

NEWSROOM

[Home](#) / [News](#) / [2020](#) / [July](#) / Students Lead Conversations on Equality

STUDENTS LEAD CONVERSATIONS ON EQUALITY

FOUR BONNER SERVICE SCHOLARS CONNECT WITH HUNDREDS OF THEIR PEERS
THROUGH INSTAGRAM-BASED INITIATIVE.

by [Jane Heeter](#) | July 6, 2020

Above: Left to right: Bailee Comer, Malik Dickens, Sydney King, Vanessa Lin

Read time: about 3 min

Four Christopher Newport students hope to increase understanding about injustice and inequality – one video chat at a time.

When the death of George Floyd ignited conversations about race in the United States, juniors Bailee Comer and Sydney King and seniors Malik Dickens and Vanessa Lin decided to act. All four are Bonner Service Scholars, a program in which students spend four years dedicating hours of service each week to a local community organization.

Within a few days, they'd set up an Instagram account for their initiative, which they called Colleges for Equality. Its goal is to engage young people in conversations about systemic racism.

The idea first came about after a video call for Bonner Scholars to discuss the Black Lives Matter movement, facilitated by Vanessa Buehlman, director of the [Center for Community Engagement](#) and the Bonner Service Scholars Program.

“With all the emotions that were running high everywhere, it felt really good just to have people to talk to about these kinds of issues,” said Lin, a [biochemistry and biology](#) double major, member of the [Honors Program](#) and president of the Student Honor Council. “That’s part of what we do in the school year (as Bonner Scholars). We have an environment to be able to talk about what’s going on in the world.”

The group planned as it went, sketching out a week’s worth of content via live videos on Instagram. By reaching out to other universities in Virginia and the Bonner network, followers jumped from 30 to over 200 in a few days.

They locked in a different topic related to systemic racism to discuss each day, including access to education, privilege, politics and power. Each evening discussion began with a video introduction by Vidal Dickerson, special assistant to the vice president of student affairs for diversity and inclusion and a frequent adviser to the Bonner Scholars. “Homework” had been given out in the form of five to six articles, TedTalks or other resources related to the subject.

Dickens facilitated the live discussions with students from Christopher Newport organizations and other campuses, including representatives from the College of William & Mary, Virginia Commonwealth University and Carson-Newman University in Tennessee.

“The conversations were a learning thing. It wasn’t for people who already knew all the issues going on,” said Dickens, a [history](#) major and president of the Black Student Union. “It was definitely for people who see that something is going on, but they want to know what’s the background behind that, the systems in place that perpetuate these racial inequalities. It was a group learning situation through these conversations.”

Participants were able to ask one another questions, to challenge their preconceived notions or to ask why a system is the way it is. Viewers could also chime in with questions to further the discussion, making the live format as conversational as possible.

Sometimes participants disagreed or came to an issue with a different level of understanding, a true jumping-off point for deep discussion.

By the end of the week, almost 1,000 users had followed the account. Over 2,400 had interacted in some way with the content, with over 300 accessing the resources. Fourteen videos were viewed nearly 7,000 times.

“Through this we recognized the power that we have to kind of say, ‘Let’s start and see where it goes,’” said Comer, a [political science major](#) and member of the [President’s Leadership Program](#). “Seeing the power youth have today and we can really change what we want, we can band together, that was my huge takeaway. We have a lot of power in being humble and saying, ‘This is where I am. How do I move forward?’”

The final event included a panel discussion with Buehlman, current student Quentin Watts, Dr. Danielle Stern, associate professor of communication, Dr. Angela Spranger, assistant professor of management, Newport News Police Chief Steve Drew and Newport News Sheriff Gabe Morgan, a member of the Board of Visitors and chair of the university’s Council on Diversity and Inclusion. The Multicultural Alumni Chapter shared information about how to get involved with the group.

“I am incredibly proud of our students. The thoughtfulness, quality and integrity of what they put together and the participation they were able to garner in a few short days is truly astounding. The event was wonderful from start to finish,” said Buehlman.

The group isn’t sure what the next chapter of Colleges for Equality will look like once the school year gets underway, other than that the conversations will continue. And one thing is for certain: it will be led by students, for students.

“It was very heartening to see so many young people and college students wanting to get engaged in it,” said King, a [philosophy](#) major and member of the President’s Leadership and Honors Programs. “We wanted to create something we would want. It was very cool to be learning with this thing that we created. We can hold this space for these conversations.”

