LAUNCHING DIGITAL NAVIGATOR PROGRAMS IN TEXAS PUBLIC LIBRARIES

A PROGRAM OF THE TEXAS STATE LIBRARY AND ARCHIVES COMMISSION

THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT AUSTIN TECHNOLOGY & INFORMATION POLICY INSTITUTE

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In 2021-22, The Texas State Library and Archives Commission (TSLAC) awarded one-year grants to ten Texas libraries to support Digital Navigator programs. Digital Navigation addresses the digital divide by targeting the most impacted communities, mobilizing partnerships, undertaking needs assessments, marketing services, as well as offering instruction and monitoring its effectiveness. This report highlights how a diverse group of Texas libraries executed that model in a one-year grant program and analyzes their successes and challenges.

Major conclusions

The research sought to examine how libraries chose priorities and structured their programs, how the efforts were implemented, how they worked with partners, and the instructional resources they used.

Choosing program priorities:

- **The model Digital Navigator approach presents an integrated solution to problems of owning appropriate devices, having and maintaining adequate connectivity, and possessing the literacy skills to accomplish what one needs to do**. Building on years of research and program analysis, the Digital Navigator idea integrates all the elements that can lead communities to become digitally competent. It can take years to assemble the component pieces that satisfy the integrated approach. Models such as the early Salt Lake City program illustrate the time- and resource-intensive nature of such undertakings.

- **Most libraries focused on digital literacy training and giving away or loaning devices, especially hotspots, as cornerstones for their programs.** During the pandemic, having access to a laptop or tablet or smartphone escalated in importance because so many services and social and work interactions became digital. Obtaining some sort of device was a widespread response across the country, and the libraries found that people were not as intent on checking out or receiving computing devices because they already had them. However, the need for connectivity remained strong: connectivity continues to be unreliable or unaffordable for many households in Texas.

- **Many libraries developed their Digital Navigator program around the needs of people already using the library rather than recruiting patrons from other settings**. The Digital Navigator model urges that providers, whether libraries or other organizations, examine local communities and assess needs systematically using various data sources and partnerships. This should yield targeted populations who would be the objects of outreach and marketing. While the smaller libraries in this grant program examined census data to determine the status of the local digital divide, most of them targeted people already coming into the library for their programs. Assessing local community needs in systematic or statistical terms was challenging for many libraries, and this affected outreach and marketing efforts. The two largest libraries had the benefit of more localized data that enabled them to target specific neighborhoods in their cities.

- **Senior adults were a common user group for these programs.** Seniors are a critical target for digital inclusion efforts and frequently require assistance with affordable connections, devices, and instruction. The library-based training and some in-home or in-organization classes reached seniors in convenient settings. Seniors responded favorably to these efforts. This group in particular also realized social benefits these classes catalyzed within the context of the library.

- **Libraries continue to provide a valuable and essential service as a public space for information access, especially in an increasingly digital world. Their histories and the public confidence they command mark them as important pieces in policies addressing digital inclusion**. Libraries' social infrastructure enabled them to offer trusted services to populations that might be difficult to reach. Their assets include strong local social capital and personnel who understand local communities.

- **While libraries can be a crucial site to bridge the digital divide, their capabilities must be supported within the context of their resources and mission.** The Texas libraries receiving the grants are all different, serving different populations and emphasizing unique internal strengths while also operating within unique institutional settings. Communities' "digital readiness" varied, and this in turn influenced how program elements could unfold. Some libraries had to focus on improving local internet connectivity while others emphasized getting devices to populations that lacked them, while still others used their funding to offer digital literacy instruction. A one-size-fits-all model did not materialize across their locations. Rather, each library chose to focus on what made the most sense given their resources and local needs.

- **The terms of success differed from place to place.** While TSLAC gathered routine data such as numbers of people served, that metric does not capture outcomes such as increased goodwill and social capital among people receiving services, the value of the new capabilities acquired by people in the program, improved staff confidence and administrative capabilities, and opportunities to expand the range of patrons and the types of services that can position libraries for new futures.

Implementation aspects:

- **Some impediments to launching these programs were beyond the control of individual libraries**. For example, procurement processes, the short grant timeline, and the effects of the pandemic on hiring figured into some frustrating aspects of the programs. For those libraries that intended to hire new staff, the one-year appointment and absence of guaranteed benefits were disadvantageous.

- **Finding and training the right staff and mobilizing sufficient organizational support (within accounting or IT, for example) sometimes proved challenging.** Smaller libraries often found it more efficient and effective to use internal staff to develop digital literacy training either through classes or one-on-one appointments and to mobilize partnerships. Only one library adopted the Digital Navigator approach of having dedicated staff available solely for assisting patrons on an as-needed basis; others embraced the efficiency of group classes or appointments to optimize time management.

Working with instructional resources:

- **Building a community of practice and providing training materials were helpful to many libraries**. Using monthly cohort meetings to convene staff associated with the ten projects, TSLAC was able to offer pragmatic support to the grantees, who shared best practices and questions in these forums. Participants appreciated the insights offered by other sites, and the opportunity to air difficulties and solicit solutions.

