Development of Inclusive Language Training for Albemarle County Government

Avery Romano

Kyle Kelly

Meredith Hoos

Samantha Lewis

Yuning Ye

Department of Urban and Environmental Planning, University of Virginia

PLAN 6020, Methods of Community Research and Engagement

Dr. Barbara Brown Wilson

May 10, 2021

Abstract

Recently, equity initiatives have increasingly been used by local governments as a tool for addressing injustices and discriminatory practices. Because the concept of equity is still new to many, it is important to have a foundational understanding of what equity entails and how it can be implemented. This report outlines the process of creating an equity training module to be used for staff training in Albemarle County. Prior to developing the training, interviews were conducted with current staff members working for the County. The information and comments collected from these interviews served as the starting point for identifying key themes to discuss within the module. The training was then developed as an interactive PowerPoint presentation which is intended to give those participating in the module a better understanding of what equity can look like in local government. . In addition, a post-training questionnaire was developed in order to allow participants an opportunity to provide any comments or feedback about their experience with the training. Furthermore, this report also serves as a reference for anyone seeking additional, outside information about the topics discussed within the training module. The module is intended to be utilized by staff from all departments in Albemarle County as a tool for learning about equity and to begin to apply this knowledge to their work.

Keywords:

Equity, diversity, implicit bias, inclusive language, module, training, local government

Table of Contents

Development of Inclusive Language Training for Albemarle County Government

The goal of our project is to produce a training module that provides Albemarle County staff with the resources and tools to feel comfortable and confident to talk about demographics and populations of people in Albemarle County, learn more about equity and inclusive language, and begin to apply that knowledge to their work. The module is intended to empower each staff member to evaluate equity in their own policies and plans prior to implementation. We hope that these resources will help mitigate harm to communities.

For many local governments, the process of advancing equity begins with training and facilitated conversations for staff and elected officials. This type of training focuses on building a common vocabulary and shared understanding of equity concepts across the organization.[1] Talking about issues of equity is difficult and only having limited understanding of equity can have harmful impacts on populations that are misrepresented. There are many reasons why people may be uncomfortable with discussing equity and its related concepts. Identified factors include:

- real and perceived risks for "public facing individuals and organizations, whose status and financial depend on the perceptions of funders and audiences;"
- misconstrual of calls to name white supremacy and oppression as threats to their personal identity;
- fear of appearing biased or fear of lacking necessary knowledge;
- and fear of backlash from misrepresenting experiences of people of color.[2]

---

[1] (LaCivita, 2020)
[2] (Spievack & Okeke, 2020)

Having a handle on the appropriate and equitable way to refer to populations allows government staff to navigate conversations and presentations without causing harm or stigmatizing those groups of people.

Inclusive language "acknowledges diversity, conveys respect to all people, is sensitive to differences and promotes equitable opportunities."[3] This language can be present in communications such as emails, marketing material, social media, websites, and other forms of communications. There are some overarching guidelines for inclusive language:

- Avoid terms that are polarizing, dehumanizing, or isolating
- People-first language is usually preferable. This means putting the person before the issue such as 'people with autism'or 'people who use wheelchairs';
- Treat people the way they want to be treated;
- Use the language of the majority group if there are multiple ways to refer to a group;
- If you are ever in doubt, always ask;
- When speaking or writing, address the problem, not the person.
- It is worth noting that inclusive language is not a substitute for equity. Rather, it may be thought of as a foundation for using an equity lens when approaching government work.

---

[3] (*Inclusive Language | University Communications*, n.d.)

A.   Equity in government - importance in government and context

Local government can be a force for advancing equity, but it requires a firm commitment and the right skills to do so. Using inclusive language is part of an ethical approach to conducting meaningful outreach and engagement. It is important to engage groups from "under-represented" populations in the language that they use to describe themselves. In regard to language, impact is more important than intent. The effect of using language that alienates people is that they will not be willing to engage with the local government, leading to missing important perspectives on issues in the community. This is why it is important to avoid pejorative language that may invoke unhelpful stereotypes or implicit biases. Additionally, using inappropriate language to describe groups can perpetuate skewed power dynamics.

