on desired outcomes within a highly racialized society like the United States. At Juniper, the

changes to hiring mentioned above were aimed at increasing the number of professionals of color at the organization, which did not ultimately happen. However, the changes *did* succeed in significantly increasing the number of applications from people of color, which was a movement toward progress. For example, Juniper is located in a conservative, rural, tourist region of the U.S. In view of this, staff members often shared that there were many systemic barriers at play that influenced efforts to diversity the overall staff: (1) state-level policies that prohibited DEI language; (2) the high cost of living; (3) the lack of sufficient housing options, particularly those that were affordable. One professional of color at the organization also shared that they believed that the location and context of a rural and conservative climate like theirs, where no one or almost no one "looks like you," played a role in the declined offers. That is, while an organization may create job descriptions and compensation packages that are more-inclusive, broader systemic issues will continue to play an important role in whether the desired impacts of these efforts can be realized.

Overall, all three organizations worked in different ways to attract, hire, and keep more professionals of color. The real changes described above, as incremental as they may be, involved numerous opportunities for listening to professionals of color and then acting on their input. Coming to and enacting these changes were predicated on gaining deepening understandings of the varied ways in which white supremacy and race shape our collective institutional structures, policies, practices, and even everyday experiences. These examples are illustrative of the deep commitment held by leaders to center the experiences and value on the perspectives of professionals of color.

Organizational Infrastructure for Equity Action

Equity teams, or committees, are not a novel strategy within the work of equity, inclusion, and diversity. Across organizations participating in WTRE, we often heard about teams or committees that were made up of staff members with various roles and positions of power who were charged with moving the equity work forward. One of the main priorities of these teams involved developing an equity statement and an action plan–by naming specific goals and strategies that aligned with an overarching vision. Across case sites, many executive leaders noted that the establishment of these teams was a way to specifically direct resources (as in personnel time) to try to ensure that equity was a central point of focus for the organization. Further, by creating teams that had staff ranging across departments, roles, and positions of power, the organization was able to establish a "distributed leadership" team in which decision-making was a shared responsibility. Subsequently, establishing such teams was a critical structural change that intentionally redistributed resources (e.g., FTE) in ways that decisions could be made about policies and practices that guide the organization.

At Juniper, the development of its Inclusion Diversity, Equity, and Access (IDEA) team preceded WTRE. The team was assembled after the board passed a DEI policy articulating the organization's values, commitment, and recommended actions to promote a

more-equitable and inclusive work environment. Some of the named priorities included diversifying staff, leadership, and board members across all positions, thereby diversifying who was seen as the "typical participant" in Juniper programs; creating programs that were centered around equity and inclusion; and finally building up "staff comfort" so members could engage in difficult conversations around race. The IDEA team was able to adopt the organization's policies and then move forward on specific actions, which was their primary focus during their Working Toward Racial Equality journey.

Before designing specific strategies, the WTRE program pushed adopting staff to slow down and think deeply about the root issues that may be symptomatic of racial inequities. As a result, they could redirect their efforts to engage in readings and dialogue about race and equity so as to explicitly cultivate a process in which people could reflect on their own mental models about race. This conversation series, which came to be known as "Crucial Conversations," turned out to be a critical space of learning–one in which staff could not only engage in intellectual conversations in related to their work but could also share personal stories and experiences to give life to how some people were coming to understand the impacts of race and racism in the context of their own organization. Staff ultimately felt that this both was humanizing the work of racial equity—by giving them opportunities to shift their own ideas and beliefs and to learn from their colleagues—and had positive implications for the work they chose to move forward with. For instance, the conversation about hiring shifted from solely thinking about revising job descriptions to considering which specific policies and resources would actually be needed to ensure accessible and affordable housing for first-year intern staff members.

