



# Bridging the Digital Divide in Racine: A Collaborative Approach

## Situation

The City of Racine, located between Milwaukee and Chicago, faces a significant digital divide. While the infrastructure for broadband was in place, affordability and digital literacy were major barriers. Adele Edwards, the Chief Information Officer, was tasked with addressing these issues despite limited staff and resources.

## Response

Adele identified that the core issue was not just infrastructure but also affordability and digital literacy. She initiated a multi-faceted approach:

1. **Community Engagement:** Organized a Racine Digital Divide Roundtable with educators and community leaders to discuss how to address the digital divide in Racine. As this group formed it began to ask the critical questions necessary to form partnerships and develop early strategies to tackle the divide.
2. **Partnerships:** Collaborated with Racine's Gateway Technical College, the Racine Public Library and nonprofits such as the United Way of Racine County to leverage existing resources. The Racine Unified School District had already secured federal and corporate grants to provide devices to students during COVID-19, making them ideal partners.
3. **Interns:** Hired college interns for research, GIS mapping, and data analysis to keep costs low. Interns were tasked with mapping digital access, analyzing census data, and identifying community needs. Some of these interns eventually served as digital navigators.
4. **Affordable Connectivity Program (ACP):** Promoted this federal program to help Racine households reduce their monthly internet bills by \$30 per month. Enrollment efforts such as community events and direct outreach increased the number of residents enrolled in the ACP from 3,000 to 6,000.
5. **Device Accessibility:** Explored partnerships with organizations like Digital Bridge to provide low-cost refurbished computers. These organizations refurbish donated computers and sell them at low cost.
6. **Digital Literacy Training:** Applied for grants like the Talent for Tomorrow to fund digital literacy programs. This is where the partnership with Gateway Technical College, and the Racine Public Library was helpful to provide train-the-trainer programs, ensuring that interns could effectively teach digital skills.
7. **Policy Advocacy:** Mobilized community members to advocate for continued funding of the ACP. This included letter-writing campaigns and calls to Congress, facilitated by resources from the Education Superhighway.

## Outcomes

- **Increased Awareness:** Successfully raised awareness about affordable internet programs, reducing the number of unenrolled eligible residents by half.
- **Community Involvement:** Conducted a comprehensive outreach effort, engaging various community stakeholders to create a collaborative network. With special emphasis on covered populations, these efforts included community colleges, schools, nonprofits like the United Way and local literacy councils.
- **Internship Program:** Demonstrated the value of using interns for cost-effective project support. Interns conducted research, created maps, and engaged with community organizations.
- **Policy Advocacy:** Mobilized community members to advocate for continued funding of the ACP, including letter-writing campaigns and calls to Congress.



## Extension

UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-MADISON  
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### Lessons Learned

1. **Collaboration is Key:** Building partnerships with schools, libraries, and nonprofits is crucial for resource optimization. Because local nonprofits were trusted by the community, they were essential for outreach.
2. **Community-Centric Approach:** Direct community engagement helps in understanding and addressing specific needs. Engaging with local organizations provided valuable insights and resources.
3. **Sustainable Solutions:** Leveraging existing programs and grants can provide sustainable solutions to digital literacy and access issues. Programs like the ACP and partnerships with refurbishing organizations were vital.
4. **Resourcefulness:** Utilizing interns and existing community resources can significantly advance initiatives even with limited staff and budget. Interns provided essential support for research and outreach.
5. **Advocacy:** Engaging the community in advocacy efforts can help sustain essential programs like the ACP. Community mobilization was crucial in advocating for continued funding.

### Learn More

This case study highlights the importance of a collaborative, community-focused approach to bridging the digital divide, demonstrating that even with limited resources, significant progress can be made through strategic partnerships and innovative solutions.

Case Study contact information to come!

Questions? Contact Jessica Beckendorf, UW-Madison Extension Outreach Specialist at [beckendorf@wisc.edu](mailto:beckendorf@wisc.edu)