

Subject Heading Enhancement

A Reparative and Inclusive Practice at the University of Virginia Library

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THE UNIVERSITY OF VIRGINIA (UVA) WAS FOUNDED IN 1819 BY THOMAS Jefferson, one of the authors of the Declaration of Independence and the third president of the United States. Situated on Monacan tribal land, the university shares a historical connection with the Indigenous community of the region. Both UVA and Monticello, Jefferson's plantation, have been designated as UNESCO World Heritage Sites due to their architectural significance, exemplifying Jefferson's "comprehensive architectural vision."¹ Acknowledging the complexities of its past, UVA, along with other elite institutions, has engaged in targeted research to confront its involvement in the institution of slavery. This collective, created by the UVA President's Commission on Slavery and the University and known as the Universities Studying Slavery, comprises over ninety institutions seeking to examine their "histories of slavery and racism."² Within this context, UVA completed the Memorial to the Enslaved Laborers in 2020. This permanent tribute commemorates the families and individuals who contributed their labor to build and sustain the university. Notably, the memorial was erected three years after the infamous 2017 white nationalist Unite the Right Rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, providing a poignant backdrop to the university's commitment to confronting its past.

In 2019, against this backdrop of enslavement and white supremacy, the associate university librarian for Scholarly Resources and Content Strategy

(SRCS) charged the Digital Strategies Team at the UVA Library to investigate reparative measures that would target descriptions of marginalized and historically oppressed groups in the United States. The Digital Strategies Team began investigating and developing a strategic framework to address these current inequities, which became known as the Subject Access Enhancement Initiative (SAEI). SAEI is inspired by the efforts of Dorothy Washington, a retired librarian from Purdue University's Black Cultural Center. In 1999, Washington proposed the African American Studies Section of the Association of College and Research Libraries establish the African American Funnel Project as part of the Program for Cooperative Cataloging's (PCC's) Subject Authority Cooperative Program (SACO). This effort helped transform access to African American studies research and scholarship. Librarians, archivists, and cultural heritage professionals are well-positioned to examine and change the structural racism existing in library catalogs and information systems. The Library of Congress Subject Headings (LCSH), a widely adopted vocabulary, is fraught with biased, racist, and outdated subject headings. SAEI has now evolved into a co-developed strategic collaboration between the SRCS and the technical services unit in Special Collections to rectify these disparities.

SAEI WORKING GROUP FORMATION AND MISSION

The initiative began by establishing a working group led by two co-chairs and including additional representatives from Metadata and Discovery Services, Special Collections Technical Services, Collections Development, and at-large membership. Library leadership charged the team with implementing a systematic program to address terminology over time rather than a quick fix for a limited group of headings. The team would focus on repairing the misrepresentation or lack of representation of marginalized communities in the catalog in alignment with the library's Inclusive Excellence initiatives. To achieve these goals, the working group assembled resources and convened speaking engagements to learn about bias in knowledge organization and the communities impacted; hosted a workshop to share goals and progress with library colleagues; created a proposal form to engage with students, faculty, and community members; and developed and documented a sustainable routine for recording and updating terms approved for enhancement. This case study will present the methods and approaches implemented to meet these goals.

RESOURCES

Team members consulted a variety of resources to inform their work and contextualize the initiative within broader developments in the profession. An OCLC white paper presented strategies for engaging in reparative work and highlighted the importance of building trust with impacted communities.³ Representatives from the Triangle Research Libraries Network’s Discovery Subject Remapping Initiative presented strategies and approaches for updating headings in a consortium catalog during an OCLC-hosted webinar.⁴ The Cataloging Lab website provided updates about critical cataloging activities in its “Critcatenate” monthly news roundup.⁵ A recently published “Cataloging Code of Ethics” underscored the importance of overcoming societal prejudices and recommitted metadata professionals to describing resources without discrimination.⁶ These resources supplied an ethical and disciplinary framework for the initiative and helped guide the team in its strategic planning and decision-making.

