

# ACH Racial Justice Project

*Initial analysis and recommendations*

*May 7, 2021*

## Background

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DeEtta Jones & Associates (DJA) has partnered the Association for Computers and the Humanities (ACH) to conduct a systematic review of ACH policies and organizational culture as it relates to issues of structural racism, particularly in connection with the ACH conference, publications, governance, and leadership.

This document contains our initial recommendations as informed by several groups within and affiliates of ACH, as well as the DJA team's expertise in EDI and professional association leadership. The next step in this project will be to socialize these recommendations with a broader scope of members and those outside the Association to further refine and scope for next steps..

## Groups consulted

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DJA consultant Tyler Dzuba worked with the following groups to gather information for this analysis:

- Officers
- Executive Council
- Publications Committee
- Conference Committees
- Membership Committee
- Editor-in-Chief of Digital Humanities Quarterly
- Former ACH President Bethany Nowviskie

In addition, Tyler worked with ACH Secretary Vika Zafrin to collect applicable policy documents and background materials.

Additional groups will be identified in future stages of this project for additional consultation.

## High-Level Themes

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Through interviews with the groups listed about, DJA identified the following themes:

## ACH has made considerable progress to date

It is clearly evident that the ACH Officers and Executive Council have put a great deal of thought into responsibly managing their community with respect to racial justice. For example:

- The conference committees have worked to signal particular welcome to scholars of color in RFPs, have prioritized early-career scholars and non-traditional methodologies in lightning talks and invited art installations, and have been thoughtful toward the multiplier effect on BIPOC and gender non-conforming scholars who are often involved with many conferences at once.
- DHQ has prioritized supporting submitters through thoughtful and detailed review, especially for pieces that are eventually declined. This is seen by some colleagues as a particular service to junior scholars and those from different backgrounds. There is an opportunity to consider the next evolutions of this process.
- The publications committee is specifically paying attention to systemic models as opposed to quick solutions, particularly around access to publication venues and board seats for earlier-career scholars and for those representing less traditional methodologies.
- The membership committee is thinking directly about how ACH can support and raise the profile of DH scholars at HBCUs, as well as a richer mentoring program to connect people who are new scholars or moving sideways into DH.
- ACH has been paying close attention to pathways to leadership and influence in the field and how those have traditionally been more closed to non-White colleagues due to structural elements of the field and its social networks. The time needed to commit to organizational service, however, is often more difficult to come by for BIPOC scholars, given that they are typically called upon from many directions.
- As a small association, ACH has taken on the helm of advocacy on key issues, representing a multidisciplinary and influential emerging field. Members appreciate the association's voice, and there is opportunity to expand this role.

All of these examples clearly indicate that ACH is headed the right direction. This is an association with solid anti-racist values and clearly prioritizing this work. This does not mean that the organization has "arrived". Rather, it has solid footing and the capacity to move forward quickly.

## “Forming a field” - the rules are unwritten

One of the key elements that arose in nearly every conversation is that, over only 40 years, ACH has been at the center of forming DH as a new field. The rules are not written as firmly as they are in other fields, which both provides a rich testing ground for new ideas and creates challenges in defining the scope of the association's work.

In particular, there are notable opportunities around designing scholarly communication workflows within ACH itself and supporting changes in members' own organizations, and collective service to prioritize de-biasing systems. The main ways in which members of the DH community interact with ACH—as an author, as a presenter, as a volunteer, and as a developing scholar—are all laden with numerous assumptions around how these roles “should” play out in a scholarly association. ACH has the opportunity to define new molds.

No conversation about ACH can happen without also discussing the global DH community, ADHO, and EADH. All members of ACH who I spoke with pointed to the global impacts of racism and the need for anti-racist action within and beyond the US. Of course, the particular meaning and impact of race and racism varies from place to place, especially in context of colonization and scholarly mores. At the same time, it is the role of scholarly associations to address the impacts of race and racism regionally and in the context of their members. Both local and global efforts are important; ACH has a seat at the international table, and has the capacity to lead.

## Distributed effort

The nature of work in scholarly associations is challenging: volunteer member-leaders on rotation attempt to move an organization in a cohesive path through changing environments. Every group also pointed to the challenges here.

Some particular elements that stood out:

- ACH has made a conscious effort to shift power on the Executive Council from senior scholars to their junior counterparts. While this choice has created service opportunities and voice for early-career members, there is also a lost element of history and seasoned knowledge.
- The Association has also consciously extended terms on the Exec to four years to provide some continuity from year to year. This structure enables ongoing work to proceed more smoothly, but also entrenches challenges around inequity of workload. Usually, a few people take on the brunt of the work, and others less; when terms are longer, the influence of a handful of Exec members becomes outsized.
- DHQ offers a particularly salient example: peer review as it exists relies heavily on detailed analysis from volunteer reviewers. Diversifying the reviewer pool is absolutely an expressed priority. At the same time, it's challenging to grapple with the overcommitment from those same reviewers representing non-dominant identities. In addition, the editorial board overrepresents those who have the time to commit: usually more senior scholars with available time and sufficient clout.

