



# An Overview of the Wallace Center's Journey Toward Becoming a Multicultural and Anti- Racist Organization

November 2020

The Wallace Center commits to centering anti-racism, racial equity, and inclusion in our programs, operations, and culture. This is both a personal and organizational journey for our staff. As a white-led organization – both historically and currently – we undertake this work with a sense of humility and from a position of learning rather than knowing. This is an ongoing process, and we strive to make consistent steps – however small – toward fulfilling our commitment to racial justice and equity. We will make mistakes and rely on the honest feedback of our community as we work to become an authentic anti-racist, multicultural organization. This document provides a summary of the Wallace Center's journey

thus far toward centering racial justice and equity in our organization in a meaningful, authentic, and accountable way as embodied in our [racial equity commitments](#).

## Background

For the last several years, the Wallace Center has been undergoing an internal transformation to center racial equity in our program work, organizational operations, and internal culture. This process started in earnest in early 2017, when Wallace leadership started to shift and grow, new personnel joined the team, and we decided together that it was necessary to reexamine Wallace's core values and systems change strategies. There was an increasing realization by the staff that the Center's work was largely disconnected from a deeper analysis of racism in U.S. agriculture and food systems, and that the internal culture of the organization exhibited and perpetuated [characteristics of white supremacy culture](#). Although Wallace Center had enjoyed a strong reputation as a leading research and technical assistance provider, the lack of a racial equity lens was increasingly notable in our programs and culture. Wallace also started receiving feedback from some of our long-term partners and funders who had observed

this disconnect, advising the Wallace Center to reexamine and improve our efforts.

Guided by this internal and external awareness, the Wallace Center reached a watershed moment. Without question, our hearts and minds compelled us to acknowledge our past inaction and make concrete commitments to become a [fully inclusive, actively anti-racist multicultural organization](#)

In early 2018, the Wallace team launched a Racial Equity Committee to develop an action plan and quickly realized that external support was needed for fundamental professional and organizational development. We took stock of our programs and culture and realized we had a long way, and lots of concrete steps, to go in order to reach our goal of being fully inclusive and actively anti-racist as defined by the Crossroads Community Ministry. This culminated in a Fall 2018 all-staff training provided by [The Justice Collective](#) (TJC). This two-day intensive was deeply transformational for the Wallace Center, both individually as well as a team, as we examined our biases, reflected on how we perpetuate white supremacy culture, and practiced tools for centering equity and inclusion in our relationships and our work. It became a catalyst for Wallace's operationalizing of racial equity in our programs, operational processes, evaluation metrics, and internal culture.

After our training with the Justice Collective, we started to focus on building racial equity practices into our regular operations. At first, this felt like a huge hurdle, but the staff was inspired and dedicated to making improvements based on TJC's input and our own goals and aspirations. Through many iterations and attempts, we developed several actions and strategies to help us work towards a new culture that centers empathy, creates space for vulnerability and growth, and evolves our shared understanding of how critical racial equity is to our work and vision. These strategies fell into a few categories:

- Education, connection, and culture
- Hiring and HR
- Outreach and communications
- Programmatic actions

Wallace Center's racial equity work is supported by standing Racial Equity All Staff meetings each month, as well as racial equity working groups that meet monthly to forward Center's commitments.

## Education, Connection and Culture

Through our training with TJC, we learned that empathy, humanity, and humility were at the heart of dismantling white supremacy. We also learned that there was a range of knowledge within our staff about the history and current reality of racism, as well as a range of comfort levels in communicating about these systems and concepts. Wallace staff has participated as a group in the [21-Day Racial Equity Habit Building Challenge](#) in 2018, 2019 and 2020. After our participation in the 2018 21-Day Challenge, we instated bi-weekly Racial Equity Coffee Chats to continue our collective education and strengthen our individual muscles talking about race and racism. Staff rotate facilitation of coffee chats, select the topic to explore and provide a few resources. Past topics have included white supremacy culture, *Pigford v Glickman*, intersectionality, and redlining.