LEARNING SESSIONS

The SAEI working group orchestrated three learning sessions in 2021. These sessions delved into diverse and critical topics, namely the intricate relationship between language and U.S. slavery, the complexities of language concerning gender and sexuality, and the multifaceted nature of language and naming within the realm of Indigenous studies. Each session fostered educational growth within the university community, underscoring the library’s commitment to bolstering subject access to its resources in alignment with its broader endeavors toward diversity and inclusion. By incorporating these learning sessions into a cohesive approach, the library demonstrated its proactive efforts to enrich the academic environment and promote inclusivity.

PROPOSAL FORM

From the summer of 2021 onward, the SAEI working group developed a Subject Heading Revision Proposal form, with the purpose of facilitating the submission of recommendations for subject heading modifications by library colleagues (fig. 23.1). The form comprises five essential fields. The first

field pertains to the current subject heading in need of revision. The second field addresses the recommended revision itself. The third field necessitates the inclusion of a citation, which serves to demonstrate literary warrant for the proposed term. An optional fourth field allows for contact information, enabling further communication with the proposer for clarification, while also accommodating anonymous submissions. Lastly, the fifth field provides space for additional comments, including the provision of supplementary citations, examples, or resources to enhance the proposal's clarity and strengthen its validity.

The Library of Congress Subject Heading (LCSH) you'd like to revise *(required)*

Your suggested revision or improvement *(required)*

Please include a citation to demonstrate the proposed term is used in an existing resource
To ensure clarity and cross-compatibility, prior existence of a term is a requirement to ensure adequate grounds for adoption. (required)

Your name and email
This field is optional but highly encouraged so that subject experts can contact you with important follow-up information.

Any additional comments

FIGURE 23.1
UVA Subject Heading Revision Proposal form

LIBRARY WORKSHOP

To further the engagement of all library colleagues, the working group conducted a workshop in early 2022 titled “Hacking the Headings: Making Virgo More Inclusive.” The workshop encompassed a group presentation, explaining the new proposal form. This was followed by breakout workshops to foster collaborative discussions and knowledge-sharing. To gather valuable feedback and identify areas for further improvement, SAEI administered a post-workshop survey. The workshop garnered significant interest, with over thirty participants who expressed appreciation and enthusiasm for the work undertaken. Notably, one breakout group made a request for additional instructional content on basic cataloging and subject analysis, implying the presenters may have made assumptions regarding the participants’ existing knowledge levels.

RESEARCH METHODS AND TECHNOLOGY

The working group prioritized using authoritative resources endorsed by impacted communities when determining how to appropriately enhance a subject heading. An early proposal from the online form suggested that the group change the LCSH term “Transsexuals” to “Transgender people.” Initially lacking expertise on how to respond to the request, the group consulted the Homosaurus, a linked-data vocabulary for LGBTQ people. Homosaurus lists “Transgender people” as a broader term for “Transsexual people.” The group therefore opted to enhance the LCSH term “Transsexuals” to “Transsexual people” based on recommendations from a domain-specific vocabulary.

While the working group welcomed suggestions from the proposal form, group members also independently researched and implemented ideas from peer initiatives and community-driven vocabularies. Again, Homosaurus provided a source of inspiration for this work. The group modeled the vocabulary’s approach of emphasizing humanity by appending “people” to certain LCSH terms (table 23.1).

The Association for Manitoba Archives published a detailed description of their approach for revising LCSH terms containing the word “Indians.” Part of their strategy involved limiting some changes only to groups they consulted directly within the province of Manitoba.⁷ The UVA working group adopted

TABLE 23.1
Examples of enhanced subjects adding for “people”

LCSH Term	Revised Term
Gays	Gay people
Bisexuals	Bisexual people
Hearing impaired	Hard of hearing people
Deaf	Deaf people
Blind	Blind people

TABLE 23.2
UVA subject headings for Indigenous peoples in Virginia

LCSH Term	Revised Term
Cheroenhaka Indians	Cheroenhaka (Nottoway) Tribe
Monacan Indians	Monacan Indian Nation
Pamunkey Indians	Pamunkey Indian Tribe
Rappahannock Indians	Rappahannock Tribe

this approach and implemented changes to Indigenous groups in Virginia that provided preferred names via the university’s Native and Indigenous Relations Community (table 23.2).