At Laurel, we also saw an interesting evolution of their equity team. In that organization, the team members had established what they called a "JEDI Congress" that was composed of the senior leadership staff, the majority of whom were white. In its inception, the establishment of that group placed the work of change on those with the most power and authority, with members subsequently holding that senior leadership accountable for enacting change. However, this initial structure had unintended consequences for Laurel's journey toward equity. For example, as a body responsible for moving equity forward, a concern was expressed that this structure would inadvertently privilege the perspectives and voices of white and senior staff, thereby simply reinforcing racialized power differentials. Further, when the "JEDI Congress" asked for feedback from staff of color, there was a perceived lack of trust that contributed to the feeling that the process was disingenuous and not truly centering staff of color.

In working with the WTRE program team, there was a recognition that the staff actually needed to take a step back and do some critical repair work, which led to a restructuring of the "JEDI Congress" and the establishment of a more-inclusive "Committee of the Whole." That committee then could comprise all staff, wherein the responsibility of advancing equity work would fall on everyone, thus cultivating a culture of learning, collective responsibility, and shared accountability. Further, the executive director allocated monthly all-staff

meetings–held at times when staff had protected paid time and were already expected to be present–for committee meetings. To this end, leaders were striving to shift racialized power dynamics to ensure that (1) the "JEDI Congress" work was in fact everyone's responsibility and (2) conversations in meetings were representative and inclusive of the experiences and perspectives of staff of color.

Overall, examples from these two organizations highlight that one of the most fundamental aspects of building an effective infrastructure for equity action is to consider in what ways these infrastructures are supported by a range of shifts in organizational conditions. First, at the structural level, establishing these teams requires a clear vision and a mandate that expresses the group's purpose and details which kind of authority members have to impact policies and practices. In addition, there need to be organizational resources that directly support participation–such as paid time. Second, at the relational level, there is a need to ensure that the structural efforts must also pay attention to relationality and power dynamics. In this way, observers must have mechanisms in place to interrogate whether the design of the team is functioning as intended. Power dynamics will always be present, so it is imperative that group leaders center trust, personal experiences, and relationality.Having consistent process checkpoints to gather feedback through members' own observations and experiences and through those of their colleagues can support iterating the structure in a way that is responsive in meaningful ways. Third, these infrastructures require building a culture of learning. It should become a culture in which staff can interrogate their own beliefs and values so they can shift their thinking to bring intentionality and shared vision to the work of their equity teams.

Elevating the Expertise and Leadership of Professionals of Color in More-inclusive Programming

All participants in the WTRE program are part of outdoor and environmental science education organizations. Some or even all of their work involves providing youth with experiences in the outdoors to learn and grow. All three organizations discussed here, as well as most (if not all) organizations involved in the WTRE program, were working to better meet the needs of the communities they serve, in addition to working to become more racially equitable workplaces. All three organizations had sought and allocated resources for diversifying programs in different ways.

As mentioned above, a significant driver of more-inclusive hiring practices was the goal of having staff better represent the communities with which they engage. As one staff member at Tamarack put it, with regard to youth, "I have to be able to see myself in [the camp staff]," and families also need to feel safe sending their children to the program.

> "People have to have someone they trust; who've been where they've been; who are also in a position of power and have a voice."

This sentiment speaks not only to having staff that better reflects the youth in their programs, but staff members that have the capability and knowledge to advocate for youth.

At Laurel, one of the most prominent changes was the ways in which the organization was prioritizing how they engaged with the Spanish-speaking communities in the immediate area. Two Latino male staff members, one working in Education and the other in Field Restoration, entered into a collaboration to plan and hold events directly in the community. The Restoration staff member noted that this was a new kind of opportunity for him, and one that he greatly valued. He shared that seeing the investment of time and resources, and also having the opportunity to work with the very community in which he grew up, cultivated a deep sense of belonging for him. Prior to Laurel's involvement with WTRE, engaging with the Spanish-speaking community was not always a significant priority for it, nor were significant opportunities available to engage in those kinds of collaborations. This new collaboration enabled staff to better enact their values of empowering the community to engage and connect with the land. Creating programs that align with these values was seen to be impactful for all involved—these staff as well as the youth they serve. In addition, staff members shared that they had a lot of agency and voice in shaping these programs, from what the programs look like to whom they are partnering with and engaging. In this way, the organizational leaders were not only demonstrating the value of community engagement but are also empowering and elevating the leadership of these two Latino men.

