# Charting an Atlas for Equity, Part 1
Early Lessons: Undoing Harm and Building Community Trust

by April Doner

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In 2018, the University of Virginia (UVA) Library embarked on an ambitious project to build a Regional Equity Atlas tool, a platform to combine, visualize, and make accessible data about local disparities. The tool was intended to support community efforts in addressing systemic and ongoing inequities in the Charlottesville region. With 2 years of funding through a planning grant from the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) Community Catalyst Initiative (CCI), Co-Principal Investigators Rebecca Coleman and Michele Claibourn sought to offer the library's unique resources and knowledge to serve the region through helping to move the dial toward greater equity.

The atlas-building effort began with two primary goals. "One goal," Rebecca explained, "is to move beyond readily available data to incorporate information derived from both community-initiated research and University-initiated research conducted with community partners. We want to contribute to an online Regional Equity Atlas that will be sustained and used by our community, built to address community priorities, and open to relevant data and information from a wide variety of sources."

The second goal was for the atlas to act as a catalyst for creating a culture of open data in the region while enhancing the community's capacity to generate, use, and openly share data related to local inequity.
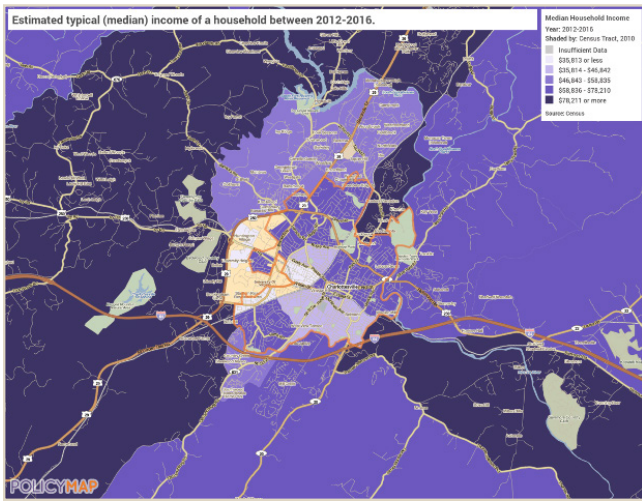
Estimated typical income of homes in the Charlottesville area, 2012–2016. Source: www.policymap.com

The unique Community Catalyst grant structure offered grantees access to capacity-building, peer support and learning, and ongoing technical assistance through a team of consultants from the Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD) Institute. Consultants provided workshops and resources on an asset-based, community-centered approach while hosting ongoing Grantee Community of Practice calls. Here, participants shared learning, stories of practice, and challenges they experienced as their projects progressed.

Additionally, IMLS allowed (and even encouraged) Grantees to make significant changes to their projects from their original proposals as they discovered the momentum, collaboration opportunities, and real concerns of community members and groups along the way.

As their project kicked off, the UVA team's experience mirrored that of the other museum- and library-led Community Catalyst teams. They quickly encountered and were forced to face the potent lack of trust many community members and groups harbored for their institution. This lack of trust stemmed from decades and, in some cases, generations of harm done to communities—and communities of color in particular.

As they moved through this stage of recognizing the need to own and repair previous harm, the UVA team (along with other CCI grantees) also realized that part of healing that harm and rebuilding trust involved sacrificing some of their preconceived plans for their project. This included their own beliefs about why it was important or the exact form it should take. Instead, the team discovered the need to back up and make a fresh start—this time, centering the voices, concerns, priorities, and existing activities of the community (local grassroots groups, organizations, and individual community members who lived the issue on a daily basis).