It is critical to contextualize disparities in order to address the root causes of inequity. By actively identifying the historic and contemporary policies that create and maintain disparities, we can shift to a more accurate narrative that implicates unjust systems as the root cause of disparities, rather than individual or communal failings. The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted inequities that exist on a national level and here in Charlottesville and Albemarle County. Structural inequities that have distributed power and resources across the lines of race, gender, class, and other dimensions of identity have led to disparate impacts on various groups.The COVID-19 pandemic also highlighted inequities that exist at a micro-scale, on individual homes and bodies. The instruction to isolate at home highlights how, at a smaller scale, individual homes and bodies are dimensions in urban equity. COVID-19 starkly shows how structural determinants of equity are intersectional and how they are critical for protecting health. Marginalized groups and areas of lower socioeconomic status have been hit particularly hard. Those who can remain comfortably inside their homes are less affected than those in

overcrowded housing or who need to physically travel to work. The response of the government and the series of policies to mitigate the virus have profound implications for the intersecting identities, positions, processes, and practices that constitute health and social equity and thus for patterns of vulnerability in urban environments.

In order to understand why this is the case in Albemarle, it is important to explore the historical contexts of these inequities. Specifically, what policies have created and upheld unjust allocation of resources and power in Albemarle County?

There are several areas of disparity in Charlottesville and Albemarle County that stem from structural barriers related to historic and contemporary policies. For example, the context for disparities in outcomes related to jobs and income can be traced back to Jim Crow laws. In Charlottesville in the 1920's, during the height of Jim Crow, the most common jobs for Black residents were in the service and labor industries. The most common jobs for white people were in the white-collar sector and business ownership. Today, there is still manifestation of these inequalities. For reference, in the six weeks following the Virginia statewide shutdown order, "28.3% of unemployment claims have been filed by African Americans, whereas 51.3% have come from white residents, according to the Virginia Employment Commission. This is racially disproportionate, as Black residents make up 19.9% of the state's population, and white residents 69.5%. An inflated percentage of Black workers filing for unemployment suggests a greater degree of job loss or less generational savings or wealth to fall back on. Economists have posited this may also be directly linked to a workforce's inability to telework, or work from home, strongly suggesting the types of jobs, and their corresponding value or pay, are still very much segregated by race."[4]

---

[4] (Yager, 2020)

Another area of disparity present in Charlottesville and Albemarle County is homeownership rates, and subsequently wealth. Disproportionality in homeownership rates between Black and white residents can be traced to policies of redlining, racist covenants, and urban renewal. Racist covenants are "agreements entered into by a group of property owners, subdivision developers, or real estate operators in a given neighborhood, binding them not to sell, lease, rent or otherwise convoy their property to specified groups because of race, creed or color for a definite period unless all agree to the transaction."[5] The effects of such a policy have been long lasting and detrimental to Black residents' propensity to build wealth. Similarly, urban renewal resulted in displacement of Black residents from their homes and led to distrust of city government due to the damaging effects.

There are significant disparities in Albemarle County Public Schools (ACPS). Based on the way public schools are funded, community wealth disparities carry over into education. Albemarle County Public Schools is known as one of the top performers in Virginia. However, this does not tell a complete story. Students of color and those living in poverty are underrepresented in nearly every program for enrichment and acceleration in Albemarle County. This includes gifted programs, which act as segregating forces that divide students along the basis of race, socioeconomic status, and ethnicity. ACPS has found that the percentage of ACPS who are "economically disadvantaged" grew from 20% in 2008 to around 30% in 2018. In acknowledgement of this, ACPS suggests restructuring school funding and practices to support school funding and practices to support students in poverty.[6] The long-term implications of

---

[5] (Silva, 2009)
[6] (*Equity Report 2018*, n.d.)

educational disparities are continued barriers to advancement, a future of income deprivation, or economic stagnation.[7]

The ramifications of the inequities discussed in this section are significant. Research has found that economic inequality leads to less trust by creating pessimism about the future and divergence of perceived fates for members of differing economic strata. Research has also drawn a link between trust and civic engagement.[8] If people feel that they are prevented from accessing opportunities because of their gender, race, ethinic or religious groups, or other reasons, it is reasonable that they would not trust institutions they feel are excluding them. Strengthening social inclusion has been identified as a way to restore trust in institutions.[9] One aspect of social inclusion is inclusive language.