One staff member at Juniper described how they felt supported to bring her Indigenous perspectives and knowledge to the curriculum of the programs offered. Under her guidance and leadership, Juniper developed an Indigenous-focused outdoor experience in which most of the youth (~70%) participating in the program were Indigenous and, for the first time since the program started a dozen years earlier, 100% of the guides were also Indigenous. The staff member described the experience as incredibly positive and affirming for staff as well as participants. They commented:

> "I was surprised how much that program makes an impact on young native teens!"

In these examples, staff members' leadership was elevated because there was a clear recognition of the value of their knowledge and skill set. Under their leadership, programs were augmented or developed which played a significant role in better serving youth in those programs. In addition, the programs provided an avenue for Black, Indigenous, and People of Color staff to have access to leadership opportunities, which are not always prevalent based on the nature of their roles in organizations. Therefore, these case studies highlight the significance of and ways in which organizations can elevate and value the expertise, experiences, and leadership of BIPOC staff across various roles, departments, and positions of power.

Building a Culture of Learning through Values-Aligned Leadership

In the Working Towards Racial Equity program, one of the goals is to create distributed leadership structures so as to enable more-equitable and more-inclusive decision-making that can promote transformative change. As part of this work, however, the most senior leader in an organization, who ultimately holds the greatest power and authority, can have profound impacts on the possibilities of change. Across our three case sites, our research highlighted how having values-aligned leadership at the most senior levels can be a powerful lever as organizations try to enact systems change efforts. Within this study, we found that understanding how organizations approached systems change was tied to values-aligned leadership. Across each of the three case sites, the organization's leaders held a deep-seated commitment to both equity and justice. Yet, beyond this commitment was an understanding that in order to move the organization forward, it needed to be grounded in values of equity and a recognition that systems of power and oppression typically function simply to reproduce inequalities.

At Laurel, we saw evidence of a multitude of ways in which the executive director's and board chair's values of racial equity and justice played a critical role in their journey. Notably, both of these leaders were relatively new to their roles at the time the organization started participating in WTRE. Both understood how the complex history of their organization necessitated their building and then enforcing a deep commitment to racial equity and justice. As leaders, they believed that was an important first step to build a culture in which staff members were able to talk freely about race and had a similar understanding of how race had shaped the United States. Subsequently they read Isabel Wilkerson's book, *Caste (2020)*, to deepen their understandings of the historical context of race in the U.S. and how it reinforces hierarchical systems of power that cause great harm to Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC). In this way, the organization was inviting staff to build up their mental models of race—grounding them firmly in both historical and contemporary examples. Over 14 weeks, staff and board members read Wilkerson's book and held meetings to discuss their own insights about it and their subsequent reflections, allowing various staff members to facilitate the conversations. This process was led by the chair of the board, a self-identified Black woman with experience facilitating social restorative justice processes, who saw her role as being a person to support the staff community in engaging in the work. In a later interview, the chair shared that often we (as a society) can use the right terminology, but that *truly* centering equity requires *individuals doing the work*. In informal conversations with staff

members, a lot of people pointed to this being a foundational experience for them. This was a pivotal example of how values-aligned leadership supported the effort to create conditions in which staff could engage in collective learning.

In this same organization, members of the leadership might be among the first to name this work as difficult, fraught with many challenges and missteps. But part of bringing values-aligned leadership to an organization also means being willing to notice when things are going array and then slowing down the process. Values-aligned leadership can also mean leveraging one's own power to enact changes that are necessary, even when it seems impossible to do. For example, the executive director at Laurel recognized that historically, as a small nonprofit, compensation was an ongoing issue. One of the equity issues they wanted to specifically address was the compensation for Spanish-speaking staff. As part of addressing this issue, the organization underwent a compensation study that resulted in across-the-board raises, addressing historical wage gaps. Then the executive director also worked with the board to implement a policy that provided a pay bump for *all* Spanish-speaking staff.