In the video below, Rebecca Coleman shares the story of their first year's journey along with her close project partner from the community, Siri Russell of the Albemarle County Equity and Inclusion office. This video was filmed at a 2019 in-person gathering of Community Catalyst grantees hosted by the Oak Park Public Library in Oak Park, Illinois. A transcript of their presentation follows.
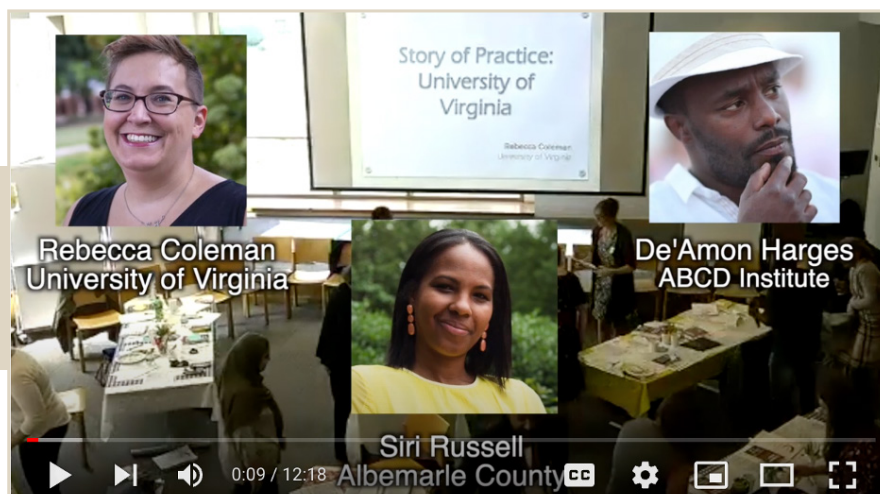
VIDEO TRANSCRIPT

Rebecca Coleman: Hi, I'm Rebecca. I'm from the University of Virginia and this is Siri Russell. She is from our neighboring county of Albemarle County, and she is one of the partners we have for our project.

We proposed a project to work with our community to create an "equity atlas"—basically a big "mappy" tool that would help our community share information that would help to power a lot of the work that our community is already doing around equity.

Right. I'm sitting in an academic library. We're not really the best positioned to be doing the work on equity in many cases. But we knew there was great work going on and we thought helping share information and data around that would be something where we could maybe move the needle. It has been a huge learning journey for me, but also for our institution, I think.

And I want to start by kindly calling out something that [our IMLS grant officer] Marvin said, which was that our project is in reaction to the riots of Charlottesville. So many of you probably saw the national news about the Unite the Right rally that showed up in Charlottesville in 2017. First, I wouldn't say it was a riot. It was an act of racial terrorism. It was a Nazi rally. And our project really starts in 1619. Right? The Unite the Right rally, all those acts of terrorism come out of a really long legacy in Charlottesville of white supremacy.

When I show up in a room, I wear the badge of the University of Virginia because that's where I'm working. And what that means to many members of our community is that I come from "The Plantation," and they call it that rightfully so. Our university was built by slaves. Our founder is a slave holder. Let's see: We were the seat of the eugenics movement at UVA. We stole the bodies of African American residents to advance our medical findings at the medical school. So we have a long legacy, right, of being very untrustworthy of the community around us.

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>
> Rebecca Coleman
> Research Librarian for Architecture
> University of Virginia

"Very quickly, we learned that we are coming from a place of really needing to beg people to give us a chance. So we walk in, and we have to say, 'You have no reason to want to work with us. I get that. But I'm hoping that you will , and we'd love the chance to work with you and support you until you believe that we really do want to be partners in this.'"

Rebecca Coleman

And I think when we began this project as a team, we thought, "This is great, right? We're finding a way to bring some resources, you know, to make a difference in this!"

But we found out pretty quick that you can't do that without trust. And frankly, we don't deserve the trust.

Even on a sort of person-to-person basis, our community is used to the university saying either, "Cool, we've got the solution to your problem because we've got the PhDs," or they're coming in and saying, "Yeah, we'd love to work with you." They demand a lot of time and resources from nonprofit organizations to partner with classes or, or other entities at the university. And then the students will do their work and turn in their papers and get their grades, and the community members never see the work that actually came out of those relationships. But they've given up their time and expertise. Communities see their expertise published without any credit to the expertise, right?

