Beyond Closing the Digital Divide

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Beyond Closing the Digital Divide

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Beyond Closing the Digital Divide

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Community Technology Centers have been one means for low income and minority populations to gain increased access to computer and Internet technology. A federal grant to Centro Cultural in Washington County, Oregon allowed local groups to focus resources on providing the low-income Latino population with technology education and access. The consequence of these efforts is significant beyond the effect it has on reducing the digital divide because, for this community, access to technology means something very different from what it does for those on the other side of the divide.

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.01 **Introduction** *(return to index)*

In recent years it has become apparent that technology may contribute to further separating those already advantaged by the society from those who are not. Low-income and minority populations are significantly less likely to have opportunities to learn about and use computer and Internet tools. This “digital divide” has attracted considerable attention with recognition that access to and skill with technology will be necessary for full and equitable participation in the economic and civic life of the nation.[1] Government and private efforts have been underway for over a decade now to bridge this gap.[2] One current federal government initiative is the Community Technology Centers program funded by the Department of Education.[3]

Community Technology Centers (CTCs) started during the 90′s as a result of the efforts of Antonia Stone who, using NSF funds, built her computer technology center in Harlem into an independent non-profit organization that supports CTCs across the country.[4] These centers vary widely in their target population, their origins, their physical situation, and their ties to communities, funding sources and other agencies. Yet they all serve a common purpose of providing disadvantaged populations with access to computers and technology learning opportunities. At present there are over 700 CTCs, with 250 supported by Department of Education grants. The DE began offering three-year grants in 1999 for model programs, and last spring received additional monies from Congress for continued efforts during the next budget cycle. Yet, significantly, there was much controversy about the refunding, with a sharp reduction in level of support for this program because of the recent evidence that the divide was diminishing.[5] What is missing from the current debate is consideration of what potential role technology serves in the lives of the disadvantaged that makes access and continued financial and social support so necessary.

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This paper reports on a CTC grant project for a low-income, Latino population in Washington County, Oregon. However the focus here is not just on the establishment of this CTC and its success in increasing the access of the local population to computer technology. It is also on how such a project represents the potential of CTCs to accomplish much more than just reducing the digital divide. For those who are disadvantaged, access to technology offers something different than what it does for those who already have a place in the society. It offers the opportunity to gain the competencies in language and basic knowledge, and perhaps more importantly, the confidence and the hope that are not even at issue for most of those on the other side of the divide. Recognition of this potential, and the value of this outcome, may make it possible for efforts to bridge the divide to be more broadly supported.

Washington County is a rapidly growing area near Portland, Oregon where high-tech companies populate the eastern half with middle to upper-income professionals while the western half is still rural, with Latinos representing 20% or more of the residents. Most of these families relying on agricultural or nursery work. Many live in poverty: 70-75% of the children in the local elementary
schools qualify for free lunches. Many have low English skills and most do not have access to computers. In 2001, Centro Cultural, the local organization that was already a focal point for economic assistance and for educational outreach from the state,[6] became the center of an effort to obtain a Department of Education grant to fund “Access Technology,” a project to expand the availability of computers and technology education for the low-income population. A major component of the grant was partnerships with other agencies, institutions and businesses that were already involved in that area. The partners included Intel Corporation, Pacific University (a nearby private institution), Portland Community College Family Literacy and Adult Basic Education programs, the Washington County Public Libraries, Oregon State University Extension’s 4-H Web Wizards, and the two major local school districts. In all, these represent a useful mix of public and private, education and business organizations.

Upon receiving the grant, a coordinator and staff were hired, and a board of representatives from the partner organizations established to provide resources and guidance as needed. Crucial to the success of this endeavor were the computer facilities available as sites for classes and labs. Intel Corporation and Oregon State Extension Service had already funded three labs that were well-equipped but under-utilized. The school districts and Pacific University offered their computer facilities as additional sites. This allowed the focus of the grant effort to be on the development and delivery of an appropriate curriculum, evaluation procedures, and outreach. For this effort, the community college partners could provide adaptable curricula, while the Web Wizard program, which required 15 hours of mentoring from its youth participants, helped with staffing. Recruitment was through the school districts, the Community College programs, Centro Cultural staff and programs, a network of Latino Family Service organizations, the Oregon Employment Department, plus local businesses, churches and other organizations. Teachers and aides fluent in Spanish, convenient hours, a focus on foundational skills, and a comfortable, inviting approach produced a flood of interested participants.

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In the next six months, over 750 people attended classes to learn basic computer skills such as MSWord and Excel, Internet and email use. The sessions met twice a week for three months. Six or eight classes ran concurrently, held at different times and at different sites to enable everyone possible to be able to attend. Few students missed any sessions. Over 100 more waited for the opportunity to take the basic course. Over 100 more waited for the opportunity to take the basic course. Almost equal numbers of men and women signed up. They ranged in age from teens to seniors, although the majority was between 20 and 40. Most had only completed elementary or junior high school (70%), were married (65%), with more than half having children. The majority (65%) was currently employed, and all had at least one family member in the work force. Yet almost all of the families had yearly incomes below $20,000.

