Community Catalyst
Libraries · Museums · Communities

Charting an Atlas for Equity, Part 2
The Progress We Made When We Weren't Making Progress

by April Doner
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This is a continuation of [Part 1](#) of University of Virginia Library's story of community engagement through their Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS)-funded project with the Community Catalyst Initiative (CCI). Their work focused on building a collaborative community-centered Regional Equity Atlas.

Like for many IMLS Community Catalyst grantees, the first few months of 2020 delivered a complete disruption of normal life for the University of Virginia (UVA) team and their partners with the onset of the global COVID-19 pandemic, followed by uprisings calling for justice and equity for Black lives after the murder of George Floyd in May.

With the encouragement of IMLS and a team of consultants providing support from the Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD) Institute, the UVA team had spent the prior year prioritizing earning trust, undoing harm, and building relationships with the community groups—especially those at the grassroots level—and using their own power to nurture power and control. This, they realized, was a precursor to producing the regional equity map they outlined in their grant application. The team also trained their focus on ways that they could effectively shift power to community control.

Like other CCI cohort members, the UVA team found that their earlier prioritization of relationships and supporting community-led work enabled them to respond to COVID and the need for racial reckoning in ways that were more valuable, attuned, and relevant to their community. The mutual trust and knowledge they had cultivated through investing significant time into developing authentic, mutually supportive relationships enabled the team to creatively pivot their work and provide real value to the community.

Instead of building the Regional Equity Atlas as originally conceived, they focused instead on nurturing and acting on opportunities and projects that emerged from these partnerships. These included co-creating data visualization products and policies determined by community partners to be useful as well as bringing a greater focus on equity and accessibility focus to library activities.

Here are some of the accomplishments that flowed from these deepened partnerships:

- working with university instructors and students to make research results publicly accessible to the community
- a racial breakdown of frontline jobs helping a local journalist to visualize data for his coverage of stop-and-frisk policies
- new desk hours at Charlotte's Equity Center downtown location, where staff is available to help community members access data
- refocusing library projects from a traditional humanities focus toward equity and community, such as a recent Digital Humanities Center project on the local impact of the university's role in land ownership from an equity standpoint
- the City of Charlottesville, County of Albemarle, and UVA signing a joint memorandum of understanding (MOU) promoting equity

In the end, the team reflected that being able to forge even more powerful relationships with these partners was the point after all.

The work of the UVA team and their partners offers a compelling example of how historically White institutions can embark on a path of undoing deep-seated, generational racism and harm to communities of color while becoming more community-centered, relevant, and invested in their surrounding community.

In this video, project lead Rebecca Coleman shares the story of how her team navigated 2020 in close, meaningful alliance with their community partners. It was recorded at an IMLS Community Catalyst Initiative Cohort Storytelling Festival in February 2021, hosted by the ABCD Institute. A transcript follows.

THE PROGRESS WE MADE WHEN WE WEREN'T MAKING PROGRESS

University of Virginia
Building A Collaborative Community Equity Atlas

Rebecca Coleman, University of Virginia
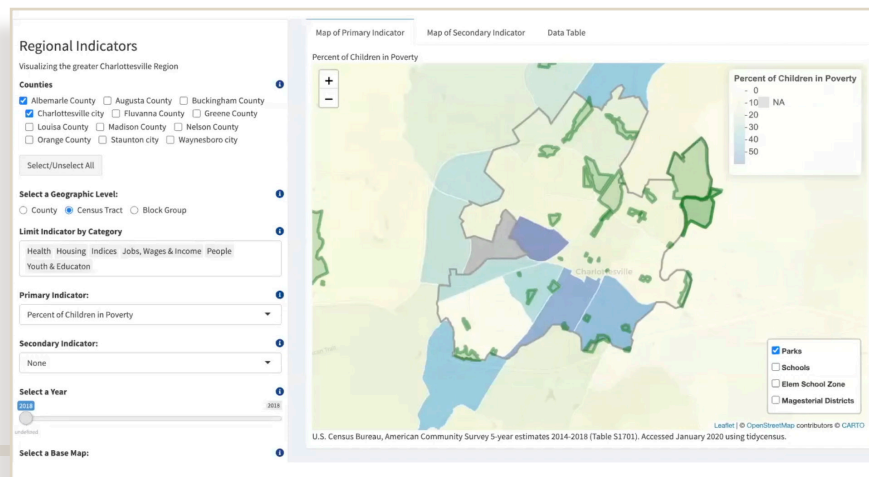
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VIDEO TRANSCRIPT

Rebecca Coleman: Hi, everybody.
So I'm going to talk about the progress we made when we weren't making progress.