B.   *Literature Review- research on equity trainings and findings*

A review of the literature was conducted to determine best practices for equity training. Many organizations, non-governmental agencies, and local government agencies have crafted individual equity and inclusion training programs. While searching for equity programs, we focused on searching for local government programs that were available. Oregon and Washington state had the most relevant and available information. The Washington Race Equity and Justice Initiative (REJI) provided a manual for setting up training to include an equity lens and provides different activities to achieve these goals[10]. Renton, Washington provided case examples of including an equity lens to various local government aspects. This document defined equity, why applying a lens to certain issues is necessary, and when it is appropriate to use. This

---

[7] (West, 2020)
[8] (Uslaner & Brown, 2005)
[9] (Lord, 2019)
[10] (*Washington Race Justice Equity Initiative; Organizational Race Equity Toolkit* 2018)

framework for including equity lenses led to actions items throughout the city such as targeted outreach to certain demographics for services, reviewing procurement contracts to include more contracts available for women and minority owned businesses, and the court system producing documents in multiple languages[11]. The Office of Human Rights and Equity in Portland produced a document that compiled the ongoing equity plans for the entire organization[12]. Like the Washington state plans, the document explains the benefits of thinking equitably. Each of these plans center equity and provided frameworks for how to incorporate equity into policies and implementation plans. Progress is tracked and reported.

The literature reviewed provided a lot of information to process and parse through. While many sites and journal articles were helpful in their entirety, others had moments of helpfulness that ultimately provided us with things to think about and consider in the early stages of deciding which direction to take this project and what specifically we wanted to focus on within the equity frame. Ultimately, through conversations with Siri Russell and Albemarle staff, we landed on providing a module training for inclusive language.

C.   *Thesis Statement*

The use of our module which touches on topics of equity and language, will provide staff the tools to begin to apply an equity lens to policies and implementation plans which will reduce harm and de-stigmatize communities in Albemarle county.

---

[11] (*Renton Equity Lens Process and Examples* 2019)
[12] (*Portland, Oregon; Promising Practices in Government to Advance Racial Equity n.d.*)

Methods

Pre-training Interview with Albemarle County Staff

Participants

Five Albemarle County government staff members took part in the pre-training interview (Appendix B). Each staff member had previously taken part in the Albemarle County equity training program conducted by the Office of Equity and Inclusion. Participants held a variety of jobs within the Albemarle County government.

Materials

Pre-training interviews provided insight into the staff training needs that our community partners could not provide. To conduct these interviews we implemented a semi-structured interview model, using a list of questions to serve as a rough guide for our conversations. Establishing a guide also permitted a degree of consistency in the data being collected by multiple interviewers. We drafted an initial list of questions, and after meeting with Siri Russell and Dr. Binte-Farid we narrowed our questions down to government-specific, equity- and inclusive-language related questions.

We structured the finalized interview guide with eight questions in order to build a rapport with the staff member being interviewed, and to understand their role within the organization before introducing equity into the conversation. These questions are provided in Appendix B2. We shifted focus towards equity by asking about their experience with equity training programs and the role of equity and language in their work. Our last questions addressed

the staff member's comfort level in discussing difficult topics of inequity and in conveying demographic information to others.

The group used a google sheets document to share our daily availability for conducting interviews. This, along with an invitation to take part in our study, we sent to our community partner, Siri Russell, which she then shared with roughly 10 members of Albemarle County staff. Her emails included a paraphrased version of our invitation, which provided an overview of our project and how long the interviews were expected to take, and our interview questions. The original invitation language is included in Appendix B. The decision about who would interview which staff member(s) came down to group member availability.

To analyze the results of our interviews, we used HyperResearch, a free online analysis tool, to code for keywords and themes from interview notes.

