

Best Practices in University-Community Partnerships: The UT-Ottawa Coalition Experience

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Abstract: The University of Toledo Community Outreach Partnership Center (COPC), funded by a HUD grant, has partnered with the Ottawa Coalition (OC), a neighborhood collaboration of about 40 separate entities in west-central Toledo. While this collaboration encompasses many different areas, one of the most successful has been the establishment of community computer labs in the OC area. The purpose of the labs is to provide access to technology for children, adults and seniors in a supervised setting. In addition to the COPC grant, funding was obtained from the Kellogg Foundation, the City of Toledo, Microsoft and others. The university has also been very helpful in providing technical and equipment support. This paper will discuss the successes and failures of this university-community collaboration and how other universities have attempted to provide similar services to underserved neighborhoods. Issues to be discussed include: recycling of used university computer equipment, student support (paid and volunteer) and possible grant funding sources.

Introduction

In its fullest definition, the term “Digital Divide” is a very difficult and complex concept to understand. For the purposes of this paper, we are focusing on this concept as it correlates with the very real inequality that some people experience related to the technological world of computers, the Internet, and the information revolution. Of particular importance to this discussion are those populations within North American society who experience economic, educational, political, cultural, and language differences and disparities. As the national Children, Youth and Families at Risk organization states “it is quite clear that [these audiences] have less access to the Internet and are less technologically literate” than middle-upper income, mainstream populations [3]. Statistics show that of 80% of the children and youth living in homes with a \$75,000 or above income have computer access at home, while only 18% of children and youth in homes with a \$10,000 – \$15,000 income have computer access at home [4].

Jessica Sandham, in her article *Technology Counts 2001: Across the Nation* [4] confronts this digital divide and highlights how it has been addressed across the country. State initiatives, she shows, are predominantly focused on and have been successful in closing the digital divide for kids in the school and education system. She states, “technology is the great equalizer among schools” [4, p. 1]. However, the problem is not strictly solved in our educational system, as Norris Dickard of the Benton Foundation, Washington acknowledges, “The big divide comes when [students] walk out school doors” [4].

The dilemma then, is how to make the technology revolution not only available but also *real* in the lives of persons systematically and traditionally disenfranchised. Several models of intervention have been attempted in our impoverished neighborhoods, and categorically successful have been the partnerships between neighborhood organizations and universities. The blending of the technological expertise of university personnel with organizations who can assist in making technology available to neighborhood residents, small local business owners and young people across the community seems to be a recipe for success. These partnerships are successful in part because they are built on the following underlying principles: community-based, holistic philosophy; university-resident-organizational partnerships; the address of complex neighborhood conditions; the value and celebration of diversity; inherent collaboration; the development of a system of services that makes sense to the community; highly accessible services provided by respectful people; education and intervention that builds resiliency in the neighborhood [3].

Examples of University-Community Computing Partnerships

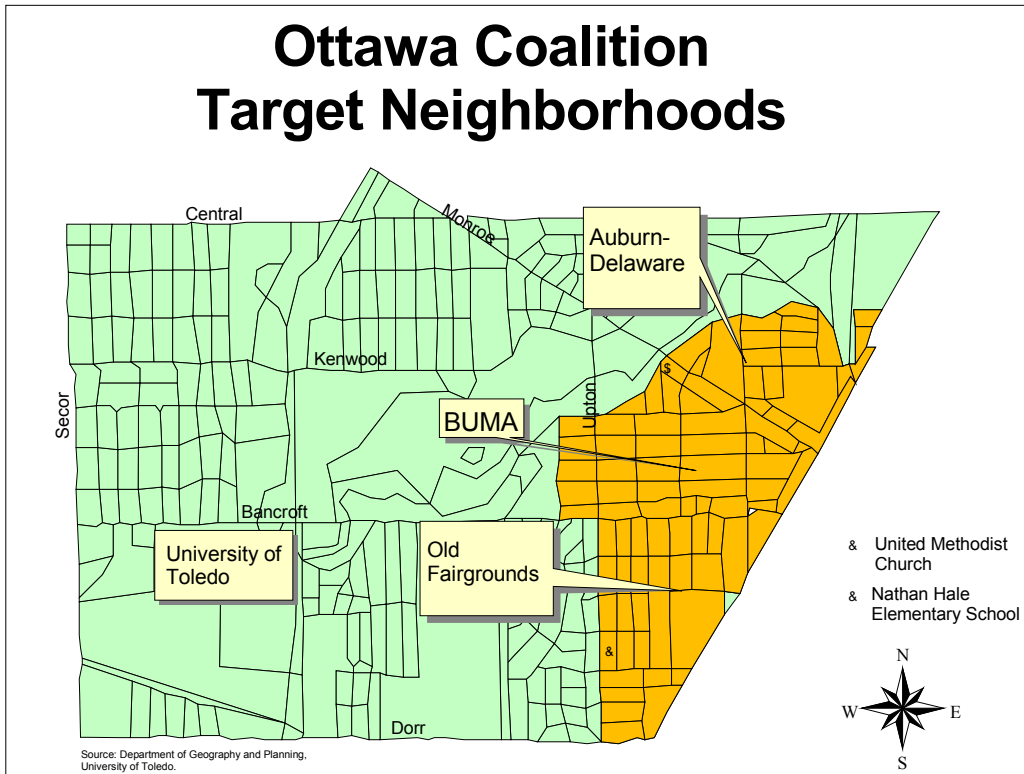
Examples of university-community computing partnerships are growing. North Carolina Central University has opened five community computer labs in the Durham metropolitan area, two housed in churches. The N.C. Central community computing program was funded by a grant from the U.S. Department of Commerce National Telecommunications and Information Administration and the Technology Opportunities Program [2].