We've heard some stories of some folks that seem like their project is really well put together, and I love that and I'm a little jealous. But I've come to terms over the past year with some ways in which our project is not what I thought it would be, but it's maybe something greater. So that's what I'd like to talk about.

I'm going to shortchange my friends here, because I do know that we are running a little short on time. So I will just introduce you to Barbara Brown-Wilson there on the left and Siri Russell on the right. This is a video that they produced and put up on the website of the University of Virginia Equity Center, talking about the Equity Atlas Project and basically explaining what our hopes and goals for the project were. They are two of our partners with this. Siri represents the Albemarle County Office of Inclusion and Equity. She's one of our best friends with this.

So what were we trying to do was to make something "mappy" that would give a lot of information about equity in our region. And we wanted to gather information from community partners, organizations, and help make it more accessible and more actionable within our community.

And here's what we came up with in the first year of our grant. We were iterating, we were experimenting, we were coding.

We had great goals for 2020.
2020 was going to be where everything happened!

This is what happened in 2020 to us, as well as everybody else, I think.

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Personally, I really struggled with this. I struggled with feeling like I had lost our connection to some of our partners.
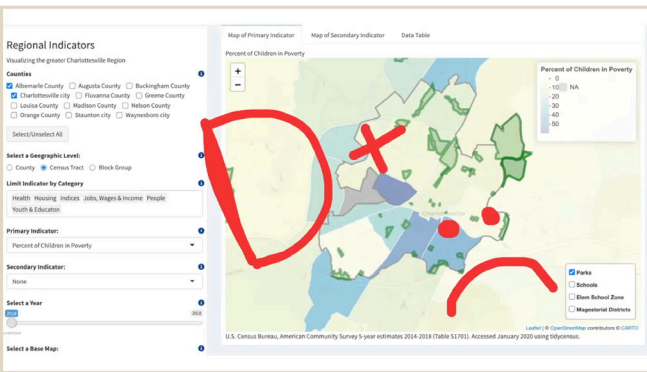
One of our great partners was the Thomas Jefferson Health District. You can imagine they got *a little busy*. [laughs] We haven't heard from them in some time. So things just sort of turned sideways.

Personally, of course, 2020 was also just really hard. It was hard to be doing this kind of work and watching the world around us.

So at the end of 2020 this is what it looked like. Pretty much the exact same.

So if I had to give us a grade on that and that alone, I probably would have done a D+. It was not what we had hoped, right? We wanted to build a lot more and we wanted to do that in consultation with our partners, but I was encouraged to sort of look around and see, "Okay, so while we weren't working on this, what was going on?"

What was going on was that we were working with some of our partners on other much-needed data projects. They actually came to us and said, "Hey, you've been talking about data. You've got people that do data stuff. This is what we need right now."
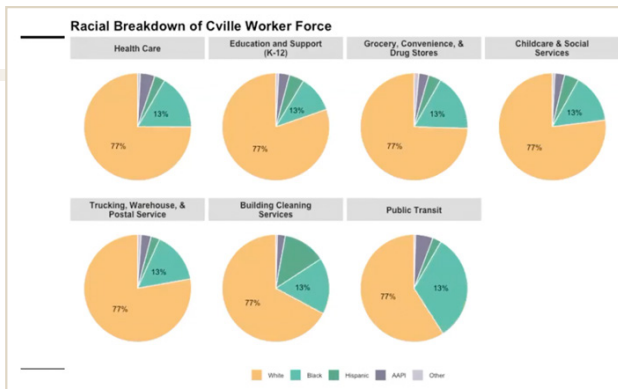
So we totally pivoted and abandoned our mappy thing, and we worked for them on information that was relevant to COVID.

