Voices for Equity: A Visual Library of Calls for Equity at the University of Virginia

Background

Responding to faculty, student, and community activist calls for concrete and immediate action towards racial equity following the murder of George Floyd in May 2020, UVA President Jim Ryan appointed the Racial Equity Task Force to compile a list of "thoughtful and bold" recommendations for swift adoption by the University. But much of this work is already accomplished. Protests, petitions, and working group reports from decades back until the present document actions for the University that are both thoughtful and bold. Many of these actions remain unaddressed. Responding to and creating history, the collection of students, faculty, staff, and community members – primarily individuals of color – behind these written records provide the blueprints for present action. This project seeks to elevate their action plans – to dialogue their works with each other and with history – to chart the path forward.

Purpose

This project serves a threefold aim for strategic planning, public communication, and future historical preservation.

Strategic Planning: To assist the Racial Equity Task Force, we will identify common themes in demands across three dimensions – Dispersion, Magnitude, and Sustainment. (1) Dispersion represents the degree to which differing groups – across faculty, student, community and demographic delineations – have raised common themes. (2) Magnitude refers to the extent to which demands are repeated by individuals in a document or at a specific time. (3) Sustainment references the aspect of time – for how long have demands been requested? Which are longstanding and must receive priority?

Public Communication: When the University implements the work of others, credit is due. We will provide the University a way to publicly cite the contributions that have led to this moment. Beyond this, this project has three key communication aims. (1) For Students – past, present, and future, to contextualize their actions alongside those of peers, to see how work was done before them and to see how what they began carried on after they left. (2) For accountability – to display time gaps between demands and responses and for transparency as the university implements its action plan into the future. (3) For understanding, for individuals to recognize the longstanding roots of the Racial Equity Taskforce's recommendations as opposed to viewing them as isolated or reactionary changes.

Future History: Actions the University takes will become history. By creating this record, we will push back against the future erasure of the ones who did the work. The future story must not be that in 2020 the University charted a course for racial equity, but that in 2020, the University internalized and acted on the voices of its constituencies to pursue racial equity.

Methods:

This project proposes a three-part digital format to record, communicate, and preserve these demand documents.

Record: We propose a visual interactive library that integrates the authors, ideas, and texts of these demand documents into the local, state, and national political contexts into which they were written. Individual documents should be viewable in their entirety on request. This is perhaps most accomplishable in the form of a dynamic and interactive timeline. It can be built in two stages. (1) Timeline of demands and (2) Adding in historical context

Communicate: We propose a set of visualizations that present succinct analyses across the three strategic planning goals – Dispersion, Magnitude, and Sustainment – and engages audiences at the three communication goals – Student Contextualization, University Accountability, and Community Understanding these should emphasize:

(1) Overlaps between communities regarding specific issues. Most likely a faceted set of chord diagrams, each for a different issue. *Dispersion, Understanding*
(2) Stream Graphs that Trace the lineage and progress of issues raised by specific documents integrated with a breakdown of the content of that specific document. *Sustainment, Contextualization, Understanding*
(3) Analyses of one demand type, tracing how the language around it has evolved over time. *Magnitude, Understanding*
(4) Prominently features a list of the University's resolutions after the racial equity task force

Preserve: Develop a database of demands that individuals can query by key words, key themes, authors, author demographics, and time periods.

Other Considerations:

Accessibility: Work with UVA web development to make site accessible according to ADA compliance guidelines.

Community-Reviewed and Created: After creating visual interactive library, work to contact original document writers to comment on framing of their specific documents and rely on their knowledge to identify history surrounding.

Potential Extensions Thoughts:
Can we use an oral history approach to collect voices from the document writers themselves about the what and why of these demands? What were they responding to? Why did they write them? What were the challenges they faced in the process? How did the university community at that point respond (at three levels of administration, faculty, and peers). Did they feel that they were listened to? It would be awesome to actually be able to integrate those voices into the visual as audio recordings that people could listen to.