## DJA Analysis

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There are two main challenges facing ACH with respect to racial justice: doing the work, and building membership to support the work. “There is no formula for how to align an organization’s commitment to racial justice with its policies, practices, culture, and ethos. Doing this work organizationally is also about building internal will. It is about taking risks in word and deed. It is about working with integrity and being accountable to people and communities most impacted by structural racism.” ([source](#)) These are not unique to ACH: all

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professional associations are dealing with similar issues of how to identify and prioritize the right steps forward. This is a particularly salient set of circumstances for a small association like ACH, however. With little to no paid staff capacity and a volunteer base with varying degrees of time and capacity, the key will be identifying particular areas to start.

Most organizations, in our experience, pose similar questions in prioritizing racial justice initiatives. How do we do right by our members? What are the initiatives we want to prioritize? The speedbump for many of them, though, is trying to do too much too quickly for the capacity they have. In this way, they get overwhelmed by the volume of options available.

Across ACH, there are a ton of good things happening already. The Association is interested in narrowing its focus to what it has control over and has particular expertise in. This falls in line with best practice: ACH cannot do everything under the sun, and judicious selection will be needed in designing an effective strategy to address structural racism in the organization.

Best practice in association management offers three primary elements that may be relevant for ACH to pursue:

- **Agile boards and governance structures:** associations are moving beyond a comprehensive representation model of governance, in which we assume that only a seat at the board leads to a group being prioritized. Rather, we are finding that the most effective boards limit their membership to approximately 6-8 members, carrying approximately 3-year terms staggered for continuity. Smaller boards enable rapid iteration, focused work, and a necessarily restricted scope. Additionally, committees and working groups are rarely formed in perpetuity. These groups should be formed with a clear charge, timeline, and membership, prioritizing discrete short-term work in the context of long-term guidance from the board.
  - DJA worked recently with Code for Science & Society and Invest in Open Infrastructure to develop a set of [guidelines for anti-racist board governance](#) which may be useful for ACH's consideration.
- **Tell the story:** in soliciting members, associations must point directly to what the member will gain from involvement. Is it continuing education? Advocacy for structural change the member cares about? A core network? Collaborators? Any combination of these are fine, but the prospect has to be able to see themselves in the association before joining and committing effort. This story benefits as well from the agility described above: professional associations can't rely on expecting members to pay their dues for years while waiting for the opportunities they eventually want. Give new members a path from day one to make a difference.
- **Design an adaptable plan, not a years-long strategy:** the days of 5- or 8-year strategic plans are ending. Even projecting work 3 years into the future is a challenge. Rather, best practice across industries increasingly starts with values and core priorities that are extremely unlikely to change from year to year. Then every 12 to 24 months, an organization can reassess actions, celebrate successes, adjust direction as needed, and plan for the next brief cycle.

Anti-racism starts with individual *and* collective action. In the same way that we cannot have an association without prioritizing its members, we cannot enact systemic change without emphasizing the role of the individual in community. As ACH seeks to de-bias systems and deconstruct systemic racism, it will need to focus on what individuals in power are able to do about policy and practice within the Association and its affiliates. Some systems are not directly within your control, but some are.

The top challenge that DJA sees organizations fall into when trying to create equitable structures is overwhelm: we see the million ways the world could be better, and if each of those things were *just so*, we would have fixed the problem. Faced with an impossible task—fixing racism, for instance—we become paralyzed and choose to do nothing or, worse, enter an endless cycle of analysis and toy actions. The perfect is the enemy of the good: organizations that succeed in advancing equity realize that not every action is doable at once, so they must pick a place to start and expand from there.

This choice is where values and guiding principles come in. When we directly discuss what we as an organization hold dear and what we want to say is true about us in a year or two, we clarify our next steps. We also must honestly assess our capacity. If “fixing racism” is too much for one year (it is), then we need to determine how many projects we can hold together at one time.

The next key element to avoid stagnation is having a plan to revisit from time to time. In one year, for example, we can determine how far we’ve come, check off any projects we’ve finished, and add new ones that build on our successes and what we’ve learned.

Finally, *associations are us*, even more so than normal work environments. An association board does not need to do all the work themselves: they have the opportunity to call folks into the room, share power, and lean into the interdependence that members have with each other.

## Recommendations

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DJA proposes the following recommendations as potential ways forward. Not all of these need to be acted upon immediately: rather, they represent a set of possibilities which advance the racial justice work of the Association in ways that are consistent with its existing approaches, expressed values, and academic mission.