So, [below] is racial breakdown of frontline jobs in order to help explain to our local community what was happening and how impact of frontline jobs during the COVID pandemic had huge racial implications in our community.

We also were approached to collaborate with some of our partners on other data projects.

So this is Charlottesville Police stop-and-frisk data for Charlottesville.

One of our collaborators, local journalist Jordy Yager, is doing some amazing mappy work with us, but also wrote this story about living in Charlottesville as a person of color and what that means in a lot of different aspects. And to back that story up, we really worked with him to visualize some important data and to build stories around it.

And that is one of the important things that was a goal for us with the Equity Atlas was not just to make a map of data, but to make a map of data that tells stories and is part of stories so that we're not weaponizing data. We are actually contextualizing it.
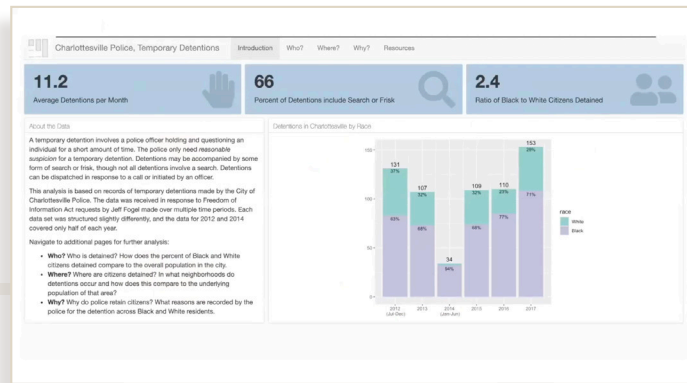
Other things that happened while nothing was happening:

We continued to work with the University's different classes, different instructors to say, "If you are producing work about our local community in your class, for goodness sake, give it back to our local community!" This is a screenshot from our institutional repository, where we've started to get much more general student work that has to do with our local community.
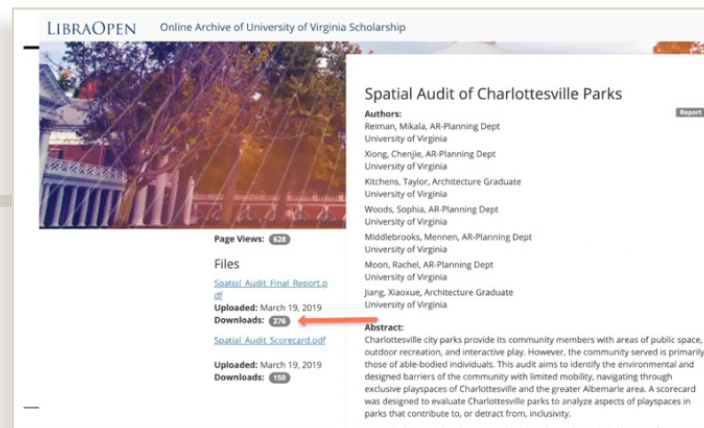
This is a spatial audit of the Charlottesville parks.

Basically they were looking at "How accessible are these to folks in wheelchairs or other sorts of physical challenges?" And you can see that since it was deposited, it's been downloaded 276 times. This is the kind of paper that usually disappeared after a semester or was only held by the faculty member after grades were given out in the past.

We also have become very tight partners with our Equity Centers. So the library actually will, in theory, have some desk hours when those things become real again in what is a newly opened community partnership office for the university.

"We continued to work with the University's different classes, different instructors to say, 'If you are producing work about our local community in your class, for goodness sake, give it back to our local community!'"

"This is a spatial audit of the Charlottesville parks. You can see that since it was deposited, it's been downloaded 276 times. This is the kind of paper that usually disappeared after a semester."

It's located in downtown Charlottesville, and it will have some hours where community members can come and talk to us about anything that we do. That could be tracking down resources that are in our print collections, or it could be things like, "Can we help you with your data projects?"

This is one way in which the partnerships we established around the Equity Atlas Project have now turned into partnerships in physical spaces as well.