Johns Hopkins Medicine's Center for Information Services and Community Services Department used computers from the medical campus, upgraded with added memory and new software and installed them in a church in the east Baltimore area. The staff at Hopkins hopes that some of the children using the lab might be potential Hopkins employees in ten years [5].

In Austin, Texas, a local non-profit, Austin Free-Net, works with a variety of public and private organizations, including the University of Texas and a local community college, to provide class presentations and training, research, curriculum development, and technology policy discussions. Not only does this collaboration operate five community computer labs but also helps to map community technology resources for the city. [1]

The Ottawa Coalition and the University of Toledo have built a similar partnership using both public and private dollars to create a technology network in its neighborhoods. The labs created by this partnership provide an increased accessibility to personal computers, the Internet and the technological assistance of computer technicians who can teach, monitor and mentor neighborhood children, youth, adults and seniors in their efforts to bridge the digital divide.

Ottawa Coalition Target Neighborhoods



The Ottawa Coalition

The Ottawa Coalition is a grass-roots community organization in west-central Toledo Ohio. The geographic area of the Coalition constitutes nearly five square miles, where more than 30,000 people live. The Coalition is a neighborhood-based collaboration of over 35 separate entities, including 10 separate neighborhood associations, a state university, a hospital, six churches, three public and two parochial schools, and two banks. The mission of the Coalition is: *to nurture a safe, healthy, and vibrant environment for those who live, work, learn, worship and play within our neighborhoods.*

The neighborhoods within the Coalition area run the gamut from high income housing in well-established neighborhoods to low income housing with predominantly a rental base.

The Coalition, with predominantly a volunteer base, has been very successful in obtaining public and private grant funding for its activities. In 1999, the Coalition received a major grant from the Kellogg Foundation to provide technology, health and business programming in their underserved neighborhoods. In the same year, the University of Toledo received a HUD Community Outreach Partnership Center (COPC) grant, which targeted three neighborhoods in the Coalition – Auburn-Delaware, BUMA and Old Fairgrounds. All three neighborhoods are predominantly African-American with a high percentage of rental properties and low property values. The COPC programs expanded on what was done as part of the Kellogg project and included leadership training, community nursing, legal mediation, housing, business training, children's theatre workshop, business camp for kids and a technology component.

Technology Program

The Coalition began its technology program by securing a Capital Improvement Grant, through State Senator Linda Furney. These funds went to make the necessary improvements to the site of the first Coalition community computer lab at Monroe Street United Methodist Church.

These improvements included installation of electrical wiring to support the power requirement of a Local Area Network (LAN), special air conditioning equipment, a chair lift and bathroom modifications for handicap accessibility. Kellogg funds were used to purchase 14 Pentium workstation computers with the following configurations: 450 MHz Intel Celeron processor, 32

MB RAM, 8 Gigabytes hard drive, 10/100 MB Ethernet card, sound card, 8 MB video card, 15-inch monitor, Window NT 4.0 (eventually upgraded to Windows 2000). The workstations are connected via 10BaseT Ethernet running at 10 megabytes per second. The LAN has the capability to run at 100 megabytes per second with minimum network hardware upgrades. The server is the same base unit as the workstations with more memory (originally 64 MB RAM, upgraded to 256). The file server is the gateway to the Internet for the lab and it is connected to the Internet via a Buckeye Cablevision Modem (recently upgraded to DSL). An HP 2100 LaserJet Printer is attached to the LAN.