- **Training materials and instructional support provided by contractor Literacy Minnesota were helpful for about half the sites, but others found the materials and the content less desirable for their communities**. Libraries indicated it was a useful resource for instructors in particular, who would tailor materials to their students. People in instructional settings wanted social interaction, and they wanted content that addressed their more immediate needs rather than computer and software basics that comprise the instructional modules. Two sites wanted materials available in Spanish. Many libraries did use the materials during the first year when they were free but were not able to continue with the service after the grant term ended, when it would cost them directly.

Identifying and working with local partners and constituencies:

- **Equipment donation programs became helpful ways to reach new constituencies.** Some programs reached out to local nonprofits or faith-based institutions to reach households that might need either equipment or instruction. Equipment became a gateway to requests for literacy training (i.e., how to use the equipment).

- **Narrowing the digital divide cannot be solved by libraries alone.** Some of the libraries that forged successful partnerships did so by reaching out to a large variety of local organizations, and in many cases those organizations provided access to people who wanted training and/or devices. Libraries may not be as well suited for solving home-based connectivity, a bigger problem requiring local advocacy skills, new physical infrastructure and possibly new regulations. Loaned hotspots did help with connectivity.

- **Partnerships varied significantly across each of the ten libraries with some creating new partnerships and others strengthening current ones**. Some anticipated partnerships did not materialize, but others developed – sometimes serendipitously – across the grant's duration. One legacy of the program may be a greater awareness of both the work involved in establishing partnerships and the advisability of being open minded about where partnerships might occur.

Major recommendations

- **The Digital Navigator approach is holistic, with many moving parts. A longer timeframe for developing programs would be helpful to tackle all of its components.** Uniformly, all grantees reported the one-year timeframe was too brief. As well, procurement matters delayed equipment purchases. A longer timeframe combined with information and grant processing needs could ease this process.

- **Provide incentives for internal buy-in on elements of the grant such as purchasing a digital literacy resource package**. While several libraries thought the materials provided were helpful, especially to instructors, the cost of continuing with them was prohibitive in most cases.

- **Consider ways to provide assistance on undertaking needs assessments and capturing outcomes.** Most of the needs assessments libraries assembled as required by the grant proposal were cursory. Few libraries did much with the information they gathered. There may be room to help libraries target more effectively, and to market to identified constituencies. TSLAC could survey different regions or settings, for example, to assess community digital readiness and share more nuanced information with targeted libraries.

- **Assessing local needs should drive library efforts.** While statewide surveys regarding residents' digital skills could be useful heuristics for understanding needs, a more functional assessment would need to be highly focused on specific regions if libraries are to act on that information. Highly local data would be most desirable.

- **Develop tools that libraries could use with ease as mechanisms to assess aspects of their programs.** Most libraries had not examined their accomplishments in terms that would allow them to pinpoint what "worked" and what did not in terms of curriculum or other activities.

- **Consider the unique needs of seniors by developing outreach suggestions and specialized instructional materials designed with adult seniors' typical interests in mind**. This population is a priority in the digital divide scheme.

- **Consider ways that libraries might implement a dedicated Digital Navigator position, one that is separable from more routine library positions and focuses primarily or exclusively on digital inclusion patron needs.** Those needs may entail figuring out connectivity options, accomplishing certain tasks, or training people on software programs. These individuals could maintain focus on digital literacy/Digital Navigation tasks and not perform "normal" or routine librarian duties.

- **Cohort meetings were useful but organize some of them into smaller cohorts of similar libraries, small, rural libraries or larger and urban libraries, for example.** A related recommendation from the libraries is to address types of instructional needs for one-on-one approaches, or classroom style approaches.

- **Use the current grant recipients as mentors for subsequent libraries wishing to embark on Digital Navigator programs.** This may reduce a lot of the uncertainty libraries experience with this new approach to digital inclusion.

- **Cohort meetings could be organized with an agenda pre-circulated so that attendees know the purpose of each meeting.** Consistency in agenda and purpose of meeting, so that attendees know what to expect, was desired by program staff.

- **Tackle the problem of supporting staff hires that can continue past the duration of a grant.** This may require certain provisions in a grant application, or opportunities for continuation grants for successful projects so that staff can remain employed.

- **A future Request For Proposals could adopt different requirements depending on the capacity of library systems.** The differences between small and large libraries in terms of their bureaucracies and grant handling suggest that grant requirements could be structured to insure appropriate awareness and acceptance from relevant units. Being sensitive to different needs of different organizations in terms of actual grant applications and implementation processes could help to smooth Digital Navigator approaches. For example, explicitly carving out a role for IT staff to affirm certain needs or requirements could be helpful in the long term.

- **Cultivate digital awareness and readiness among libraries before they can apply to a digital navigator grant. Consider a grant opportunity that might include Phase 1 and Phase 2, for example, with certain accomplishments enabling a libraries to move into Phase 2.**

- **Consider how to structure grant offerings to maximize impact in domains that it prioritizes.** The grant application process was affected by opportunities to apply to two other grants simultaneously, one focused on telehealth and one more open-ended. Having three opportunities available at once may not be optimal for tackling digital inclusion goals.

- **Provide support on outreach and marketing efforts to increase reach and impact.** The resource guide provided separately may be helpful in this regard. The National Digital Inclusion Alliance doubtless will remain an excellent resource.

- **Provide venues for libraries in proximate geographies to connect with one another.** This could assist with creating communities of practice.

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