We also had some staffing changes that actually are indications of the strength of the bonds we've got.
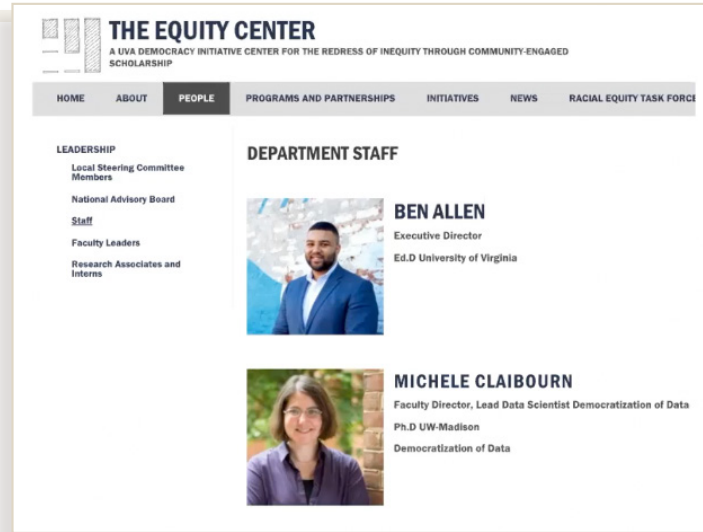
"This is one way in which the partnerships we established around the Equity Atlas Project have now turned into partnerships in physical spaces as well. We also had some staffing changes that actually are indications of the strength of the bonds we've got."

Ben Allen was one of the recipients of one of our mini-grants to our community to help build capacity for data sharing in community organizations. He was working at a local school at that time and wanted to share some equity data. They actually ended up not completing their mini-grant work because Ben left and became the executive director of the Equity Center at UVA. I'll take that as a win, that he started to believe in our mission and really trust us as an institution.

Michele Claibourn, who some of you met in the first gathering that we did with ABCD, actually just left the library last month and is now also fully employed by the Equity Center and is now their lead data scientist. So we lost our library data person, but gave her to a full-time role with the Equity Center partnership!
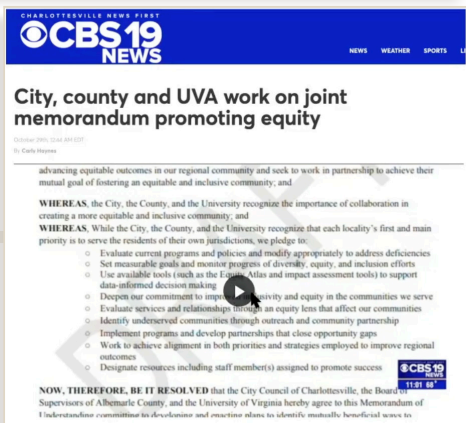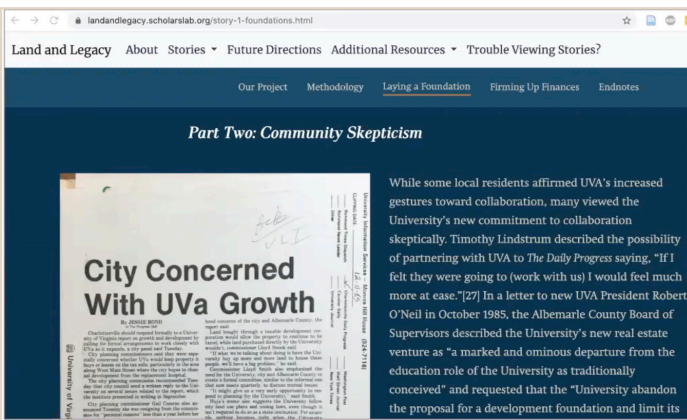

We've started to have more impact within other library work.

This is a digital humanities project that was done by our Digital Humanities Center.

And while in the past, they did sort of fluffy projects or your traditional sort of historic digital humanities, this time they actually worked with the Equity Center and our Equity Atlas Project and looked at the university's role in land ownership locally and the impact that that had had from an equity standpoint. So that was a really interesting way to turn other work that the library was doing toward this goal.

