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Insights from the 2023 Northeast Digital Equity Summit: *A Report on the Role of Extension Programs*



By Julie Slivka, Communications Manager
University of Maryland Extension, Marylanders Online Program

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- **Peter Wulforth**, Penn State Extension and NERCRD
- **Cristy Schmidt**, Penn State Extension
- **Isaias Y Tesfalidet**, University of Maryland Extension
- **Jesse M. Ketterman**, University of Maryland Extension
- **Paul Treadwell**, Cornell Cooperative Extension

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Insights from the 2023 Northeast Digital Equity Summit: A Report on the Role of Extension Programs

The Northeast Digital Equity Summit (NDES) convened educators and researchers from land-grant universities across the Northeast in a virtual setting on September 19, 2023. Organized by Penn State Extension, University of Maryland Extension (UME), Cornell Extension, and the Northeast Regional Center for Rural Development (NERCRD), the primary emphasis of the summit was to explore how the inherent characteristics of extension programs make them well-suited for leading collaborative efforts toward achieving localized digital equity. This report provides an overview of key sessions, definitions, takeaways, initiatives, and best practices discussed during the summit.

Introduction

The 2023 NDES explored the capacities and opportunities that land-grant universities have in the advancement of digital equity. By strategically leveraging resources and interagency collaboration, these institutions can have a significant impact on the expansion of digital equity. The 2023 NDES sessions featured presentations from preeminent agencies such as the National Skills Coalition, the National Digital Inclusion Alliance, the Digital Harbor Foundation, the National Digital Extension Education Team, UMD, the University of Maryland College of Information, North Carolina State Extension, and several others.

The common understanding among all participating agencies is that digital literacy is essential in today's information-driven society, empowering people to communicate effectively, make informed decisions, and participate fully in the digital world. Digital equity is a multifaceted topic that encompasses many variables, from access to affordable and reliable internet connections, digital devices, and the necessary skills to use both. Expanding digital equity unlocks numerous advantages, from educational and economic empowerment to social inclusion and a more cohesive society.

Digital inclusion aims to bridge the gap between those who have access to these resources and those who don't, often focusing on underserved or marginalized populations such as low-income communities, rural areas, elderly individuals, and people with disabilities. Land-grant universities are particularly well-positioned to champion digital equity efforts by working to ensure that all individuals, regardless of their background, location, or income, have a fair chance to benefit from digital technologies.

Summit Components

[Summit Agenda](#): The event covered a wide range of topics, including Digital Equity 101, leveraging extension programs, bridging the digital skill divide, and effective partnership models.

[Summit Resources](#): A repository of resources, including presentation slides, session recordings, and additional materials, is available to participants and anyone else interested in continued learning.

Definitions (shared by NDES presenters, see references for sources)

1. **Digital Equity** refers to a continuum of broadband technologies and their meaningful use for social and economic benefits. Dimensions include (1) affordable and robust broadband (2) internet-enabled devices that meet the needs of the user (3) digital literacy training (4) quality technical support (5) applications and online content that encourage self-sufficiency, participation, and collaboration.
2. **Digital Literacy** refers to the ability to use digital tools and technologies to access, understand, evaluate, and create information effectively. Digital literacy is essential in today's information-driven society, as it empowers individuals to participate fully in the digital world, make informed decisions, and communicate effectively.
3. **Digital Inclusion** focuses on ensuring that all individuals and communities have equal access to digital technologies and the opportunities they provide. This includes access to affordable and reliable internet connections, digital devices, and the necessary digital skills.
4. **Digital Capital** refers to the accumulation of digital competencies (information, communication, safety, problem-solving) and digital technology (devices, connectivity, support), which can, in turn, affect other capitals, such as financial and social.
5. **Digital Parity** refers to a scenario with equal levels of internet connectivity, digital skills, and digital mindset between groups (e.g., rural versus urban).
6. **Digital Divide** refers to the gaps and disparities in access to the internet, computers, and other digital resources, often linked to socio-economic factors.
7. **Digital Continuum** refers to a more dynamic and ongoing perspective on digital disparities, taking into consideration that the divide is not a one-time issue but rather an evolving landscape of access and adoption. Continuum components include awareness, availability, accessibility, adoption, and advancement.
8. **Articles and Listicles** are digital skills tools that provide background information, as well as an explanation of broad and specific topics, via a narrative or listed article format
9. **Tutorial-based Tools** typically present in video or screen capture steps, these visual instructional tools illustrate all the steps to a process, such as sending an email or updating settings.
10. **Instructor Support Tools** are often offered in conjunction with tutorial, or product-specific tools to support a classroom session on the topic or offer handouts and other facilitation materials.