The lab is only open when qualified attendants are available. We have used primarily paid student workers (graduate assistants and undergraduates) who were paid out of both Kellogg and COPC funds. These students are all very computer proficient, with many of them knowledgeable about server and hardware maintenance. One of the side benefits of our computer lab program is the training and experience received by these student workers. One of our original lab directors, who worked for us as an undergraduate, was hired on by UT as a college computing specialist upon graduation, based primarily on his work experience with the Ottawa Coalition.

The Monroe Street lab is currently open three mornings a week for adult usage. We have had a good turnout of senior citizens, who want to learn how to send email, use the Internet and do word processing. The lab is also open on Wednesday evenings for family use. While we are pleased with the adult usage, it has been the after school program that has been amazingly successful. The lab is open after school three days a week. Two student workers supervise the

students at all times. The original intent was to offer a more structured class-type program but we found that unstructured lab time worked best, especially for children who have been in school all day. We do not use any Internet filtering software but rely on the supervision of the monitors to keep students away from pornographic or violent web sites. Students who violate these rules are kept out of the lab for one week to one month.

After the first lab opened, the Coalition received a major grant from Microsoft that included \$15,000 cash and over \$60,000 worth of site licenses and software. This grant enabled the Coalition to look at increasing the number of labs in our service area and beyond. The next lab opened was at Redeemer Lutheran Church in the Old Fairgrounds neighborhood. This lab was much smaller (six computers plus a server) with more limited hours. Initially the church wanted to staff the lab entirely with volunteers but after one year of operation began using paid student help (paid with COPC funds). Some of the volunteers were great but others were unreliable or unable to handle a server-based environment.

Last summer the Coalition opened two additional labs, one inside its service area and one outside. Ashley Arms is a low-income elderly and disabled apartment building less than one mile from UT. It is owned and operated by the Lucas County Metropolitan Housing Authority (LMHA). LMHA had been planning to have a community room on the fifth floor and committed \$20,000 to remodel that space. Working with the Coalition, four computers donated by UT (upgraded with bigger hard drives) along with a server and printer purchased by LMHA were placed in the community room. The lab is opened 10 hours per week, with classes held on a regular basis to get residents “up to speed” on using computers. This lab has a different set of

needs and concerns, due to the age and lack of technology skills of the residents. We have held more structured classes than in our other labs and hope to upgrade the monitor and mouses to make them more user friendly for our elderly clientele.

The fourth lab opened was at Aurora House in Toledo's north end. Aurora House is a residential center for single mothers with substance abuse problems, so this lab is used by both mothers and their children. Six donated, upgraded computers from UT along with a server were placed in this lab. The server, printer and software were purchased by the Coalition using funds from Microsoft and the City of Toledo. The Coalition has hired a student from a local community college who staffs this lab ten hours per week. Eventually Aurora House hopes to train a resident to work at lab attendant, eliminating the cost to the Coalition of lab staffing.

All four labs received technical support from the University of Toledo College of Business Computing Services. Students hired by the COPC grant work in both the community computer labs as well as for the College's Computing Service and when severe technical problems arise, the professional staff provide their expertise towards solving the problems.

Looking Towards the Future

With the COPC grant expiring in June 2003, all the labs are looking for new funding sources and/or ways to provide staff. The University of Toledo has committed a 20 hour per week graduate assistant for Fall 2003 to assist the Ottawa Coalition in staffing the four labs. While this is a great contribution, it doesn't completely meet the needs of the four labs, given the

current schedule of open lab hours. The Coalition continues to look for private and public funding sources as well as possible volunteer staffing. One possible UT source may be service learning students, who as part of their participation in the Honors Program as undergraduates, volunteer in the community. The experience with volunteers at the Redeemer lab causes the Coalition to look with some concern at volunteer staffing. We are hoping to partner with a non-profit which provides housing and other services for mentally ill residents to provide computer training and hopefully train our own volunteer base. We have received a number of inquiries from professional computer people interested in volunteering as trainers and we hope this combination of volunteers and trainers will work for our neighborhoods.

Access to hardware and software for the labs has not been a big problem for the Coalition. A number of private and public entities have offered to donate computer equipment. While we have accepted some donations, we have not wanted to take the paid staff time that it would take to check and refurbish donated equipment. A local technical college has volunteered to take in donated equipment on behalf of the Coalition and use the equipment as class projects for a computer repair class. The University of Toledo has expressed some interest in setting up a computer recycling policy and we hope this can come about in the future. The Microsoft grant for software has been very helpful and we encourage other non-profits to look into this as a source of software. The process to apply is relatively simple; information is available on the Microsoft web page (<http://www.microsoft.com/giving/Home.asp>).

Conclusion

The Ottawa Coalition – University of Toledo partnership has been a successful one in the area of technology. With minimal bureaucracy and good faculty and staff support, this partnership is helping to bridge the “digital divide” in our Toledo neighborhoods.

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