Project Gabriel- President’s Special Commission on Slavery and Justice

Minutes

August 10, 2023
Duration: 4:30 p.m. to 6 p.m.
Platform: Zoom

Attendees: Bonnie Newman Davis, Sheryl Garland, Magnus Johnsson, Rhonda Keyes Pleasants, Matt Conrad, Dr. Faye Belgrave, Dr. Leonard Edloe, Dr. Clifton Peay, Dr. Kevin Harris, Dr. Lauranett Lee, Jonsette Calloway

Charge: Based on the findings of the December 17, 2022 report on Slavery and the Medical College of Virginia, this Commission is charged with recommending to the Administration and Board of Visitors of VCU specific ways in which the institution should:

(i) memorialize all enslaved individuals who labored on MCV grounds and property; and
(ii) provide a tangible benefit such as a college scholarship or community-based economic development program for individuals or specific communities with a demonstrated historic connection to slavery.

Discussion/Updates

- Approval of June 15 meeting minutes
- Introduction of Bonnie Newman Davis
- Status of workgroup progress was discussed.
  - Memorialization (Dr. Belgrave)
    - Workgroup has met three times, with one final meeting next week
    - Established three subcommittees to focus on each recommendation
    - Each group is working to operationalize and provide fine-tuning to the broad recommendations, especially in regard to the first recommendation.
      - Making further recommendations around First African Baptist Church (FABC) feasibility; renovations will be determined by the functionality, which is another group's focus
      - There is a strong need to do a full feasibility study
      - Other discussions have taken place around FABC ownership
      - Collaboration with EMSWP Family Resource Council–want to use this project as an opportunity to close some of the FRC recommendations
      - Functionality–focused on the cultural, educational, usage of the space (paired with FRC recommendations)
■ Dr. Edloe–It will be a long-term effort when it comes to the building; it has been inspiring to think about “what can be” for the space.
■ Dr. Belgrave–Pre-planning study would be long-term, whereas recommendations from FRC may be longer term.
■ M. Johnsson–Dr. Carmen Foster provided great insight on positioning the project for those in and outside of Richmond.
  ● B. Martin–Valentine Museum is doing additional research related to medical findings; current findings should be incorporated into mission.
  ● Dr. Belgrave–We see the long term objectives as intersectional and additional findings can augment each other.
  ● M. Conrad–EMSWP has been stood up to reconcile MCV and the remains; Gabriel Proj. could expand beyond to include this; would Gabriel recommendations be a part of EMSWP or usurping their process and scope?
    ○ Dr. Belgrave–FRC developed recommendations to be part of the larger group of recommendations.
    ○ R. Keyes Pleasants–FRC was formed prior to HB1980 and goes back a few years; would not be usurping either one’s thought process, but all decisions are to be considered collaborative and a meeting point between both groups because in some regard, the recommendations are very similar.
  ■ M. Conrad–Interested in knowing what that collaboration looks like
  ■ R. Keyes Pleasants–FRC is very interested and supportive of the FABC renovation and using the area for reflection, contemplation, education, and recently added recommendations to be more specific around this.
    ● Expressed strong interest in using FABC.
  ● Dr. Peay–He and Sheryl had a conference call with the FABC pastor who strongly supports the plans for renovation; there is no separate agenda.
  ● S. Garland–One of the ideas presented was to pursue a black church preservation grant; Development and Alumni Relations team did their due diligence to research this; a decision was made not to pursue at this time due to concerns with approval process and additional details around the building’s usage; there is a recommendation to look at this opportunity in the future.
  ○ Scholarships (Dr. Harris)
  ■ Dr. Harris–Had discussion with the scholarship workgroup to remind them of what’s at stake.
- Group did homework prior to meeting; felt comfortable identifying a scholarship framework and reviewed funding to put together a sustained effort
- Group is using the time to think through options to determine the best direction to proceed, considering all parameters/concerns, etc.; opportunity to think about how they can strengthen certain efforts
- Workgroup was advised to explore options for funding, to be included in final report
  - Community Programs for Individuals (S. Garland)
    - Dr. Douglas-Glenn and Sheryl will meet in late August to share findings from both workgroups
    - Removed “underperforming schools” from language
    - Workgroup wanted to know how many parents, students impacted were at the forums and recommended securing additional feedback
    - Group is crosswalking what youth said and what came from the forums to develop the operational plan
    - N. Bailey recommended a meeting with the RPS Superintendent
    - Discovered VCU and community partners are already engaged; next step is to reach out to partners
      - Dr. Belgrave–offered to be used as a resource for partnerships
      - M. Conrad–offered to be a bridge for RPS
  - S. Garland–Additional recommendations that should come out of the steering committee: how Proj. Gabriel will be going forward, a communications plan, organizational structure; need language around these ideas for the final report.
- Question regarding timeline
  - Submitting recommendations to S. Garland and Dr. Peay by Aug. 21
  - B. Newman Davis to have draft report by Sept. 1-5, with a final report by Sept. 8
    - Ideally, the steering committee will review; J. Calloway to place in Google Docs.
    - Will ask Dr. Higginbotham to review

**Action**
- Co-chairs to submit recommendations by Aug. 21

**Next steps**
- Workgroup co-chairs to continue development of operational plans
- Commission to think on ideas around Gabriel’s organizational structure