

# IMPACT REPORT 2019–2024

The First Five Years of Training  
Emerging Environmental and  
Climate Justice Leaders



**AGENTS  
OF CHANGE**  
IN ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE

# A NOTE FROM OUR FOUNDER AND DIRECTOR

Back in 2019, I noticed there was a lack of diversity among thought leaders within the field of environmental health — especially for those who were driving conversations about science in the media and popular culture. I started working with Brian Bienkowski of Environmental Health News to use storytelling as a tool to amplify neglected voices. The first cohort of Agents of Change was launched a few months later.



From there, the program has grown and snowballed into something I could never have expected. We have created an amazing community of 57 dynamic, creative, justice-oriented scholars. Our published media has been viewed and heard by millions across the world. Our leadership team has grown and includes diverse experts in the field who work diligently to create an environment where our fellows can learn and thrive. What I am most proud of is creating the space where fellows can show up as their whole authentic selves. We are starting to see how investing in these individuals and giving them this unique training and community can induce systemic and structural change. We look forward to continue nurturing and growing our community and increasing the impact of our collective work on science, policy, and civic engagement.

To our fellows, supporters, and sponsors: your commitment to growing our program and your unwavering dedication to shaping the future of our field have been the impetus behind our achievements over the past five years. This report displays the outstanding accomplishments of each of you. I am truly grateful for your consistent support throughout this remarkable journey. Together, we are making a meaningful impact, transforming communities one step at a time.

With profound gratitude and excitement for the journey ahead,

Ami Zota, ScD MS  
Associate Professor  
Columbia University Mailman School of Public Health

# MISSION AND VISION

Our mission is to empower emerging leaders from historically excluded backgrounds in science and academia to reimagine solutions for a just and healthy planet.

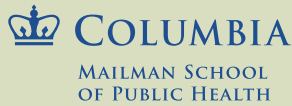
Our vision is to foster a new cadre of diverse and inclusive leaders in environmental justice who can help create systemic change by integrating the best available science and technology with the intergenerational knowledge of communities who have been disproportionately harmed by environmental degradation and historically excluded from decision-making because of racism, classism, and other systems of oppression.



# OUR APPROACH

Pictured: Timnit Kefela, PhD MSc. Photo Credit: Daniel Burke Photo & Video.

## Partners



Our institutional home



Our media partner

## Leadership



Leadership team with nine members, including program alumni, journalists, and experts in science communication and policy.

## Program Components



A fellowship to increase leadership, science communication, and public engagement skills among early career scientists from systematically marginalized backgrounds.



Amplifying our alumni's ideas and research as they work toward leadership positions in academia, government, nonprofit, and the private sector.



Multimedia platform to broadly disseminate the voices, stories, and research contributions of emerging environmental justice leaders in our program.

# FELLOWS BY THE NUMBERS

**57** Fellows

**5** Years of fellowship program

**30** U.S. cities



**14**

Fellows now in faculty positions

Affiliation during fellowship:



**75%**  
Academia



**9%**  
Government



**14%**  
Academia / NGO\*



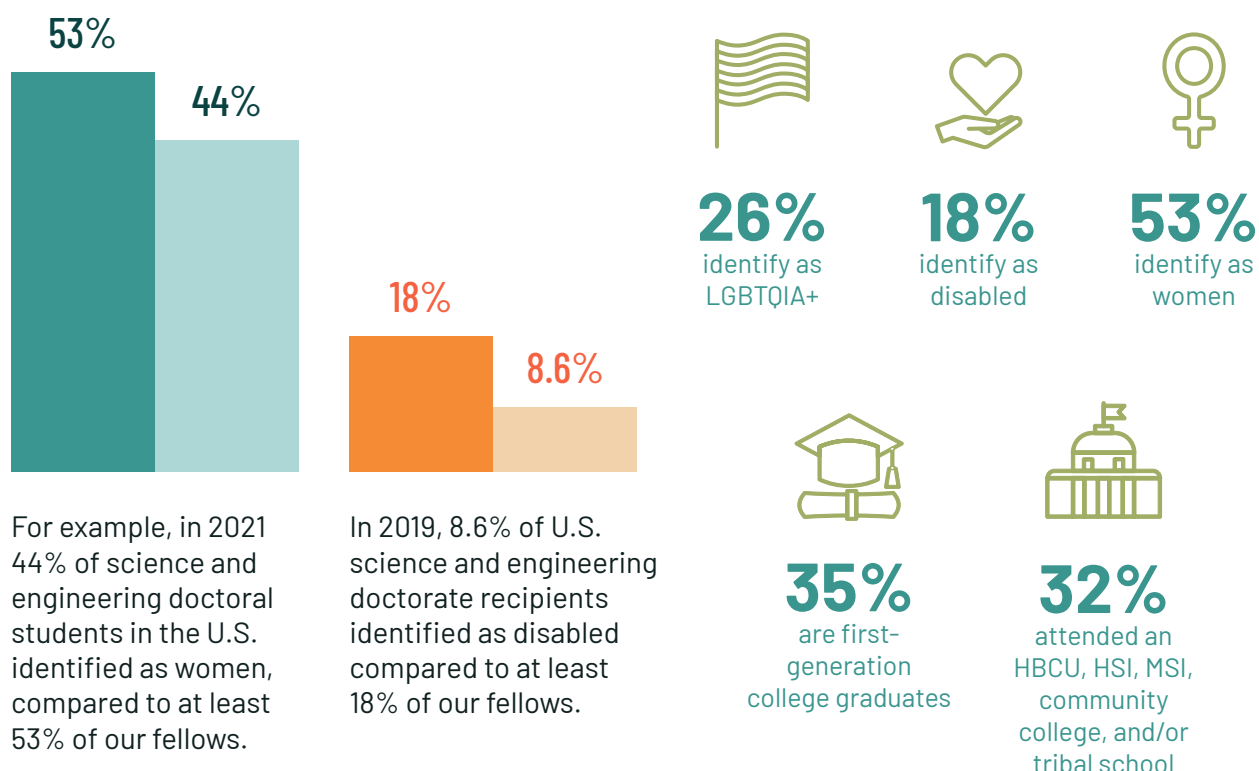
**2%**  
NGO

\* Indicates affiliations with both an academic institution and an NGO

IN OUR  
FELLOWS'  
WORDS

"Meeting people with very different lived experiences from me was super exciting and I treasure this; just having met them makes me think differently."

Fellows are also diverse in gender, sexual orientation, disability status, level of educational attainment in their family, and the type of undergraduate institution they attended.



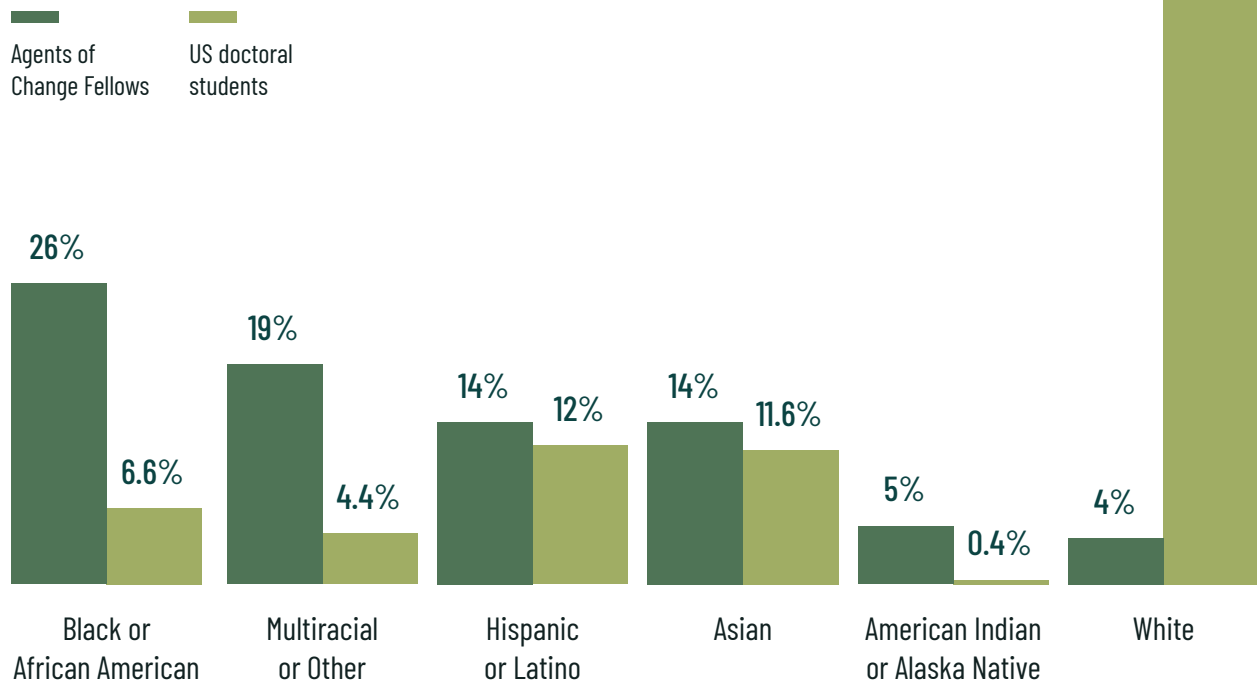
## IN OUR FELLOWS' WORDS

"I feel more confident than ever in my work, ideas, and ability to express myself. This program was transformative."