11. **Specific Audience Tools** cater to communities such as seniors or speakers of languages other than English. These tools are generally based on different learning principles.

Key Takeaways (see [summit resources](#) for more on specific programs mentioned below)

1. **Community Development**

Extension programs have long served in a distinctive community-facing capacity that allows them to empower communities through the provision of specialized trainings, classes, events, research, outreach, and resources. Extension can also support digital equity initiatives by conducting focus groups and work groups to solicit community feedback to inform programming and services.

By engaging with communities where they are and incorporating their feedback, extension programs are in prime positions to promote grassroots digital literacy work, while collaborating with external partners to address other barriers such as local infrastructure issues, affordability, or sociocultural factors. Leveraging extension's resources and unique positionality as trusted educators will strengthen collaboration with other agencies, educational institutions, government agencies, community nonprofits, and other stakeholders to advance quality of life.

Contemporary studies show a rising demand for digital skills in the labor market. A study from the National Skills Coalition revealed that jobs requiring digital skills pay 23% more than those that do not. Across industries, 92% of jobs require digital skills. One-third of the US workforce does not possess foundational digital skills - 13% have no digital skills, and 18% have limited digital skills. These findings emphasized the need for digital skills, with specific tools and approaches discussed for delivering digital skills training, which extension programs can themselves, or collaboratively, provide.

2. **Resource Development**

Extension collaborations have experienced success by launching tangible and digital tools, such as the Community Digital Access Toolkit, Digital Skills Toolkit, and an on-demand resource library. These assets will decrease time, transportation, and cost requirements for digital education, and increase digital inclusion by ensuring on-demand resources are accessible and available in multiple languages. There is also a need to develop a virtual space for digital navigators and extension professionals to share ideas, resources, research, and questions about digital equity work.

3. **Service Models**

The FarmerTech program, an adaptation of the Teens as Teachers Model, empowers young people to teach local farmers about technology and software. This model has been effective in enhancing individual and community self-efficacy in digital skill development, fostering proactive help-seeking behaviors, improving job skills, and contributing to the formation of a proficient broadband workforce, while decreasing social isolation. Additionally, offering sector-relevant incentives can catalyze participation in digital education initiatives. For farmers

specifically, this might encompass streamlined processes for licensing, certification, and compliance, along with expanded product reach and increased revenue opportunities.

The National Digital Volunteer Model can serve as a guide for how extension programs can harness the existing infrastructure of land grant universities. Another model is the Literacy Mentoring Program.

4. Learning Models

Best practices for delivering digital skills training to various stakeholders vary across the board. There is a need to prioritize interpersonal client connections in both verbal and non-verbal ways. Additional community learning opportunities include one-to-one training, drop-in hours, public and private classes or events, informational campaigns, and issue briefs. Digital education needs to be created in response to the requirements, barriers, and expressed needs of the community.

5. Funding

Land-grant universities are familiar with the collection of research and data needed to apply for grant funding. There is potential for future grant funding through the Digital Equity Act for which extension programs can apply on behalf of collaborations to support digital inclusion initiatives. These initiatives and investments will in turn support the farmers, workers, and small businesses that extension programs seek to serve.

Conclusion

Extension programs play a pivotal role in addressing the digital divide in the target sectors of family and consumer sciences, agriculture, and youth development. By adopting innovative approaches to digital collaboration, resources, and navigation, extension programs can help close the gaps in digital access and knowledge, in turn fostering a more connected and informed community. Moreover, extension programs are strategically positioned to establish partnerships with external stakeholders while promoting increased awareness, resource sharing, and connectivity to further their impact. Through these collaborative efforts, extension programs can contribute to building a more inclusive and digitally empowered society.

The Northeast Digital Equity Summit served as a pivotal platform for collaboration and knowledge exchange among land-grant universities. The initiatives, findings, and partnerships discussed during the summit are vital steps toward advancing digital equity in the Northeast region and beyond. Extension programs may play a critical role in fostering a more diverse, inclusive, informed, and innovative society where everyone has the opportunity to thrive in the digital age by advocating for community collaboration and leadership. As stakeholders continue to implement the lessons learned, the impact on communities, individuals, and the digital landscape is expected to grow and evolve to meet the changing digital needs of communities.

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