As mentioned above, a challenge to this change was that federal regulations disallow policies that are based on demographic markers like race. These types of policy clashes can hold change hostage and contradict the very intentions of racial equity policies. Nonetheless, the executive director believed that this policy was important and ultimately was able to pass it with board approval because of the tie to linguistic skills. What is important to highlight in this example is that for the executive director, this decision was grounded in a valuing and recognition of the work that many of the Latinx, Spanish-speaking staff were doing. Their work not only was mission-critical but also was disproportionate to other staffers' work because of their linguistic abilities and the cultural knowledge they brought to the task. In this example, we can see how when leadership is grounded in the value of racial equity, it can elevate issues in sharper ways and thus be an impetus for various types of solutions.

At Tamarack, in 2022, a change in leadership was made in which the former rural camp director became the chief executive officer. Many staff later felt that leader's skills were integral to many of the changes they were noticing and experiencing. As a long-standing member of the staff community, the new CEO brought with them many experiences of learning both with and from communities of different cultures, so as to create programming responsive to their particular needs. Some staff made note of what they called the "de-siloing" of the Rural Program. One staff member previously had shared observations, calling the organization "*a white-led organization playing in an indigenous world, which had*

historically impacted the ways in which the organization was perceived by the community." But the experiences of the new CEO helped to foster a mindset to spearhead positive change. As one staff member put it, *"[they ask] why and questions policies,"* demonstrating that it was a culture where it was okay to question the status quo. This highlights the importance of leadership's setting the overall tone for the organization and putting resources into efforts to foster greater equity throughout the organization, including supporting the staff that would be involved in WTRE. This had ripple effects throughout the organization, in which staff shared that people in both leadership and administration talked about "becoming better at listening to staff" and engaging more staff on a regular basis. For example, based on positive feedback about the beneficial use of "affinity spaces" (including a rural program offering such spaces), Tamarack directed resources to continue to support them. There were more opportunities to take on leadership roles for staff as well. For example, Tamarack adopted a new practice of simply using a calendar for staff members to sign up to lead an event, rather than having to be chosen by those in power. This strategy intentionally tries to disrupt hierarchical power structures by recognizing and valuing the leadership that all staff members hold. One staff member noted that there had been a "big shift in leadership" that had resulted in younger leadership emerging in the last couple of years.

Across these illustrative examples, we can see how leading with values of equity and justice can play a profound role in the work of pursuing racial equity. Here we see how the leaders of these three organizations not only stated that equity and justice were important to the organization, they also "walked the talk." Their values guided a culture where risks were celebrated, where questioning the status quo was normalized, where collective learning was an integral part of the process, and where trust and relationality were central components of leadership. This is not to say that each of these organizations has *figured it out*–in fact, across all three organizations leaders shared the fact that things have continued to shift and evolve. While they stated they hoped that some of the changes would bring transformative impacts, they thought it remained to be seen how long-standing those changes would be. They also recognized that as people, programs, policies changed, the leaders themselves needed to continue iterating to respond to shifting and evolving conditions.

Implications for Organizations

Deepening mental models of race, power, and systems of oppression is a critical pillar to building one's capacity to engage in systems change efforts.

The WTRE program, in its design that is aligned with the Waters of Systems Change framework, emphasizes the importance of both using mental models and building up one's

equity lens to critically examine how organizational conditions may reinforce inequalities. Through WTRE programming, participants built their understandings both of race and of white-supremacy culture, which in our study were considered fundamental pillars on which systems change efforts were constructed. Staff at each organization identified issues they wanted to address, based on a belief in equity. Over time they began to see how inequities are deeply rooted in interconnecting systems of power and oppression, thus building their personal critical consciousness[3]-their understanding of how race, class, gender, and other sources of inequities are connected and thus require complex and innovative solutions. For example, efforts to diversify staff must consider how barriers to entry are tied to racialized ideologies of which kind of expertise or experiences an organization values, or even how generational wealth impacts who has the privilege to take on part-time or seasonal work. As we saw in the case of Juniper, hiring practices that are rooted in observed racial disparities are also connected to economic issues. Further, efforts must extend beyond recruiting and hiring to consider how the organizational culture is welcoming (or not) and also how or even whether it promotes experiences that affirm people of color. For example, building more-inclusive and decision-making structures requires giving explicit attention to interpersonal relationships and power dynamics, in ways that we saw at Laurel.