### Wallace Center Racial Equity Priorities from TJC Training

1. Ground truth our strategies & processes with our Black, Brown, and Indigenous partners.
2. Address hiring bias that prioritizes experiences disproportionately available to white people.
3. Partner with Food Systems New England to adapt [21-Day Racial Equity Challenge](#) for a Wallace cohort approach.
4. Publish a highly visible [Wallace Center racial equity statement](#).
5. Strengthen relationships and prioritize recruiting new staff from HBCUs.
6. Generate dedicated funding for racial equity professional development and programs.
7. Create workplace opportunities for peer-to-peer dialogue and skill sharing on racial equity topics.
8. Support staff training and opportunities for individuals to lead internal racial equity work.
9. Support BIPOC leadership in positions of power internally and externally.
10. Include equity in proposal design and make it part of a consistent checklist: we must measure and track our progress.
11. Operationalize tools and approaches for centering racial equity in all aspects of Wallace Center (e.g. partnerships, funding, metrics, etc.)

The chats create space for sharing personal

experiences, building relationships, developing a shared vocabulary, and expanding our understanding of the role of race and racism in our work and our lives. They are optional, but more than half of the staff attend nearly every time.

After our training with TJC, we conducted an honest assessment of our internal organizational culture using Tema Okun's seminal piece on the [characteristics of white supremacy](#) in the workplace and Crossroads Ministry Chicago's [Continuum on Becoming an Anti-Racist Multicultural Organization](#). This process revealed pervasive behaviors, patterns, structures, and operational shortcomings that were obstacles to our progress. This included an over emphasis on urgency and perfectionism, as well as tendencies towards defensiveness, worship of the written word, and power hoarding. Through a series of all-staff conversations, we began developing working cultural agreements to help us 'walk the talk.' We began by naming behaviors that contribute to the human-centered culture we want to create and the 'taboos' that violate it or reinforce patterns we want to disrupt. For example, a minor but valuable practice we've employed is instating personal check-ins at the start of almost every meeting. Check-ins have become a tool we use to lead with humanity and connect as people before we dive into the business at hand.

Generally, we continually work to educate ourselves and each other to identify blind spots, sharpen our understanding of how racism is perpetuated or disrupted through organizational culture, and become better allies through action. To support our continual learning journey, we formed a working group exclusively focused on staff professional development around racial equity in mid-2020 to lead the identification and resourcing of relevant capacity building for the team.

## Hiring and HR

One of the most glaring barriers to the Wallace Center becoming a multicultural, anti-racist organization is the racial makeup of our staff. Wallace's full-time staff at the time of our training with the Justice Collective was all white. We started to examine the internal and external forces that led to this lack of racial diversity on our staff, including our hiring and HR processes and the ways we evaluated candidates for open positions. We've come to better understand the nuances of why that is – including a history of using low-paying internships as an on-ramp to becoming an employee, the lack of targeted outreach to potential candidates of color, and our hiring team not being conscious of biases and blind spots around race and

equity. Though turnover at Wallace is low, we knew that diversifying our staff is essential to our strength and effectiveness as a mission-driven organization. When hiring opportunities arose, we researched how to design a process that minimized opportunities for bias. This included standardizing our position descriptions and including salary information in job postings. We also revised our promotion and interview processes to ensure fairness, balancing lived experience with professional experience, considering an individual's full professional "runway," and scoring candidates privately to minimize influence from peers and supervisors.

In 2019, we hired two people of color, but – for different reasons – neither remained with the Wallace Center. We are using these departures to reflect on how we can better structure our hiring, onboarding, and team management processes to ensure that people of color feel safe, valued, and supported on the Wallace Center team. This continues to be a significant area of growth for us and one that the Wallace Center has been engaging with our parent organization, Winrock International, to resolve. In mid-2020, we convened a dedicated racial equity working group and developed a specific process for the Wallace Center's hiring process to support continuous improvement as we work to diversify our staff.



### Lessons Learned from 2020 Staff Departures

- New staff need at least 12 months to adjust – especially people of color, and supervisors.
- New staff can struggle to navigate Wallace’s complex and, at times, unrealistic workloads.
- Wallace struggles with identifying and addressing where new staff need support.
- Communication channels aren’t always clear at Wallace, creating confusion and exclusion.
- Wallace staff still have racial blind spots, biases, and commit microaggressions that need to be addressed.

### Recommendations for Next Steps

- Undertake consistent individual and organizational racial equity professional development.
- Create a strategic plan that is rooted in dismantling white supremacy, internally and externally.
- Strengthen hiring process to check for implicit bias and be more inclusive of staff perspectives.
- Develop more clearly defined systems, roles, and processes to support new and established staff.
- Focus on success during new staff on-boarding by setting achievable goals and providing mentorship.
- Earmark funding for a formal mentorship program for staff of color during on-board and beyond.
- Commit to regular Wallace-wide and team-specific team building to support relationship development, collaboration, and shared visioning, particularly when new leadership is hired.