Here, we have identified recommendations particular to the four areas in scope for our work, as well as several overarching recommendations.

## Conference

1. **Continue to prioritize modes of scholarship outside the norm for DH.** In particular, seeking non-mainstream topics, methodologies, perspectives, and modalities will continue to mark ACH conferences as an option for voices who have not found a place in more traditional associations or venues.
2. **Develop and promote accessible cross-modal ways to participate once in-person conferences are possible again.** The necessity of virtual conferences in 2020 and 2021 has highlighted how virtual offerings broaden access for those who may not be able to travel for any number of reasons, including

lack of funding, local responsibilities, or disability. Future in-person conferences should be supplemented with meaningful ways for colleagues to gather without attending in person. This might include livestreams, sessions repeated online, and complementary parallel tracks for those who are not on-site.

- a. For online-first inspiration, consider the recent [International Conference on Linguistics Communication](#) and its use of [Gather](#).

## Publications

1. **Work with DHQ to examine the needs and paths forward for racial justice in the journals' work**, including the review process, editorial board appointment process, and topical focuses. Conversions should occur early and often, with the aim of clarifying the next steps.
  - a. ACH and DHQ would do well to consider as a case study the recent errors in editorial judgement from the Journal of Medical Library Association (as documented in their own [apology](#) and the reflections of two of the [affected authors](#)). How can DHQ get ahead of similar potential harm?
2. **Explore additional opportunities to place earlier-career folks in roles of influence** on editorial boards and in reviewer roles. Consider broad ranges of publication venues which are connected to the DH community.

## Governance

1. **Establish a standing agenda item for the Officers and Exec on racial justice initiatives.** There will be particular actions arising in all of these areas that require oversight and sustained attention.
2. Coordinate racial justice activity as a top priority for all committees and member initiatives. This could happen in a number of different ways: aim for developing a set of goals overall for what racial justice looks like in DH and in ACH, and then determine what is in scope for each group.
3. Elevate the voices of members who bring perspectives not currently represented on the Executive Council. Potential sources could be those who present non-mainstream modes of scholarship in ACH-affiliated venues.
  - a. Consider opportunities for providing a platform, such as taking over the ACH Twitter account for a day to highlight non-dominant scholarship and communities in DH, or allowing a working group to define a particular segment of regular member meetings.
4. Consider implementing additional officer nomination and onboarding practices that prioritize anti-racism. DJA has prepared a detailed set of [white papers related to best practices for board governance](#) which may be relevant.
5. Engage in conversation on how the current governance and committee structure serves or does not serve the Association's goals around racial justice. Considering the current structure, there is a lot of emphasis on getting things started within the Executive Council. One opportunity is to develop new

methods for appointments and charging groups that prioritize underrepresented voices, and giving those voices power to move the organization.

## Leadership

1. **Lean toward ACH's role as a voice for social justice in DH and beyond.** The advocacy role—toward legislation, toward equity in scholarly circles, and toward the well-being of marginalized DH workers—is an opportunity to make a difference broadly.
2. **You don't need a multi-year strategic plan, but you do need strategy.** Rather than attempting to project specific actions far into the future, define several specific values and areas of focused, aspirational action that will endure year to year. Work across the membership to define these together. There will be some disagreement on the particulars, and the Association will be better equipped to select clear paths forward for having had the conversation. Specifically, one of those ongoing areas or a guiding principle spanning them will be anti-racism. Others might include advocacy, member engagement, programming, publications, and association governance, for example.

Values are a broader conversation: who do you want to be as ACH, and as a part of the DH community? What are the successes you most celebrate, and what qualities do those exemplify? A clear statement of organizational values will also help you identify clear action areas.

Once you have those values and action areas (or strategic priorities) in place, you can identify specific actions that will move you closer to your aspirations in the coming 18–24 months. On a regular basis, these can be revisited with members and member-leaders to celebrate success to date and to set goals for the coming cycle.

One methodology might include a set of two immediate member-inclusive conversations, followed by a defined review process:

- a. Define shared values through participatory discussions. Begin with appreciative inquiry: what high-point experiences have you had in ACH or similar venues? Then, what values have those experiences exemplified? In small groups, define shared values based on individual values, then perform an analysis across groups to arrive at a set of organizational shared values that reflect the wider experiences of participating members.
- b. Define areas of action that broadly define ACH's strategic work. This work could draw on traditional strategic planning methodology, but it might make sense to start with draft areas as listed above: anti-racism, advocacy, member engagement, programming, publications, and governance. These can be presented to the membership with draft definitions, for the purpose of discussion and clarification.
- c. Once areas of action and shared values are defined, plan for initiatives that fit within those areas. Those initiatives should be on an 18- to 24-month scale. Then, toward the end of that cycle, take time to assess progress, adjust course, and develop following initiatives.