# IN OUR FELLOWS' WORDS

"There is no other opportunity like this that brings together like-minded scholars and focuses on communication and environmental justice."

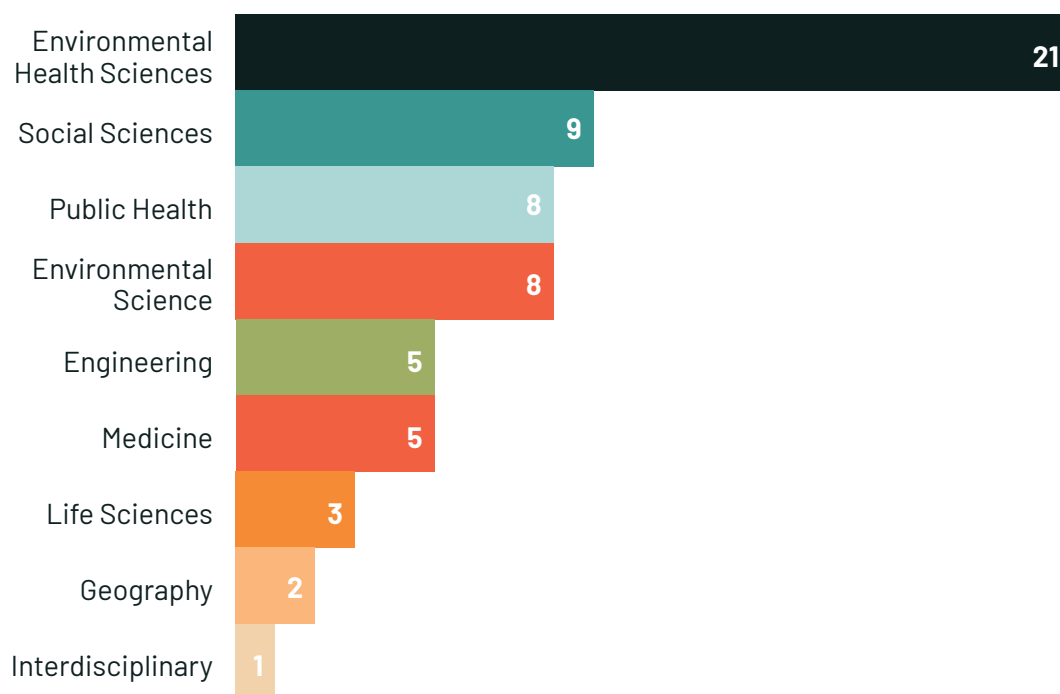
Our fellows are significantly more racially diverse compared to science and engineering doctoral students overall in the U.S.



U.S. doctoral students data from National Center for Science and Engineering Statistics, Survey of Graduate Students and Postdoctorates in Science and Engineering, 2021.

"Multiracial/Other" category for AoC-EJ Fellows includes multiracial only; for U.S. doctoral students, the term includes "Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander and more than one race."

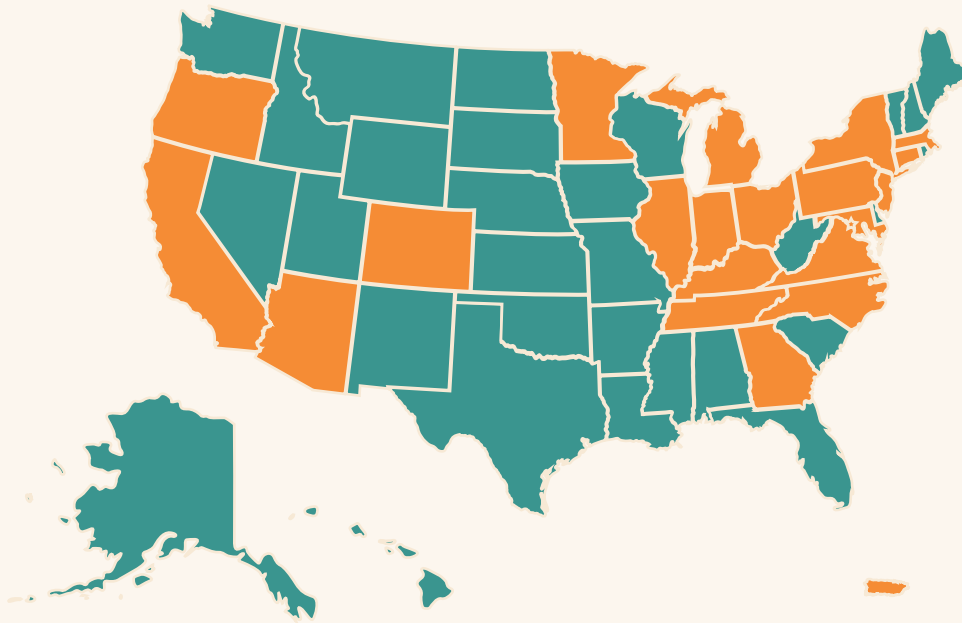
## Fellows' areas of disciplinary expertise