Once the organization of staff, lab support system and basic classes was established, grant money was used to develop a second level of instruction where students could move on to more advanced skills such as web-page design and Power Point presentations. Over 120 students
completed the advanced class. A graduation ceremony at the end of the summer celebrated the accomplishments of all.

The computer lab at Centro Cultural was also opened throughout most of the day for the students, and anyone else interested, to have access to the machines and knowledgeable help in Spanish. From the log-in sheets, the lab was used over 480 hours in six months. Here the money from the grant was used to purchase software that would be useful for the community in general. Other funding sources were tapped to provide additional hardware. Where originally there were 8 older computers there were now 25 new and upgraded models. Resources were also found to have the lab open 12 hours a day Monday through Friday, staffed by a Spanish speaking aide to ensure that the community truly does have ready access and assistance.

The objective of the grant had been to increase the computer access and skill of a disadvantaged population. For this, the funded project was highly successful, as measured in traditional terms of numbers who are able to use the computer at a certain level as a consequence of the activities stimulated by the grant. However, those numbers do not capture all that was accomplished, or indicate what is only now possible to accomplish in this community.

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What is more important to recognize than the reduction of the digital divide is the value of this achievement to the individual, one of many now in this community, who is not fluent in English, did not get far in formal schooling in Spanish, had little or no exposure to computers before, but who at the end of six months can give a Power Point presentation, or create a web page, or construct an Excel worksheet. For such an individual, that accomplishment brings a great sense of confidence and hope, far beyond what it would represent to someone who does not face such daunting barriers to a better life. In addition, while gaining specific computer skills is helpful for anyone, for the disadvantaged, this new ability to use technology provides a means to overcome the barriers they face. Because of the capacity of current technology to provide interactive learning experiences, these community residents can now work on their own to learn English, and build the knowledge base and skills in reading, writing and mathematics required for civic participation and economic advancement. Since few traditional means – i.e. the avenues the more advantaged take for granted– are available to provide this population with what they need, the greatest potential benefits of bridging the digital divide is that computer technology can become the means to fulfill those needs.

What is required for this self-sufficiency is continued access and guidance like that provided by Centro Cultural. The center is rooted in the local community. It is responsive to the lives and needs of the people there. With the grant, the Center has built partnerships with local public and private agencies to enhance their investment in the community, and to focus local resources to ensure continuation of that commitment. This is what is meant by building the community’s capacity to improve the lives of its members. Further, the original grant allowed the center to develop the organization and purchase the software to be used to help this community learn
English, basic education, and job skills. In the future, to further contribute to the residents' possibilities for economic advancement, the center wants to work with local businesses to determine what technology skills are needed and provide the interactive computer software that can train the residents to move into specific jobs.

Unfortunately, the federal government has not continued its previous level of support of CTCs. The Department of Education grants are now for one year rather than three. Given the need throughout the country for such assistance, and the sharp reduction in total program funding, competition is high. If Centro Cultural does not receive another grant, some basic computer classes will continue, and the lab will be available to the community. However, there may be no coordinator, and the center will have less of an ability to address the larger purpose. The potential in this community for using technology to substantially improve the lives of the residents may go unrealized.

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Because of the Access Technology grant from the Department of Education, Centro Cultural of Washington County, Oregon has built a program that incorporates all the elements crucial for success in providing a disadvantaged population with the opportunity to engage with technology as a means to enhance educational, social, economic and political participation. The results from this project make it clear that bridging the digital divide is not valuable just for itself but because technology can now directly provide the means for economic improvement, social integration and a sense of personal empowerment. Technological access is the road to independence, to self-sufficiency, where there have been few traditional avenues available. It is important that the commitment to continue these efforts does not falter.[7]

**References** (return to index)


Other United States Government granting programs for community-based technology access include Technology Opportunities Program (TOP) (http://www.ntia.doc.gov/otiahome/top/) And the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) Neighborhood Network:http://www.hud.gov/nnw/nnwaboutnn.html


http://www.ntia.doc.gov/ntiahome/dn/
See the editorial by Jeffrey Barlow in the Journal of Education, Community and Values: Interface on the Internet


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3 THOUGHTS ON “BEYOND CLOSING THE DIGITAL DIVIDE”

Antoine Phillippi
on January 30, 2014 at 6:14 PM said:

I believe this is among the such a lot important information for me. And i’m happy studying your article. However should observation on some common things, The web site taste is ideal, the articles is truly excellent : D. Excellent process, cheers

nigeria entertainment news
on February 4, 2014 at 10:41 AM said:

Hello there, You have done a excellent job. I will definitely digg it and personally recommend to my friends. I am certain they’ll be benefited from this website.

ways to make make money fast and legal.
on February 5, 2014 at 6:00 AM said:

List items that you own and no longer want on auction sites or in classifieds and sell them for quick cash.
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Getting the right crowd to see your website is a challenging task.