So, this is all this stuff that we didn't quite know. Like we knew, but we didn't quite know that this was all what walks into a room along with our team. And so very quickly, we learned that we are coming from a place of really needing to beg people to give us a chance, right? So we walk in and we have to say, "You have no reason to want to work with us. I get that. Right. But I'm hoping that you will and we'd love the chance to work with you and support you until you believe that we really do want to be partners in this."

You know, I say that, and I talk about some of those injustices as though they're in the past, but they're not.

So just this past week, you know, in the middle of us trying to build partners and gain trust of our of our community, a story comes out that the University of Virginia Medical Center and hospital has been suing local residents for unpaid bills, putting their houses in lien and worse. Bad stuff, right? Collections. Garnishing wages for payment. And I'm over in the library trying to do like, "Oh, information sharing is caring," right?

And all of a sudden now my relationships with our community partners come with this as well. So there's been a lot of, "Okay, we have this huge bureaucratic institution that's been doing a lot of nasty stuff for a long time and is maybe trying to get it's house in order." I really do think we're doing some things that suck a little bit less than we used to, but there's a lot of reasons that community doesn't see us as a trustworthy partner. And so we're starting from that.

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And so one of the reasons we are lucky enough, I think, to have Siri sitting next to us is because we finally realized, you know, what we really need to do is just go out and find out what people are doing and try to find out what we can do to help them. Right. Do you want to talk about that at all, Siri?

Siri Russell: I think you said a lot, Rebecca. A lot to absorb there. Those were the realities of the partnership. But it's right.

I should start by saying . . . I worked for Albemarle County, as Rebecca said, in our Office of Equity and Inclusion, which is a relatively new thing for us. Similarly to the university, local government is not exactly a huge trust-building statement in the community. But we have even more obligation in a lot of ways and even more ownership.

So this partnership has been filled with probably two low-trust and even lower trust entities who have a lot of ownership in creating the disparity that currently exists in our community. And it is considerable in Albemarle County and Charlottesville. Charlottesville is actually in the center of Albemarle County, but were separate for a lot of reasons.

We're one of the wealthiest in Virginia, but we're actually in the bottom third in terms of economic mobility. We have a pretty significant gap in life expectancy between our White and Black residents. Close to 13 years. Actually, and something that I like to say is, you can do a lot in a timeframe like that.

So the work that the university has been doing for us has really been providing resources and a space to work, to get out into the community. We are about to go together on an "Equity Road Show" is what we're calling it, where we've got 726 square miles to cover. Ninety-five percent of it is rural area.

I mentioned that we're one of the wealthiest counties in Virginia, and that's true. But we also have a lot of folks who are not experiencing that wealth. And at the same time as we have many former plantations that have been turned into either a winery or a horse estate, we also have folks that are living in chicken coops and in places with no floors.

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So we're going to gas stations, laundromats, corner stores, any sort of gathering place that already exists in the rural area where people might be, and asking them about their experiences, but also what an equitable community would look like. And then the work becomes how we actually create that community."

Siri Russell, former Director of Equity and Inclusion, Albemarle County

And those are the places that we're going together, to try and bring ourselves to folks where they currently are. So we're going to gas stations, laundromats, corner stores, any sort of gathering place that already exists in the rural area where people might be, and asking them about their experiences, but also what an equitable community would look like. And then the work becomes how we actually create that community.

Rebecca: So you can see how that's not necessarily key to, "Okay, how does that feed back into what we call an equity atlas, right?" But that's our learning process, right? How do these community members think about their own community? How would they express equity?

And also, we've learned that we need to care a lot about what are the concerns around an equity outlet. So I think when we applied for this grant, we were thinking a lot of quantitative data, right? Now we know that that can be really harmful and stigmatizing. So we're working on changing those definitions. And being part of Siri's amazing work in the County is one of the ways that we're trying to augment our own learning and thinking about what we might work towards together.

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Rebecca Coleman

For more information, visit:

Part 2: "The Progress We Made When We Weren't Making Progress"

Charlottesville Regional Equity Atlas

"Library Receives IMLS Planning Grant" (article)

IMLS Community Catalyst Initiative

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