## IN OUR FELLOWS' WORDS

"Being in a carefully curated space with other scholars of color who are committed to advancing environmental justice and health equity has facilitated conversations and amplified perspectives that I rarely encounter in the spaces that I occupy on a regular basis."

Fellows were predominantly doctoral students (61%) and postdocs (23%), with our program attracting top early career scientists from public and private schools, government and NGOs across the U.S.



1. Arizona State University
2. AYA Research Institute
3. California Institute of Technology
4. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
5. Colorado State University
6. Columbia University
7. Cornell University
8. Educator Collective for Environmental Justice
9. Emory University
10. Environmental Defense Fund
11. George Washington University
12. Harvard University
13. Healthy Building Network (now Habitable)
14. H.O.P.E. (Humans for the Opposition of Pollution and Emissions)
15. Icahn School of Medicine at Mt. Sinai
16. IRRIGaTe (Irrigation Resources Reaching Indigenous Growers and Tribal entities)
17. Massachusetts Institute of Technology
18. Minnesota Department of Health
19. North Carolina State University
20. Northwestern University
21. Oak Ridge Institute for Science and Education
22. Ohio State University
23. Oregon Health Authority
24. Partners for Environmental Justice
25. Purdue University
26. Robert Wood Johnson Foundation
27. SUNY Downstate Health Sciences University
28. University of Arizona
29. University of California Berkeley
30. University of California Santa Barbara
31. University of Maryland
32. University of Massachusetts Amherst
33. University of Michigan
34. University of Minnesota
35. University of Pennsylvania
36. University of Puerto Rico
37. University of Southern California
38. Yale University



# OUR IMPACT

Pictured: Wellington Onyenwe, PhD, MPH. Photo Credit: Daniel Burke Photo & Video.

Environmental Health News publishes our fellows' ideas in narrative essays and a podcast that dive into the career paths, research, and big ideas from past and present fellows and other leaders in the field of environmental justice.



**100+**  
podcast  
episodes

**80k+**  
listens



**60**  
essays

**1.8M+**  
views

Our social media presence continues to grow in the quantity and caliber of our followers.



**1.9k**  
followers



**740**  
followers



**2.4k**  
followers

As of February 2025



**6**

Webinars with  
Collaborative on Health  
and the Environment

**21**

Fellows

**1,700+**

Views

Fellows undertake research that covers a breadth of topics in environmental and climate justice.

Their research focuses on different impacted populations and is published in high-impact journals that are influential in the scientific conversation – such as *Environmental Health Perspectives*, *Nature Medicine*, *American Journal of Public Health*, and *BMJ Global Health*.

### Fellows' areas of research, by keyword



Areas are sized proportionally to represent the number of fellows working in each subject.

We are injecting new ideas into the public and scientific conversations about the environment, health, climate and justice.

Major media outlets, including The New York Times, PBS, The Guardian, Civil Eats, Grist, The Conversation, The Washington Post, and Inside Climate News have featured our fellows and their work, and have quoted them as experts.

**The New York Times**      **The Guardian**

 **PBS**      **The Washington Post**

**Inside Climate News**      **Grist**

 **THE CONVERSATION**

IN OUR  
FELLOWS'  
WORDS

"I became more confident in my abilities to share my research and learned to find and use my unique voice in environmental health to advocate for change."

Fellows have also done important work that has impacted government agencies, as well as federal and international policy.



### **Government agencies**

- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention Environmental Justice Working Group
- Voices from Early Career Scientists, National Institutes of Environmental Health Sciences Partnerships in Environmental Public Health Conference



### **Federal policy**

- White House Environmental Justice Advisory Council
- Preventing Harmful Exposure to Phthalates Act
- Environmental Health in Prisons Act



### **International policy**

- First-ever Climate Justice Pavilion at COP 27

## **IN OUR FELLOWS' WORDS**

"I feel empowered to share my voice and challenge the status quo in research."