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## Overarching

1. **Invite members presenting DH work outside mainstream perspectives to advise the work of the Association.** As ACH conferences and publications have been seeking non-majority viewpoints and methods to feature, the Association has a built-in starting place for seeking advice from these scholars. Whether through formal venues such as an advisory committee or informal venues such as continued focus groups and conversations, these people would have particular insight into what their communities could gain from an association like ACH beyond publication exposure.
2. In relation to the previous recommendation, **advance ways to compensate advisory work about the structures and approaches of the Association.** There is a key difference between working within a scholarly association as a member, and working *on* an association in an advisory role. One model would be to convene a compensated quarterly or semi-annual advisory group representing non-dominant identities and spaces in the field to discuss current initiatives, gaps, and opportunities to advance equity.
  - a. Compensation may be monetary or include cash proxies that are meaningful to participants: comped membership and registration at the annual meeting,
3. **Specifically prioritize member-driven projects and enduring contributions.** These include resources developed and maintained by member-leaders such as DHQ, or the recent guide on anti-racist technical terminology (and accompanying bibliography), but can and should prioritize projects that are not driven from above. ACH has clearly set itself up well to advance social justice in the DH community and beyond. The Association can continue to build upon this work by consistently organizing short-term member-driven groups to produce and highlight work that advances social justice, and racial justice particularly, and dismantles systems of inequity across DH and affiliated fields.
  - a. The Digital Library Federation<sup>1</sup> has carried out similar work with its [working group](#) structure, which is supported by paid staff. ACH will need to consider feasibility and complexity given the varying amounts of time and resources that volunteer member-leaders can devote.
4. **Continue to recognize the volunteer burden upon people from underrepresented groups.** Short-term projects with defined deliverables help volunteers plan their time well. Relatedly, pay mind to scope creep in ACH activities: while some members may be more than happy to do more than was originally asked, it is likely that the non-white, non-senior, non-traditional scholars you would like to build space for will be excluded by ever-expanding projects.
5. **Establish policy/practices on the accessibility of online and in-person discussions.** Consider topics such as:
  - a. Social accessibility: how do scholars and practitioners gain access to conversations among ACH members? How are they supported as new members? Who is missing, and why?

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<sup>1</sup> Thanks to Patricia Hswe for pointing to DLF as an exemplar, and for this suggestion!



- b. Event accessibility: for physical events, what are the practices around disability and access to venues and content? How do those who can't travel participate? What are the expected practices for online events?
6. **Devote specific member-driven effort to communication.** The great perk to being as far down the road as ACH is is that you have a lot to celebrate publicly. Regular small communication creates a virtuous cycle: prospective members hear about the great work ACH is doing and value that work; when an opportunity arises to collaborate, those prospects take the reins; they produce amazing outcomes; and ACH can share those successes further. The key here is **persistence and closing the loop**.
- a. Share the good things that are happening: use the venues that exist to share the particular work that committees, the Exec, and officers are doing right now. In particular, call attention to the many racial justice related activities across the Association. Tell the story!
  - b. Commit to regular updates: if one or two people can devote a couple of hours per week to sharing successes, then you'll begin to develop momentum and a continued reputation for results. Use the news page, social media, and other venues as appropriate.
  - c. Have a wish list: beyond your first few initiatives, point out several additional racial justice activities that ACH would like to pursue if only members would support them. Clarify specific projects, specific timelines, and specific skills needed. Ask folks to come along and make those things real.
    - i. Some of the initiatives on this list may be included. We also recommend developing particular ways to advance ideas from the broader membership as part of the next phase of this project.
  - d. Encourage member-driven initiatives. Not every idea needs to come from the board. If there were a particular way in which members (or prospective members) could share project ideas centrally, then it will be easier for volunteers to find each other, and for the Exec to support the good work that they want to do.
  - e. Make the website accurate: at this stage, the website is partially out of date. As the center of publicly facing activity, make it clear which ways members can successfully engage with each other, and ways that the community can learn what ACH is up to.

## Next steps

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As called out in the definition of the project, ACH is particularly interested in examining structural racism in conferences, publications, governance, and leadership. So as to not boil the ocean, DJA recommends that the Executive Council select one or two initiatives in each of those four areas, as well as prioritize a set of initiatives to come next. Start with those and develop momentum.

This work should occur in consultation with the broader membership and external groups, such as former members, former leaders, and colleagues across disciplines. Once this report is released, the next immediate step will be to hold conversations among the broader membership to develop priorities, context, reactions, and needs for further discussion.

Once an initial set of initiatives is identified, ACH should plan for implementation over time and with the input of a diverse swath of members. There are a lot of opportunities to act quickly; care should be taken to also create time for discussion, different viewpoints, and refinement of the process over time.