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JPMorgan Chase invests \$1.5 million in initiative for women of color



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JPMorgan Chase is supporting an initiative to prepare women of color to change systems in Columbus.

The financial institution has invested \$1.5 million in an "equity design" institute, which will train women of color to develop solutions for challenges that could include anything from housing insecurity to lack of access to childcare.

The women will bring their experience to the training, and learn to apply design principals to create more equitable systems.

The institute is the brainchild of LC Johnson, founder and CEO of Zora's House, and Kelley Griesmer, president and CEO of the Women's Fund of Central Ohio. They are partnering with the Columbus College of Art and Design (CCAD) and the Columbus-based Fringe 22 design and creative strategy studio, which will provide instruction to two groups of women over two years.

The training will take place at Zora's House, a co-working space and leadership incubator for women of color, in Weinland Park.

"This is a collaborative effort to not just create another program, but to change how policy is designed," Johnson said.

"We want to understand how power operates and how things are currently designed in Columbus, so that we can build a more equitable structure. We want to be able to share everything that we're learning as a model for other communities who may be interested in using design as a way of advancing equity."

Closing equity gaps

JPMorgan Chase's investment is just one way the company is working toward bridging equity gaps, according to Corrine Burger, Columbus location leader for the bank. For example, Chase recently implemented a five-year \$30 Billion Racial Equity Commitment, which provides Black, Hispanic and Latino communities with access to home loans, business loans, financial planning services and more.

Racial inequities costs Columbus economy \$10 billion a year, report finds

Burger called women of color "the backbone of our economy," and mentioned that they have been disproportionately impacted by the pandemic.

In central Ohio, Black women earn 65 cents for every dollar earned by white men, according to a 2019 report by Women's Fund of Central Ohio. Latina women earn 60 cents to the dollar.

"We're looking for systemic change," Burger said. "I'm super excited about our partners in this endeavor, because it makes us re-think how we might attack some of these issues."

What is equity-centered design?

Just as products are designed to fill a consumer need, programs and systems are designed to solve community challenges. But they are not always created with input from people affected, or with equity in mind.

In fact, experts argue that systems of oppression were intentionally created that way.

"Equity-centered design thinking argues that systems are designed, and they can be re-designed," said Jennifer Schlueter, associate provost and dean of academics at CCAD. "We are in no way accidentally landing in the system that we're living in right now. It's working the way it was intended to work, and we can re-design it to change how we interact with each other and whose voices we uplift."

As part of this initiative, CCAD will create a certificate in equity-centered design thinking, which will be offered to central Ohio businesses, organizations and, later, the general public.

Additional partners in the equity design institute include organizations led by Black women: the Affordable Housing Trust for Columbus and Franklin County, Columbus Urban League, Women's Center for Economic Opportunity and YWCA Columbus.

The organizations' leaders have been helping shape the initiative, and will provide a pipeline of participants from the women they serve.

"They also have big ideas and vision," Griesmer said. "(With) the way the current philanthropic system is built, the best we can do is grab people out of the river and try to put them back on the shore."

Women are returning to the workforce. Here's what it takes to get them to stay

The equity design institute will be a learning process, allowing participants to try and refine solutions to community issues.

"In design, it's about being iterative," Johnson said. "It's not about knowing everything when you first go in. When it comes to social change, we're creating a world that has never been seen before. We've never seen equity in this country. We have to be able to give leaders more grace and more space to build as they go."

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