## Outreach and Communications

The majority of our work in the early days after our racial equity training was internal as we developed a common understanding of racial equity, functioned together in centering racial equity, identified areas for shared learning, and altered our practices to be more inclusive. However, we also recognized that we needed to engage with our community to actualize, improve, and be held accountable for any racial equity commitments we would make. At the Wallace Center’s 2018 National Good Food Network (NGFN) Conference in Albuquerque, New Mexico, we made a public commitment to our community that we would be dedicating time and effort to becoming a multicultural, actively anti-racist organization. We chose to do this both to share our intentions and to ask our friends and colleagues to hold us accountable. We started the process of creating a public-facing commitment to centering racial equity by reviewing peer organizations’ racial equity statements and then collaboratively crafted a set of [Racial Equity Commitments](#), which we shared at the 2020 NGFN Conference, and continue to hone and operationalize. These commitments guide our program teams as they build partnerships, identify needs, design projects, and evaluate impact.

We also came to realize that, in general, the people applying to participate in Wallace Center programs, those taking advantage of our technical services, and those collaborating with us were largely white. We started examining the causes of this phenomenon, and realized it was potentially because we were communicating with predominately white networks, using language that might not have been inclusive, and offering opportunities that were not welcoming to

people of color, or did not engage directly with race and racism. In order to address these concerns, we started to create relationships with Black, Indigenous, and POC-led networks so we could share our opportunities with a more diverse group of people. We also have added and communicated specific anti-racist foci to in-person events like leadership retreats and learning journeys. Furthermore, as an organization with lots of communications products and a large network, we realized the power that we had to center and highlight leaders of color. We have made an intentional commitment to using our communications tools, notably our newsletters, webinars, and social media, to uplift the work of leaders of color. To codify this, we have developed a specific process for planning, releasing, and evaluating our communication processes and products to counter systemic racism, recognize BIPOC leadership, and lift up efforts to build collaboration on racial equity in agriculture and food systems. This process is integrated into a larger racial equity toolkit created by a dedicated racial equity working group.

## Programmatic Actions

We balanced our internal and operational work with a commitment to designing our programs and projects using a racial equity lens. This began with a process initiated by The Justice Collective training that resulted in Wallace’s initiatives developing racial equity action plans outlining how they would take steps to ensure that their programmatic activities included a racial equity lens. While the plans varied from initiative to initiative, they included many cross-organizational priorities such as working to hire

contractors of color, prioritizing BIPOC voices in our communications, developing equity criteria for grant proposals, and revising our project design process to build more meaningful relationships with BIPOC-led organizations and communities. One key learning from our training with The Justice Collective is you can't manage what you don't measure. This led us to start consistently collecting demographic data for our events, and applications for programs like our Fellowships and training, so we could track our progress in increasing the racial diversity of the people using our services.

Diversity in and of itself is not the goal. We are also learning to use our financial and communications resources, and our social capital with funders and other majority-white organizations, to recognize and remunerate the essential BIPOC contributions to the movement for a more just food system. We have sought out and compensated BIPOC webinar presenters, hired more BIPOC contractors and vendors, and aim for majority BIPOC participation in programs like mentorship, retreats, and learning journeys whenever possible. Furthermore, in 2019 we reoriented our Food Systems Leadership Network (FSLN) Fellowship program to directly support three BIPOC leaders in [Equitable Food Oriented Development](#) to raise awareness of this community wealth building practice. This refocused program supported these leaders to devote more time to movement building by presenting at multiple events and contributing to the EFOD Steering Committee.

We recognized that the 2020 NGFN Conference was a huge opportunity to show our community that the commitment we made at the 2018 conference had yielded a meaningful shift in our culture and operations. The effort to build an inclusive conference began in earnest in late 2018 when we convened a Conference Advisory Team that was racially diverse and included several people with expertise in operationalizing racial equity. We also sought out a local host partner that had a strong racial equity lens to their work. The Advisory Team and host partner, Propeller, provided extensive input on the Conference theme and marketing language to ensure that we were explicit about our commitment to racial equity. We chose presentations that addressed equity issues and ensured that presenters were racially diverse. We also made a conscious effort to partner with businesses owned by people of color for conference services like photography, printing, and transportation, and offered nearly 50 scholarships to the Conference prioritizing local leaders of color.

