

LGFCU Excellence in Innovation Award Project Evaluation

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| Project ID | PIP-11 |
| Title of Program | TechConnect |
| Program Category | Public Information and Participation |
| Submission Date | 6/24/2016 10:43:28 AM |
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| Implementation Date | 8/5/2015 |
| FLSA Designation | Exempt |
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Description of Productivity Improvement

The Catawba County Library is addressing the digital divide, workforce development, and improving the digital literacy skills of our community with the implementation of the TechConnect learning space specially equipped with technology at the main library in Newton. We provide equitable access to technologies that enable users to gather, use and create digital content as well as access real world technologies that enhance the skill set of our community's workforce. According to the 2009 Digital Literacy Report "investment in basic skills, specifically those needed to grow digital literacy is a critical factor in supporting the overall growth of an economy and development of society" (Digital Literacy Report). TechConnect at the library provides an access point for people who need to learn more about current technologies and enhance their skill sets.

The TechConnect Space was established in direct response to the library's community centered strategic plan goal to provide our community access to technology, training and work skills development. The target audience for the TechConnect primarily encompasses the young adult and adult population of Catawba County. The library defined a collaboration with NC Workforce Development to provide a workspace for NC Works career specialists to provide one-on-one assistance to citizens in the library. Through this partnership we are able to reach community members in need of career counseling and employment assistance in a convenient location with access to public computers. In response to the library's strategic plan, the County Commissioners approved hiring a full time digital services librarian who created lesson plans and ensured all library

personnel understood and could assist our citizens in using our new technologies, including a 3D printer, digital cutter and iMac computers.

The Library was awarded a Library Services and Technology Act (LSTA) grant from the Institute of Museum and Library Science to purchase equipment for the TechConnect space. TechConnect has become a center of creativity, industry, and workforce development supported by a full range of activities to empower lives and build community:

- Weekly workshops, including digital literacy, technology tools, computer assisted design (CAD) software and 3D printing (5-10 participants per class)
- One-on-one sessions, on demand as citizens need it
- Embedded Career Specialist on hand weekly to assist job seekers
- Monthly STEAM classes for elementary and high school students to align with educational and workforce initiatives
- 3D printing and scanning
- Digital Cutting
- Audio and Video creation and production

The impact of the TechConnect Space has been tremendous. Our community members have experienced a remarkable increase in access to technology and workforce development assistance at the library. The model for this project can easily be scaled up or down according to the available budget and the provision of access to new technologies and new employment services previously not available at the library.

Works Cited

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Description of why this project was initiated

The need for a special technology learning space was determined through findings from our recent community needs analysis, research findings on digital literacy, recommendations from the library's Edge Technology assessment and an initiative of the Urban Libraries Council to grow and develop access to technology services. As part of the strategic planning process, the Catawba County Library System conducted a comprehensive community needs analysis in 2014-15. Approximately 1,400 people participated in this study, including county commissioners, county manager, library director,

Library Friends group leaders, school superintendents, city managers, workforce development leadership, community leaders, and other key stakeholders. Additional input was gathered through focus groups with diverse segments of the community and library staff, public community forums, a survey of randomly sampled county residents and general survey responses in both online and hard copy format gathered both inside the library and throughout the community.

The executive summary of the community needs analysis indicated that “because of the increasing array of digital devices and new and varied ways to download and experience digital content, the need for digital literacy and training is even more essential.” (Chow 3) It was also noted that “technology training has moved slightly away from just computer basics, as more Catawba residents become comfortable with basic computing, to more individualized, just-in-time training customized to how and when citizens need it.” (Chow 3) “The Library can best ensure its relevance by ensuring access to quality, current, and reliable technology and continuously innovating and evolving with the changing needs of the community” (Chow 4). We also concluded that “the Library’s primary opportunities for improvement include realigning libraries as community places by creating engaging and collaborative spaces, better align with community economic development needs with increased job seeking and employment programming and resources and ensure the security and ready access to diverse collections and resources.