And one of our best wins that we've had is that the City, County, and UVA all have signed a joint memorandum and MOU promoting equity.

And if you read in the small print right in the middle near that little arrow, it does say use available tools such as the Equity Atlas to assess these.

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And so even though the tool itself is still in a period of change and new directions, it is already being embraced by the community because they have trust that we are going to be building it together.
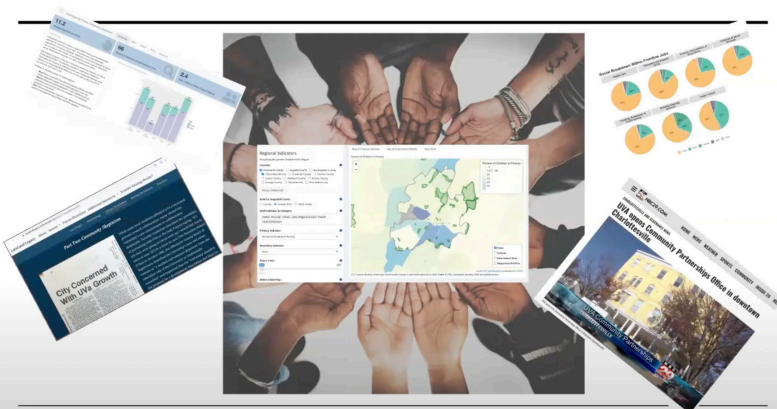
So here's a little quote from Lao Tzu: "By letting it go, it all gets done. The world is won by those who let it go. But when you try and try, the world is beyond the winning."

> By letting it go, it all gets done. The world is won by those who let it go. But when you try and try, the world is beyond the winning.
> Lao Tzu

And that really helps me. I kept thinking about "The Thing"—the thing that we had tried to build.

When I look back over the past year and the things that have happened that are not "The Thing" we tried to build, it's really a much richer story of the collaborations that we've been building.

Here's a little visual for you.

I think what we've done successfully is actually placed the Equity Atlas into the hands of our community members. We have a good shared ownership of it, and that means that it hasn't moved as fast as maybe I had envisioned when I wrote this grant with my partners.

But it means that it's building alongside other things that are just as, if not more important.

So I add those things in here.

And then I looked at this image again, and I was like, no, it's still not right.

"The important thing isn't the things that have been built or that we hope to keep building. I think this is the most important thing that we've built, which is all of the hands together who are now working together to support each other and to support this ongoing effort."

Because the important thing isn't the things that have been built or that we hope to keep building. It's actually this. I think this is the most important thing that we've built, which is all of the hands together who are now working together to support each other and to support this ongoing effort.

Those partnerships are going to continue to manifest themselves in different ways and toward different partners, and toward different goals, but they are established and that's been shown throughout the pandemic. It's been shown throughout a lot of the stress that we've all gone through in the past 2 years. And I have total faith that these partnerships will exist past this grant, which I think is the thing that I may be most proud of here.

I'll just say that it was hard for me to want to tell this story, because I kept wanting to tell a story about the thing that we said we wanted to build. And I kept feeling like, "Well, it's not really in a place where I feel like that's our story, and I don't want to tell a story because we're trying to co-create it." And I don't want to, you know, own that story when we're still trying to make sure that everyone feels like it will be their story.

And talking to [our ABCD consultant] De'Amon [Harges], he's so good about being like, "No, but that what you just said there, you know exactly what you were saying about what distracted you this week, right? The work you were doing, that you felt like you left you with no time to make your story for a story?" He's amazing at reminding you that that is the work. That is really the story of community change.

And when you're in academia or some of these big bureaucracies, I think it's so easy to get caught with that goal-oriented [mindset], like you have to do your annual review and you're like, "How much progress did I make toward the thing that I said I was going to do?" And this is just a different way of being, and it's been amazing to have the guidance of ABCD along the way."

For more information, visit:

Part 1: "Early Lessons in Undoing Harm and Building Community Trust"

Charlottesville Regional Equity Atlas

Video: "Equity Atlas Project" (The Equity Center)

IMLS Community Catalyst Initiative

The Asset-Based Community Development Institute

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