We still have a lot to learn about making our conferences and events more equitable. First of all, the cost to attendees is prohibitively high in many

cases. Though we offered discounts, scholarships, and early bird prices, the regular ticket cost \$495. This price tag, plus the expense of traveling to a conference, meant many small, low-resource organizations couldn't attend, and therefore their perspectives were left out of the Conference. Wallace is continuously grappling with the dual pressures of ensuring that the Conference is accessible, and being able to provide local food, fairly compensate our speakers and vendors, and host the event in exciting, interesting locations like New Orleans that tend to be more expensive. Furthermore, there are a few steps we'd like to take in 2022 to make the Conference more welcoming and inclusive, such as offering translation services and childcare.

## Looking Forward

With the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020 and multiple murders of individuals in BIPOC communities at the hands of police, the Wallace Center recognized that our journey toward understanding and centering racial equity would be challenged to evolve and accelerate. Building off our [Racial Equity Commitments](#), we are shifting our organizational approach to engage every staff member through working groups in order to maintain accountability and continue progress towards our goals.

The Wallace Center is also actively developing an

### Wallace Center Racial Equity Working Groups

- Continuity and Culture
- Metrics and Tools
- Professional Development and Funding
- Wordsmithing and Communications
- Winrock and Institutional Change

advisory group that will – in part – help advise the organization on how to deepen its commitment and action on racial equity. The Wallace Advisory group will include diverse and critical perspectives to help inform the organization's mission, strategies, and day-to-day activities. This group will also help us build opportunities to meaningfully partner and collaborate with BIPOC-led organizations.

Shifting the Wallace Center's culture and practices to be more attractive and supportive of BIPOC professionals will take time and dedication. Through increased professional development and improved processes, the Wallace Center is committed to taking responsibility for creating an open, inviting, and accountable workplace so that the burdens of internal

education and implicit bias do not fall disproportionately on BIPOC staff. We're also working to take more responsibility to use our learning journey to reach other – predominantly white – audiences on the topic of racial equity in agriculture and food systems. We are seeking additional professional development training to further refine and improve our approaches towards equity and becoming more effective with tougher audiences such as within our collaborations in the meat and dairy industries.

As a national intermediary organization (one that regrants funds and sub-contracts extensively), we are aware of the power dynamics inherent in seeking and deploying funding and other resources. Still, we have more to learn in this area to act in a more equitable way consistently. One area of focus for 2020-2021 will be around developing a power analysis. As part of this, we are also aware that how we procure goods and services can reinforce or correct systemic racism and exclusion. We are committed to shifting our procurement to reflect our racial equity commitments.

As can be seen from our three-year-old journey thus far, there are many ways to commit to racial equity and develop strong systems, processes, and spaces to deepen and grow this work. If there is anything that we have learned during this process, it's that it requires a long-term commitment, developing a learning mindset and culture, and holding ourselves accountable. Statements of solidarity and support are important, but they are largely optical- the follow-up and action are most meaningful.

fundors, partners and staff about the lack of racial equity analysis in our work.

**2017:** New staff join Wallace Center and help current staff in raising the importance of racial equity in systems change and food systems work. During a strategic planning retreat, Wallace Center conducts an internal review of our status on the Anti-Racist Multicultural Organization Continuum. Wallace Center staff participate in 21-Day Racial Equity Challenge. Wallace launches a Racial Equity Committee to develop an action plan. Wallace staff include a racial equity committee in our conference planning and make a commitment at the 2018 National Good Food Network to center racial equity.

**2018:** Public commitment at 2018 Conference. All staff participates in 21-Day Challenge as a staff. Wallace staff attends two-day training with The Justice Collective. Bi-weekly Racial Equity Learning coffee chats instated.

**2019:** Wallace teams create and start implementing Racial Equity Action Plans. Equity in hiring process. Planning for the 2020 Conference begins in earnest with a commitment to centering racial equity, including convening an Advisory Committee with a focus on racial equity.

**2020:** Wallace hosts conference with strong racial equity commitment. Public commitments published. Wallace establishes working groups to maintain consistency and progress on our racial equity strategic priorities connected to commitments.

