

Nomination for the ITGA Presidential Excellence Award.

Nominee: Cornell University Office of Community Relations

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Working on race and town-gown relations, over the long haul

Over several years, Cornell University's Office of Community Relations has quietly developed collaborative and progressive initiatives tied to race, equity and diversity, under a broad and inclusive town-gown umbrella.

Its work has gone beyond financial and human support of local organizations and events with diverse agendas and missions, to include institutionalized resources and groups that have become part of Cornell's and our community's fabric.

Its efforts have revolved around creative and consistent media, and proactive meetings, neither one of them one-offs in response to a crisis, but tools that are used for work and connectivity on a daily basis.

Active media

In 2008, a series of race-related incidents in Ithaca led to important community forums organized by Cornell and the Tompkins County Chamber of Commerce. Among many initiatives discussed and developed was the need for more proactive and consistent media. With the support of the Chamber of Commerce and Cayuga Radio Group, Cornell Community Relations created and took ownership of two projects:

* Writing and producing a series of public service announcements that won a New York State Broadcasters Award. The 15 PSAs (including one in Spanish,) concluded with the tagline, "The Business of Tompkins County? It's Equity", and featured an exceptionally diverse collection of local leaders from the public, non-profit, and private sector, as well as high school students.

* The weekly radio show "All Things Equal", that made its debut in August 2008, and airs on Tuesday mornings. This award-winning show - produced by Cornell's Office of Community Relations and broadcast on WHCU – touches on everything from K-12 equity strategies, to local affordable housing and employment challenges.

Over the years, it has been a steady resource for everyone of every background in Tompkins County, and provides an opportunity for measured, 15-minute conversations on sensitive issues that weren't condensed into soundbites that can divide or dumb down, but rather nurture and forward.

Podcasts from recent shows, here. This is updated on a weekly basis. Shows this winter and spring will include an interview with local Muslims, and their story on developing a

community in Upstate New York, and more on “Black Lives Matter.” (First show on this topic aired Jan. 5, 2016.)

<http://whcuradio.com/podcasts/categories/podcasts-equal/>

All Things Equal” was previously nominated for the National Association of Broadcasters Education Foundation's (NABEF) Celebration of Service to America Award by a coalition of community members.

* Occasional projects over several years on "Cornell Cast" that touch on diverse issues past and present, including an award-winning show on how the Willard Straight Takeover in 1969 impacted local residents. <http://www.cornell.edu/video/witness-the-willard-straight-hall-takeover>

And perhaps most importantly, a quiet meeting

The Local Leaders of Color Group, co-chaired by the director of a local community center that serves a largely minority, low-income community, and Cornell's president, formerly David Skorton, now Beth Garrett, was created in 2006, shortly after Dr. Skorton's arrival, at the request of Community Relations.

The request for meetings with this group was made in order to discuss any given (and frequent) town and-or gown race-related controversy in an established venue, rather than forging relationships - and related communications - in a crisis.

Another goal for these sessions is to regularly forward shared challenges and opportunities, and to develop related and potential collaborations.

It has proven to be a valuable resource, especially with potentially contentious issues, as was the case during program and personnel changes at the Africana Studies and Research Center. The group held three separate sessions tied to Africana alone, which included the provost, several vice presidents, and President Skorton, who only missed one meeting since 2006.

Today, the Local Leaders of Color group includes representatives from the Ithaca Asian-American Association and the Latino Civic Association, community center directors, clergy, businesspeople, leaders from city and county government, and other non-profits.

Article on this initiative, written prior to President Skorton's departure.

<http://ezramagazine.cornell.edu/FALL14/PeopleFeature.html>

In 2015, Cornell University's Office of Community Relations was recognized with the Martin Luther King Jr. Peacemaker Award by Ithaca's Community Dispute Resolution Center for developing this group, as well as other daily, effective town-gown initiatives.