Procedure

We interviewed participants via Microsoft Teams and Zoom applications, maintaining a maximum of 30 minutes per interview. Three interviews were one-on-one style interviews. The remaining interview was conducted by a single group member interviewing two Albemarle county staff members. Interviewers documented the session through concise note-taking. At the end of each interview we organized our notes into a more formal question-and-answer format and uploaded these documents to the shared folder for later analysis.

We analyzed our interview write-ups using HyperResearch to extract repeating themes. We uploaded our interview text into HyperResearch's online platform, where we labeled sections of the documents containing key themes. These sections became our code lists which the program processed to produce an aggregate frequency graph (Appendix B). From here, we tailored our training to address the most prevalent themes.

Module Development

Materials

The training module requires less than half an hour to complete and includes a final questionnaire. The PowerPoint training module comprises 25 slides It functions as both a self-directed module and as a group presentation slide deck. Interspersed throughout are opportunities for interaction with the module. Participants are encouraged to engage with questions when training is delivered as a presentation as well.

Our initial training module was based on conversations between the group and our community partner. With the larger goal of introducing an inclusive language toolkit through a PowerPoint-style module we tailored the content to align with key outcomes from the interview sessions with Albemarle County staff members.

The final questionnaire (Appendix C) is a 13 question Google Form document used to collect feedback on presentation style and content. This questionnaire is intended to allow

participants to reflect on their experience with the module and also provide suggestions and comments for how the module could be improved in the future.

Results

HyperResearch identified 'equity' as the most frequently mentioned key word from our interviews. The term, equity, was identified 9 separate times within the five interview transcripts. Training logistics and demographic were both mentioned on four occasions each followed in frequency by data, diversity, inclusive, local, needs, and race with three mentions each. History, resources, and stakeholders appeared two times each. Finally, empathy, group dynamic, maps, and safety each had a single mention.

Conclusion

Due to the shortened semester and the limitations the pandemic imposed, the group was unable to present the training to a willing group of Albemarle County staff. In this section, we detail what our procedure would have looked like had we been able to complete this part of our project, in the hopes that further work can be completed on the module.

We would have presented the training module to a selection of Albemarle County staff members. The presentation portion of the training is estimated to take 35 minutes to complete, leaving 25 minutes at the end for participants to respond to our final questionnaire and to discuss the module and topics in real time with the participants. Ideally, we would have used the questionnaire responses to tweak the module to provide a higher level of service to county staff members. Following this edit, we would be in a better position to present our findings to the class and our community partners.

Our research sought to develop a training on inclusive language for Albemarle County staff under the premise that the use of context based, inclusive language would provide staff the tools to begin to apply an equity lens to policies and implementation plans which will reduce harm and de-stigmatize communities in Albemarle county. Our research found that staff were concerned about the ways their uncertainty surrounding appropriate language for referring to people and communities impacted their ability to pursue equitable outcomes for the community. Additionally, we found that staff wanted a repository of resources at their disposal to address gaps in their knowledge and confidence in the area of inclusive language. Limitations of the research conducted include the timeframe to collect follow-up data after the administration of the training that was designed. Future research may focus on gathering this data and adjusting the training accordingly. Additional areas for further research may include an examination of the Albemarle County staff's understanding of inclusive language and equity from the perspective of the community. Specifically, does the community feel that Albemarle County staff are using inclusive language in their outreach and engagement? Does the community perceive gaps in the staff's understanding of these concepts? Furthermore, how does the community see this affecting their daily lives or their willingness to engage with their local government? These questions foreshadow possibilities for additional research on the subject matter articulated within the broader context of our research.

Appendix A

Initial Documents

Figure A.1.

Memorandum of Understanding
Albemarle County, Spring 2021

This document is a memorandum of understanding between University of Virginia students, Yuning Ye, Kyle Kelly, Avery Romano, Meredith Hoos, and Samantha Lewis, hereafter referred to as "student consultants", and Ms. Siri Russell, Director of the Office of Equity Inclusion for Albemarle County. Siri Russell is hereafter referred to as "community partner".