Finally, the working group consulted with peers at the Triangle Research Libraries Network (TRLN) who, as mentioned above, widely promoted their efforts to revise headings. A list of changes they implemented are available in Github.⁸ After examining the work of the TLRN, the UVA enhancement initiative added one more change, from the term “Poor” to “Poor people.”

The group considered different options for implementing approved enhancements to terms. Some options included enhancing terms only in the library’s discovery layer Solr index or leveraging local authority records with documented “used for” notes to automate changes in the ILS. The group eventually settled on a find-and-replace approach in which terms are queried in subject-related MARC tags, record IDs are retrieved, and subject terms are enhanced using regular expressions with batch-editing tools supplied by the

local Sirsi ILS vendor. The edits include changing Indicator fields and subfields to show where subject headings have been replaced in each record. In addition to these specific changes, replaced terms are added as keywords when the record is indexed. This allows researchers to find records via keyword search in the discovery layer if they are searching by the original LCSH term.

IMPACT

The SAEI working group has changed 10 base LCSH terms to date. These changes impacted a total of 413 established LCSH headings where the base terms either show up in compound headings or in different permutations of the terms. A list of impacted headings is available online at the UVA Library website.⁹ These 413 enhanced headings updated a total of 12,631 records in the catalog. Additionally, during ongoing research, the team worked to articulate a basic set of guiding principles to steer their work derived from the Cataloguing Code of Ethics.

- Update headings to affirm the humanity of underrepresented or marginalized communities.
- Update headings with language preferred by underrepresented or marginalized communities.
- Contribute new headings to the SACO initiative that adequately describe underrepresented or marginalized communities.

These principles are by no means complete, and we anticipate expanding the list of priorities as work with the SAEI group evolves.

CONCLUSION

The University of Virginia's SAEI is a testament to its commitment to addressing historical inequities and structural racism within its library systems. By formulating a strategic framework, the library administration is dedicated to operationalizing the initiative through sustainable practices that rectify misrepresentations and the lack of representation experienced by marginalized communities in the library catalog. A pivotal aspect of the group's future endeavors involves actively contributing new headings to the SACO program, reinforcing the university's enduring resolve to ensure underrepresented or

marginalized communities receive adequate and accurate description within library catalogs. Significantly, the initiative's independence from the Library of Congress highlights the university's determination to pursue autonomous and sustainable practices transcending the current leadership. This commitment ensures the long-term viability and continuity of their work, anchored in principles of inclusivity and fairness.

NOTES

1. Matt Kelly, "A World Heritage Site, U.Va. Stays Historic, Modern and in Use Daily," *UVA Today*, December 14, 2012, <https://news.virginia.edu/content/world-heritage-site-uva-stays-historic-modern-and-use-daily>.
2. "Universities Studying Slavery," President's Commission on Slavery and the University, University of Virginia, <https://slavery.virginia.edu/universities-studying-slavery/>.
3. Rachel Frick and Merrilee Proffitt, "A Community-Informed Agenda for Reparative and Inclusive Descriptive Practice," 2022, OCLC, www.oclc.org/content/dam/research/publications/2022/oclcresearch-reimagine-descriptive-work-flows-a4.pdf.
4. Cory Lown and Lynn Whittenberger, "Remapping Subject Headings in TRLN Discovery," OCLC Cataloging Community Meeting, June 18, 2021, OCLC, www.oclc.org/go/en/events/cataloging-community-meeting/june-2021.html#session2.
5. Violet Fox, "Critcatenate," Cataloging Lab, 2023, <https://cataloginglab.org/category/critcatenate/>.
6. "A Code of Ethics for Catalogers," Cataloging Ethics Steering Committee, 2021, <https://sites.google.com/view/cataloging-ethics/home>.
7. Christine Bone and Brett Loughheed, "Library of Congress Subject Headings Related to Indigenous Peoples: Changing LCSH for Use in a Canadian Archival Context." *Cataloging & Classification Quarterly* 56, no. 1: 83–95, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01639374.2017.1382641>.
8. "MARC-to-argot," Github, https://github.com/trln/marc-to-argot/blob/main/lib/translation_maps/shared/subject_heading_remappings.yaml.
9. University of Virginia Library, <https://library.virginia.edu/about-uva-library/subject-headings>.