Notably, building up our personal equity-lens requires us as individuals to consistently interrogate our own beliefs and positions of power that are tied to our own identities or roles within an organization. This is necessary, as they can shape what we see (or don't see) as inequities within the organization. Across each of these organizations, we noticed varying degrees in which the organizational conditions were shifting to create space for having honest and difficult conversations about race. In a parallel study, a number of WTRE participants who identified as white had shared that their experiences pushed them to recognize their own "whiteness"–a meaningful point of learning, as they grappled with what it means to center race in equity work. Collectively, these learnings highlight the necessity of cultivating an environment in which staff can freely engage in critical dialogue about both race and other systems of oppression, in relation to their own experiences as well as to broader organizational change efforts.

Connected to the imperative for opportunities for learning, along with the development of a critical lens, is the need for articulation and acting on values that emerge or that are reinforced by that lens. The organizations described above were instructive in trying to walk the talk. Their staffers took time and provided resources to come to shared values and articulate those. Staff members came together, as part of their paid roles, to form

[3] Critical consciousness, in its most basic interpretation, refers to one's ability to understand and question how systems reproduce inequities, which is seen as foundational to disrupting the status quo. This idea stems from the work of Paulo Freire (and his conceptualization of *conscientiza*), and has been explored across different fields and areas of inquiry including education (for example in the works of Gloria Ladson-Billings; Django Paris and H. Samyl Alim; Bryan A. Brown; John Reveles, and Greg Kelly; and Tia Madkins and Maxine McKinney de Royston)

committees or teams with the purpose of suggesting changes to make the work environment as well as the work itself more racially equitable. For example, in valuing the ability to provide services to all their local communities, these organizations provided resources to hire, compensate, and support staff by furnishing them with skill sets that would help them provide meaningful programming to those communities. This was facilitated by leaders who provided those resources and thereby demonstrated the high value they placed on working toward racial equity in the organization. Leaders and the organizations they lead all need to "put their money where their mouth is" and provide the resources to support meaningful system change that is aligned to values.

Cultivating distributed leadership structures creates opportunities for more-inclusive decision-making but must attend to dynamic power dynamics.

One of the strategies to become more racially equitable in the WTRE project was for organizations to move toward distributed leadership. Certainly, efforts were made at each of these organizations to be more inclusive of the voices that were listened to and had input. Such efforts yielded a number of significant changes. Providing greater opportunities to listen to all staff, particularly staff of color, contributed to the organizations' changing some of their policies and practices, as with job descriptions, interview questions, compensation policies, programming priorities, decision-making, and so on.

However, there are real constraints and challenges to true distributed leadership. As noted above, the values and direction of those with the most power in organizations really matters. Power differentials do not disappear, even when more voices are invited. One staff member at Tamarack pointed out that there is a difference between "feedback" and "power." Even though more voices were invited and provided feedback, not everyone felt they had power to influence change. In addition, it can be a challenge to truly engage high-turnover staff, such as those people who work with youth in seasonal or part-time positions. So how do staff with less power truly feel free to share their ideas and experiences? We learned about moments when it is hard to balance soliciting input from some long-established staff against placing staffers with less power in a vulnerable position. Whose voices are *really* at the table, and are they the voices needed for systemic change? New structures and processes can still reinforce power differentials. But it remains to be seen which models of distributed leadership work the best, depending largely on the organization and the people within it. Those with the most power need to work to truly be open to learning, questioning, and changing. Certainly, employing inclusive decision-making that creates authentic and ongoing opportunities for people to feel heard can be a step towards building true distributed leadership.

Organizational change work is a process that relies on trust and relationships.

