

## A Recipe for Progress in Local Government

### One Office's Struggle to Increase Equitable Living in Albemarle County

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“TODAY EQUITY IS A SENSITIVE TOPIC. I didn't want to fight for it on two fronts: in here and out there. When hiring interns, I was looking for someone who already understood its importance.” This was one of the first things my boss, Siri Russell, Director of the Albemarle County Office of Equity and Inclusion, told me. Her words resonated with me every day of my eight-week internship— they served as a constant reminder that my role as an intern impacted the image of equity our new office presented to the community-at-large.

The Albemarle County Office of Equity and Inclusion (OEI) is quite new; it was only established in the fall of 2018. Its mission is two-fold: first, to address existing disparities in community access to resources and services; second, to unearth the narratives of racial minorities that were systematically excluded from the historical record.

As one of two on-site interns at OEI, my work was focused on the development of the historical narrative for Albemarle County's first equity profile. An equity profile is a compilation of data collected from community field surveys, censuses, and questionnaires that evaluates the ability of residents to participate in a given community's local economy and access its resources and services. The goal of the profile is to offer concrete suggestions to local government offices on how to either expand the network of existing services or create new programs that better suit community needs.

### What is an Equitable Community?

When I first introduced OEI to my family as a local government office focused on promoting *equity*, they internalized it as a local government office for promoting *equality*. This misconception

was not limited to my relatives. Even in the Albemarle County Executive's Office where I worked, casual remarks by coworkers revealed that they use the words *equality* and *equity* interchangeably.

The reality is that equality and equity are not the same thing. Equality involves treating all residents in a community the same. An equal community is one in which all residents are provided the exact same resources and services. In some cases, initiatives for equal access are a prerequisite to those centered around equity.

Equity involves the recognition that history has made it so that there is an unlevel playing field such that some residents possess more privileges than others. An equitable community is one in which all residents are enabled to succeed regardless of race/ethnicity, nativity, religion, gender, sexual orientation, and income bracket, because those deprived of privileges are provided with the requisite resources to compensate (as much as possible) for historical transgressions. Interning at OEI, I realized how important equity is in Virginia where intergenerational social mobility is heavily hindered in the communities of color most impacted by slavery and Jim Crow.

### Interning at OEI

As a UVA student pursuing a degree in both Spanish and an interdisciplinary Politics and History program (PST), Director Russell placed me in charge of: designing the historical descriptions and outline for the equity profile; compiling audiovisual material for a County-wide 21 Day Equity Challenge; and assembling a report on the status of language accessibility (interpretation and translation services) in the County office building.

Initially, I was overwhelmed by the breadth of the projects to which I was assigned. I overcame this by dividing each project into a series of related tasks with an attached deadline. Whenever my progress faltered due to unforeseen complications, I reminded myself of how the given task

factored into OEI's mission. Considering how a specific task, like analyzing the historical factors behind the distribution of students on free/reduced lunches, could directly impact how much money is allocated to a community in the future, was a fantastic motivator. This perspective also taught me to concede counterpropositions to my ideas to generate the most optimal result.

### How Do You Promote an Equitable Community?

Before my internship at OEI, I was under the impression that progress on equity merely requires strong individual leaders with the charisma to push their agendas through a system resistant to change. A week in the office taught me that while Director Russell is certainly instrumental to getting equity-related initiatives (like the marker recognizing victims of lynching placed in front of the County Courthouse) on the County agenda, she could not have done it without the support of other local government officials and external organizations like the Jefferson School and the Equal Justice Initiative.

I think that one reason that university students like me, who believe in OEI's mission, but who have grown up immersed in social media, may be dissuaded from a career in local government offices like OEI, is because they lack the visibility and hence, in our minds, the transformability of their larger correspondents. Local governance just does not seem to have the sound bite potential of its federal and state counterparts. I have since learned that the recipe for progress in local government, indeed in any government, is neither the flashy promises of a single politician nor the grand speeches of an individual government official. It is a mixture of minute compromises, short-term goals married to long-standing visions, and relentless positivity in light of hundreds of setbacks. My time with OEI has taught me that those who fight for an equitable community may never make the front page, but they ensure more pages are written about women of color like me.