A. Definitions

In this memorandum of understanding ("memorandum"), "student consultants" refers to the University of Virginia student participants comprising Yuning Ye, Kyle Kelly, Avery Romano, Meredith Hoos, and Samantha Lewis. "Community partner" refers to Ms. Siri Russell, Director of the Office of Equity and Inclusion for Albemarle County.

B. Purpose and Scope of Work

The purpose of this MOU is to establish terms under which a program of leadership equity training is created and provided by the student consultants to employees of the offices of Albemarle County government.

The training is intended to empower each staff member to evaluate equity in their own policies and plans prior to implementation in order to enhance the quality of life and wellbeing in Albemarle. To make each staff member comfortable talking about the nuances of communities of color and other technical language and phrases. The aim of being more aware of these nuances and being able to write equity into public documents is to reduce harm to communities. Our group plans to provide a powerpoint presentation training and a training guide document that goes along with the presentation. To assess how effective the training has been, we will solicit feedback from the participants of the training. We will analyze the results and make necessary adjustments.

Responsibilities of Student Consultants
Student consultants will provide the following services:

1. Designate a member of the student consultant team to act as liaison between student consultants and community partner;
2. Provide contact information for the student consultant liaison to the community partner;

3. Survey existing literature and documents from other local governments both in Virginia and the wider region for examples of equity training that has been implemented at the local level;
4. Conduct interviews with Albemarle County staff members to determine the specifics elements the training will need to address;
5. Build an equity training program that implements best practices grounded in the principles of community engagement that address the results of the staff interviews;
6. Provide the community partner with monthly status reports detailing where the student consultant team is in the process of development
7. Provide a final package that will consist of a full report of the student consultant's work (including examples of other training, staff interview questions, results of the interview, a training guide, and the final presentation/slideshow).

C. Responsibilities of Project Partner
1. Provide the student consultants with the necessary information to conduct interviews with Albemarle County staff;
2. Respond to the student consultant primary contact within a reasonable time period;
3. Update the student consultants with any new information or developments as it relates to the project

D. Deliverables
The student consultants will furnish a final package of the following items:

- Training guide for leaders
- Slide deck of the training
- Final report to include outside examples, best practices, principles the training is built on, interview questions,
- Certificate of completion for participants to print

In addition to the above listed items, the student consultants will provide a final, formal presentation of the training to the community partner on a mutually agreed upon date as determined by the student consultants, the course instructor, and the community partner.

E. Costs
No costs are expected to be incurred by the student consultant team. If costs are incurred, the community partner is responsible for the purchase of any materials or necessary services to carry out the agreed upon work outlined in this memorandum.

F. Warranty

Nothing in the memorandum shall be construed as consent by either the student consultants or the community partner to enter into any contract, business relationship or any other type of agreement. Neither part is liable for damages, be they incidental or consequential, under this memorandum.

G. Intellectual Property

The documents and work produced for the community partner is intended for the use of the Albemarle county organization. It is considered public information.

H. Primary Contact Information

Student Consultant Primary Contact:
Meredith Hoos- mh6kg@virginia.edu

Community Partner Primary Contact:
 Siri Russell
srussell@albemarle.org

I. Effective Date

February 23, 2021

Signatures omitted

Appendix B

Pre-Training Interview Materials

B1. Interview invitation:

Dear {Albemarle County Staff Member},

We are a UVA graduate student group and we are conducting interviews for a project in collaboration with Albemarle county. We aim to provide an equity training module for staff by the beginning of May. Your input is greatly appreciated as we work to build out this training. All interviews will be conducted via Zoom by one or two group members. Several times are available and interviews are not expected to exceed 30 minutes.

Thank you for your consideration! Go Hoos!

B2. Interview questions:

1. Will you tell me about your role in the organization?
2. What do you need help with?
    a. What kind of information are you looking for in regards to local government equity?
3. Have you participated in equity education programs before?
4. If so, what was the focus of the program(s) or training(s)?
5. Do you feel like you have a good understanding of what equity means, in the local government context?
6. Are you applying equity to your every day work tasks?
7. When do you use demographic data? How do you present it?