In this study, we saw that organizations typically started their organizational change efforts at the structural level–by first identifying a need to change a policy or an organizational practice, such as hiring. Across all three learning partners, revising job descriptions, evaluating recruitment systems, and changing who was involved in hiring processes were three common and effective strategies. Yet notably, one of the most significant points of

tension that we observed impacting organizational change efforts was related to building relationships and trust. In some cases, we saw that the history of the organization had led to a culture of distrust, where staff were not confident that change could occur. In one case, we saw that efforts to be more inclusive further marginalized and isolated staff of color. What these instances highlight is the ways in which equity work is relational—that it relies on building relationships and trust and also on creating an understanding of how each person is entering this work.

White supremacy culture places more value on intellectual thinking over emotions and feeling (Elliot, 2016), which can often inadvertently create a culture that fails to recognize the relational aspects of equity work. Instead, we might see efforts that are grounded in checklists and products. While actions are important, what these learnings highlight is that trust and relationships can make or break organizational change efforts. When we make intentional efforts to build trust and relationships, we begin to humanize equity work–seeing and valuing each other. Further, when we cultivate a process that is grounded in trust as well as relationship-building, it lays the foundation for the cultural change necessary for organizations to move forward in their equity journey, even when efforts don't always have the intended outcomes.

Organizational transformation efforts aimed at racial equity must attend to the emotional, physical, and mental well-being of staff of color, and must support their engagement in affirming professional spaces.

Within our case study research, our main focus was on building understandings of how organizations were enacting systems change to cultivate a work environment that both affirmed and valued people of color. While the organizations we studied demonstrated a great deal of change overall, we found it was imperative to recognize the specific experiences of people of color. At Laurel, for example, we saw that, while they were well-intended, change efforts like the "JEDI Congress" initially excluded the perspectives and voices of staff of color, thus further marginalizing and isolating them. At Juniper, we saw that while staffers made efforts to diversify new hires, candidates of color chose not to work there because they said it was located in a majority white, conservative region. And at Tamarack, while a culture was being built that enabled staff of color to share their experiences with their colleagues, that did not come without added emotional labor or even the risk of retraumatization.

In a field that continues to be majority white, there is a need to recognize that people of color must navigate predominantly white spaces on each and every day of their working and personal lives, which takes a great deal of unwanted emotional labor. There has been a great deal of work that articulates the value of having affinity spaces that are specifically designed for people of color, as a counter-space. In such spaces, people of color can better connect with each other and thereby create a new space where their needs and overall humanities can be centered and valued.

In a parallel study, it was found that a number of people of color who participated in WTRE shared that the "Professionals of Color" strand was a profound experience that supported building community and solidarity with other people of color and also explore what it looked like to feel and experience true joy and liberation at work. Some also shared that that created a space where they did not have to navigate "whiteness" in the same way they do on a daily basis. What this highlights is the importance of developing these affinity spaces for staff of color, particularly when they work in organizations that are actively on an equity journey. As such, it could be worth considering how to support staff of color so they can participate in these types of affinity spaces. Examples of such are People for the Global Majority in the Outdoors, Nature, and the Environment, Bay Area Environmental Educators of Color, and the Naturally Latinos and Taking Nature Black conferences. While there are a number of such spaces, there can be barriers to participation, such as cost or distance from one's location, which elevates the need to consider how to support participation, such as paying for registration and travel costs to attend an affinity-based convening or shifting workload to create the time and space for staff to attend. In addition, people may experience resistance from supervisors to attend these types of spaces because it may not be directly tied to their role. Providing paid time off could also be a source of support in these instances.

Change efforts must include a steadfast commitment to values of racial equity and to deep understandings of the social, cultural, and political contexts.

Each of these organizations cited above illustrates the imperativeness of grounding systems change efforts in values of working toward racial equity. This requires a critical lens to deepening one's understanding of how the social, cultural, and political context shape the racialized experiences of people of color. In addition, efforts must also attend to how people interact with one another, and in what ways they can help build a culture that prioritizes collective learning and values discourse about race. In each of these examples, we see how organizations drew on their values and overall missions to guide their change efforts.