Digital literacy or computer and information literacy is defined as “an individual’s ability to use computers to investigate, create, and communicate in order to participate effectively at home, at school, in the workplace, and in society.” (Fraillon, Schulz, & Ainley, 17). A policy recommendation from a 2009 Digital Literacy Report states that “investment in basic skills, specifically those needed to grow digital literacy is a critical factor in supporting the overall growth of an economy and development of society.” (Digital Literacy Report)

According to the Pew Internet report, North Carolina is statistically lower than other states for both the number of individuals with a computer and high speed internet in their home (Zickuhr). Over the past decade Catawba County libraries have addressed this situation by increasing the number of public internet workstations per 5,000 people from 3.0 to 4.29. As a result the number of users of internet computers per capita has doubled from .66 to 1.3 in that same decade. These common metrics have been cited as evidence of a narrowing digital divide, but other research suggests that these are not actually indicators that people can use computers to investigate, create, and communicate (Digital Literacy Report). These metrics do not take into account factors such as lower-performance computers, lower-quality or high price connections (i.e. narrowband or dialup connection), difficulty of obtaining technical assistance, and lower access to subscription-based content (Digital Literacy Report).

Finally, results from the library’s Edge Technology assessment indicated that Catawba County libraries did not currently meet the community value benchmark for digital tools and resources. With the provision of enhanced access to computers, mobile devices, and the TechConnect space, the library is addressing this need in providing our community with increased opportunities to enrich and improve their lives through open access to the most up to date digital tools, resources and training. Many of these technologies would be cost prohibitive even for the average citizen to purchase, thus creating a barrier to the exploration of new technology. In partnering with NC Works and the Manufacturing Solutions Center the library is able to provide our users access to real world technology that can improve their skill set and employability.

Quantifiable results (sustainability, cost savings, cost avoidance and/or a higher level of service).

Indication of what resources were used and what was done with any accrued time savings

The TechConnect Space and related programming have had a great impact on our community. The TechConnect partnership with the Western Piedmont Council of Governments and the NC Works team provided personalized employment counseling and assistance four hours a week in the library at a dedicated desk. In addition to ongoing library staff assistance, career staff from NC Works have assisted over 75 individuals with their job search, resume writing and professional development. One recipient of this service recently wrote a letter of thanks for help in finding a new job for both herself and her husband.

Since the opening of the TechConnect Technology learning space, the library has provided 49 digital literacy workshops, including 3D printing, Tinkercad, computer assisted design (CAD), digital cutter, and computer equipment and software. Additionally, the library has provided over 150 one-on-one technology sessions to our community members.

Participants' response in the TechConnect space and programming best shows the remarkable impact of this successful program: when surveyed, one hundred percent of people participating in workshops or one-on-one sessions agree that they feel more confident in their technology and job skills from attending a workshop or session.

This space and the new technology has been an enormous success for our community and our library staff who have enjoyed learning about and using the new technologies offered in the TechConnect area. Our staff received training on each of the technologies to learn how this equipment could be used for making things from a tatting shuttle to a garden sign, ensuring that citizens can get help anytime.

Our community members have also responded well to the new technology. The Apple computers are in constant use and the 3D printer has been used by all ages. One young man printed a model of the inner ear, enhancing his middle school project. A graduate student perfected his design for a prototype heel support for baseball catchers and plans to apply for a patent on the design. A local businessperson used our TechConnect resources to design replacement parts for his vintage pinball machines. These are just a few real world stories of citizens using TechConnect to demonstrate how access to technology empowers lives.

Other descriptive information

The TechConnect Project meets several of the criteria for the LGFCU Excellence in Innovation Awards. It provides new services and access to technology that our county residents did not previously enjoy such as the 3D printer or the ability to check out a GoPro cameral and take it home. It provides hands on access to critical technology skills necessary to secure employment now and into the future. This project expanded the number of public access computers available to allow more people to benefit from the free high speed internet available at the library.

As a result of this project, the library was able to ensure staff expertise and increase confidence with the new equipment: we enhanced our staff's technology skill set in order to better assist our citizens.

The library has also worked with other county departments to demonstrate the 3D printer and scanner and have even explored creating unique parts for the County Maintenance team.

Through the innovative partnership with the Western Piedmont Council of Governments, this project has provided a new channel of access to the NC Works professionals to help people find and secure employment. Through the partnership with the Manufacturing Solutions Center the library was able to ensure best practice and create opportunities for innovation by benefitting from the experience of current manufacturing expertise to provide our community with access to an industrial quality 3D printer and software that is the industry standard. These types of technologies might seem like a novelty to some, but they are being used for real applications by our community.