# FELLOW SPOTLIGHTS

Pictured: Kevin P. Patterson, MPH. Photo Credit: Daniel Burke Photo & Video.

## VALERISA JOE-GADDY, PHD

### JUSTICE AND COMMUNITY CONNECTIONS

When I became a fellow, I already had quite a bit of community engagement experience — but the fellowship fostered even greater connections with communities that other fellows work with and come from, who are all affected by environmental issues. The fellows are passionate about and dedicated to their work, and over the fellowship time that allowed me to build a deeper understanding of environmental justice across communities, a perspective I am bringing to the communities I continue to work with. Coming from an Indigenous community, it's very difficult to trust people, so it is valuable to be able to send someone to another fellow knowing they will be in good hands. My cohort of fellows still has a really strong bond.

Dr. Joe-Gaddy is the community conservation director at Watershed Management Group.



## LARIAH EDWARDS, PHD

### SCIENCE COMMUNICATION FOR CHANGE

As a public health scientist, I am doing this work to make change. Before the fellowship, I didn't have an example of how to do strong research and communication together in a way that would be accessible and motivating to a wider audience. Translating science for policy makers requires a deep understanding of how to explain technical issues very clearly. Working on the essay, podcast and with other fellows helped me sharpen writing and messaging skills that I am applying to policy translation. The fellowship helped me gain confidence in bringing my whole self to the work, which includes my lived experience combined with my scientific training. This leads to the most impact for change — in science, in advocacy, and supporting the most affected communities.

Dr. Edwards is an associate research scientist in the Department of Environmental Health Sciences at Columbia University Mailman School of Public Health and assistant director of AoC-EJ.



## ROBBIE PARKS, PHD

### PAYING IT FORWARD

The fellowship was invaluable to bring together the core of myself, my identity, with the research I do. It also helped me learn about the importance of connecting my research with advocacy for change and becoming more confident doing that. Because of this, my general approach has changed quite a lot — I now bring my whole self into what I'm doing. I'm currently teaching a course for graduate students, and I start with my background and sharing my essay and podcast, so they understand where I'm coming from. I tell my students, "I want you to feel like you belong here." The fellowship has lifted up people like me, who belong in academia, but don't necessarily have the generational tools to maximize success. I want to continue this legacy.



Dr. Parks is an assistant professor in the Department of Environmental Health Sciences at Columbia University Mailman School of Public Health and an NIH NIEHS K99/R00 Fellow.

## ALEXA WHITE, PHD

### STRATEGIC SUCCESS AND SELF-DETERMINATION

The fellowship had a big impact on my visibility. There had been nothing like this fellowship in the environmental justice space, and once people knew I was in the program, it brought me a new level of credibility and respect. Through the fellowship, I was also able to better articulate the connections between food, climate, and environmental justice, and how my work is positioned within these. For my career, I wanted to go to a different universe than where my advisors were thinking, and I realized I could actually work for myself, doing the work I wanted to do and achieve immense success.



Dr. White is the Think 100% Climate and Environmental Justice Policy Director at the Hip Hop Caucus and co-founder and executive director of the Aya Research Institute.

## **JAMAJI NWANAJI-ENWEREM, MD, PHD, MPP**

### **BUILDING BRIDGES WITH STORYTELLING**

Working on the essay and podcast as a fellow taught me how to adapt my story to different audiences in ways I had never thought about before. I've used what I learned about storytelling in projects with my nonprofit, Elnd, to meet people where they are — we've done a photo essay project with environmental leaders across Africa and worked with science students in Atlanta to use art as a medium to tell stories about environmental issues in their communities. What is always at the center of my work are human lived experiences and finding ways to highlight these.

Dr. Nwanaji-Enwerem is a Health Equity Presidential Assistant Professor of Emergency Medicine at the University of Pennsylvania.



## **CANDIS HUNTER, PHD, MSPH, REHS/RS**

### **BACK TO HER ROOTS IN THE GARDEN**

Before the fellowship, I felt a disconnect between my research, my job and my passions. My dissertation research was about soil contamination and community gardens. The program helped bring back that connection, integrate my personal story, and continue to build my story.

I realized I needed that on the ground connection with community, so I became a master gardener. I'm leading the youth garden at our local YMCA, teaching the kids about the importance of soil maintenance and cultivating the soil. The science communication skills I built in the fellowship allow me to have diverse ways of communicating science in service to community — whether that is in government or in the garden.

Dr. Hunter is a scientific program official at the CDC National Center for Injury Prevention and Control (NCIPC) and an environmental health officer in the US Public Health Service.





AGENTS  
OF CHANGE

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COLUMBIA

MAILMAN SCHOOL  
OF PUBLIC HEALTH

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