Still, these efforts and changes did not go without their challenges. Organizations shared instances where they were met with resistance, or where some of the observed changes were instead reinforcing the status quo. Yet the organizations remained steadfast in their commitment to racial equity–embracing a process of reflection, being willing to admit when things were not successful, and responding and adapting as needed.

Many of these organizations recognized that creating systems change is not an overnight, one-size-fits all process. Rather, they needed to take time to build their understandings of staff experiences, as well as improving the surrounding sociopolitical context. That is, change efforts do not happen in a vacuum; rather, they are influenced by the sociopolitical context–such as the broader cultural values, practices, and beliefs of communities, as well as institutional ideologies and also the political landscape within which organizations operate. In many cases, organizational leaders found themselves having to navigate state-level and federal-level policies, such as anti-discrimination laws. These organizations demonstrate that there are ways to enact values-aligned change, even when laws and/or sociopolitical

contexts present barriers. Figuring out which policies, practices, or issues to take on, and how, depends on understanding one's own context and identifying what is most important and most possible in terms of change. This may mean having to make small, incremental changes that will lead to broader, more transformative goals.

Conclusion

Working Towards Racial Equity (WTRE) is a project that aims to build the individual and collective capacity of people who work in outdoor and environmental science education to cultivate more racially just and equitable organizations. As we finish writing this research brief, we find ourselves in a different context than when we started this study (or even when we completed a first draft in fall 2024). This moment is demarcated by executive orders and federal efforts attacking people, communities, and organizations that hold deep commitments to social justice and equity across different sectors, impacting those that are most marginalized. We believe that continuing to hold onto our commitment to justice and equity is more imperative than ever. It is within this evolving and dynamic context that we hope this brief can provide a source of motivation and solidarity for those who similarly believe that efforts to work toward equity cannot stop.

In this study, we have highlighted how three disparate organizations, each situated within different geographic, social, and political landscapes, were able to move their organizations toward racial equity. We do not intend this to be a blueprint; rather, one of the key insights we gleaned from this study is that there is not a one-size-fits-all approach to working toward equity. The issues within each organization, while related to broad themes like hiring and decision-making, are specific to the people in the organization, to its culture and values, and also to the sociopolitical context that surrounds it. While each organization encountered many challenges, and while in some cases their journey surfaced other issues or points of tension, this brief illuminates the breadth of possibilities of incremental changes that can move an organization towards its goals. Further, this study illustrates how issues of equity are never simple; rather, they are extremely complex and, therefore, they require complex solutions (connected to structural, relational, and even mental model changes).

In using the Water of Systems Change framework as a lens of inquiry and action, WTRE participants and their colleagues took a more-critical stance of inquiry from which they could surface how both observed and experienced inequities are rooted in systemic power structures like white supremacy, patriarchy, and classism. In addition, individuals in the study were able to deepen their capacity to engage in critical reflexivity— reflecting on and interrogating how internalized beliefs, values, and ideologies can further reinforce the status quo. In this way, this study highlighted how intentionally taking the time to build one's critical consciousness can be instrumental in advancing organizational change efforts.

We hope that this brief demonstrates how racial equity efforts are *collective.* While it is important for leaders—primarily, white leaders—to engage fully and leverage their positional power in this work, these case studies highlight how creating inclusive processes and elevating the leadership of professionals of color had powerful implications for the transformation of the organization. In this way, achieving racial equity is viewed as a process of collective responsibility–guided by deeply held values in both racial equity and justice.

Within this case study, we also recognize the time-bounded nature of this work. That is, organizations were working (and we were learning alongside them) over a mere two years. For each of these case sites, their leaders recognized they were just getting started–thus proving the longevity and iterative nature of this work. As such, our research team continues to embrace our commitment to inquiry and racial equity by finding new opportunities to continue exploring the conditions and indicators that are meaningful in racial equity work. We also have reached a greater understanding of how outdoor and environmental science education organizations are navigating the current federal landscape. In this way, we hope to continue elevating why racial equity work is mission-critical to environmental learning, to science education, and ultimately to our broader society.

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