8. Do you feel comfortable using language to describe certain populations of the Albemarle community?

B3. Interview Analysis Results:
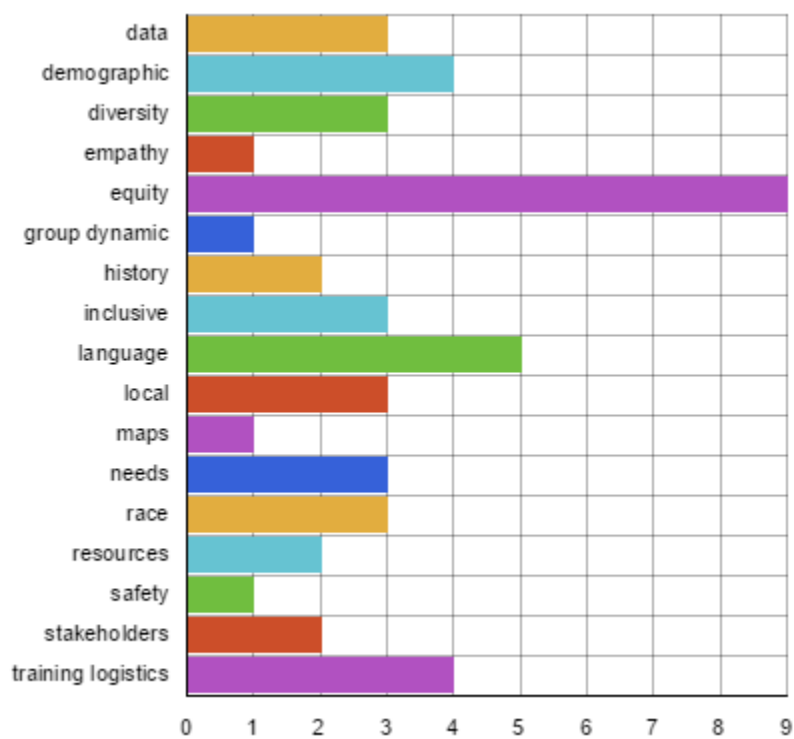
Appendix C

Training Module Questionnaire

C1. Final Questionnaire

1. Thinking back before this module, please rate your confidence level in talking and writing about specific population groups in Albemarle county. (Likert Scale: 1 to 5. 1 being least confident, 5 being most confident).

2. After going through the module, please rate your confidence level in talking and writing about specific population groups in Albemarle county. (Likert Scale: 1 to 5. 1 being least confident, 5 being most confident).

3. Can you see yourself using this language in your work? (Y/N/Maybe. If 'maybe' please elaborate.

    a.

4. What questions about inclusive language or implicit bias do you still have after the training? (open ended)

5. What would you change about the presentation format? (open ended)

    a.

6.

7. Although we presented this in a group setting, could you see yourself genuinely completing this module on your own time? (Y/N/Maybe. If 'maybe' please elaborate'.)

8. Was the module itself interesting and engaging? (Y/N)

9. What did you find interesting? What was most engaging? (open ended)

10. What did you dislike about the module? (open ended)

11. Overall, was the module helpful? (Y/N)

12. Would you return to this module for reference and additional resources? (Y/N/Maybe. If 'maybe' please elaborate).

13. Any additional comments, concerns, or critiques? (open ended).

References

Washington Race Equity and Justice Initiative (2018, June). *Organizational Race Equity Toolkit.*

    Just Lead Washington.

    https://justleadwa.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/REJI-Organizational-Toolkit_Full-1.p

    df

City of Renton, Washington. (2019, March). *Renton Equity Lens Process and Examples.* City of

    Renton, Washington.

    https://rentonwa.gov/UserFiles/Servers/Server_7922657/File/City%20Hall/Executive/Pu

    blic%20Affairs/Inclusion/Documents/Renton%20Equity%20Lens%20Process%20&%20

    Examples%203-6-19.pdf

Office of Equity and Human Rights. (n.d.). *Promising Practices in Government to Advance*

    Racial Equity. Portland, Oregon. https://www.portlandoregon.gov/oehr/article/564991.

Training Module

Equity Training Module