



## Providing Facilities and Support to Digitally Isolated Communities

A CAPE working paper on digital engagement

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Drawing those Americans who remain “offline” into digital engagement initiatives is a major challenge. More and more of our national discourse is happening in digital space, both in terms of traditional sources of information as well as in dialogue and discussion. In considering the digital divide, it’s important to remember those who remain offline are hardly isolated from society. While only 54 percent of U.S. households had Internet access in 2003<sup>1</sup>, nearly all had television and radio, although Internet-linked households are also more likely to have cable television and cell phones. Those who are offline are missing out on a significant portion of American social interaction.

Of course, one could argue, that reaching these offline people is what face-to-face engagement is for, particularly in regional initiatives. And many of those who don’t have Internet access say the reason is they don’t want or need it.<sup>2</sup> Yet digital technology holds enormous promise for invigorating face-to-face engagement, and many people expect and want to communicate digitally. Holding purely offline discussions runs the risk of seeming stale and limiting to those who are digitally engaged. Yet adding digital elements that aren’t available to all participants would be alienating to those who don’t have Internet access. Few things would be more damaging to a public engagement project than to have a significant part of the discussion occur in a space that some participants can’t reach.

### The UNM Gallup Case

Public Agenda’s work in Gallup, New Mexico, faces this challenge directly in one of the most electronically isolated communities in the nation. The initiative there is part of Achieving the Dream, a multiyear national initiative to help more community college students succeed, particularly students of color and low-income students who have traditionally faced significant barriers to success. Achieving the Dream emphasizes the use of data to drive change and focuses on measurable outcomes, especially closing achievement gaps.

Eighty-three community colleges in 15 states participate in Achieving the Dream, spearheaded by the Lumina Foundation for Education in collaboration with other foundations and educational agencies who contribute resources to the colleges.<sup>3</sup> MDC is the managing partner in the initiative which includes eight national organizations.<sup>4</sup> Public Agenda is one of those organizations.

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<sup>1</sup> National Telecommunications and Information Administration, “A Nation Online: Entering the Broadband Age,” September 2004, <http://www.ntia.doc.gov/reports/anol/NationOnlineBroadband04.htm>

<sup>2</sup> Pew Internet & American Life Project, “Why it Will Be Hard to Close the Broadband Divide,” August 1, 2007, [http://www.pewinternet.org/pdfs/Broadband\\_Commentary.pdf](http://www.pewinternet.org/pdfs/Broadband_Commentary.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> Knowledge Works Foundation, The Heinz Endowments, Houston Endowment Inc., College Spark Washington, Nellie Mae Education Foundation, The Winthrop Rockefeller Foundation, Kamehameha Schools, Office of Hawaiian Affairs, The University of Hawaii Community Colleges, The Lloyd G. Balfour Foundation, The Boston Foundation, TERI, The Irene E. & George A. Davis Foundation, the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, the Oklahoma State Regents for Higher Education, the South Carolina Technical Colleges System, and external partners coordinated by the Palmetto Institute.

## Creating a Culture of Engagement in Higher Education

Public Agenda has been a partner to the Achieving the Dream (AtD) Initiative since 2005, working closely with partner organizations and colleges to build the principles of effective dialogue and engagement into their work with local communities and leaders, as well as community college staff, faculty and students. In addition to serving as the overall engagement consultant to the initiative, we have contributed original research, created stakeholder and community engagement materials and toolkits, and provided direct technical assistance to twelve community colleges through three different pilot programs.

Currently, Public Agenda is involved in two pilot programs intended to expand and deepen our past engagement work with the Achieving the Dream colleges. The first is focused on exploring and developing new ways to increase the level of faculty and student engagement in creating a culture of student success. The colleges for this pilot program are: Bunker Hill in Massachusetts, Coastal Bend in Texas, Cuyahoga in Ohio, and Capital in Connecticut. Each college employs a variety of strategies including focus groups, student/faculty dialogue groups and campus conversations.

The second pilot program is being undertaken in collaboration with MDC, Inc. It is focused on deepening the relationship between the college and the surrounding community through the development of a college/community leadership team, thereby creating mutual accountability and responsibility for student success. The University of New Mexico at Gallup and South Texas Community College in McAllen, Texas are our college partners in this effort; both are majority minority intuitions. At Gallup, a great majority of the students are Native American, largely Navajo and Zuni. At South Texas, most students are Hispanic in origin, with a majority being Mexican and Mexican-American. This pilot grew out of a realization that in some cases, even the best efforts by institutions to increase student success may plateau or stall due to widespread cynicism or ineffective community engagement and leadership – particularly in areas where significant disparity exists among groups along economic, social or racial lines. While the institution may make numerous internal changes in policy and practice, commonly held beliefs and behaviors in the community may nevertheless limit how much progress is made.

The Community Leadership and Engagement Pilot Program which is the focus of this study involves the creation of a leadership team in each college, made up of individuals representing various parts of the community and the college to spearhead new and powerful community engagement efforts. The teams meet consistently over a 16 month period, with roughly six site visits from the partner organizations to provide training and support.

With such widely scattered participants, technology has proven to be a vital tool and a key way of using digital engagement to prepare for face-to-face work. The teams coordinate with Public Agenda via a collaborative Web application called Base Camp that enables them to share documents, experiences, manage project calendars and work on common files. The teams use the same technology to communicate with one another in between visits and conference calls.

Teams receive training and related materials on Public Agenda's community conversations model, a proven way for communities to talk about important and sometimes sensitive issues that affect all of us. The teams put together a strategic plan for sustained community engagement and concrete action to help more students succeed.

Agency members partnering with the college also receive free technical assistance and training in various stakeholder engagement strategies and methods they can use in all of their work. Agencies represented in the UNM Gallup community engagement leadership team include: Navajo Nation Self Reliance-Program, National Indian Youth Leadership Project, Chichiltah Chapter House, World Citizen Foundation, Zuni Education Career & Development Center, HELP-New Mexico envisions, and New Mexico Department of Veterans Services.

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<sup>4</sup> The national partner groups include: Public Agenda, Community College Research Center, Association of Community Colleges, JLB Associates, and Jobs for the Future (JFF), KSA Plus, MDRC, Community College Leadership program at the University of Texas at Austin.

## About UNM Gallup

The University of New Mexico-Gallup (UNM-G) is a branch campus of the University of New Mexico located roughly 20 miles from the Arizona border. UNM-G has the largest Native American student population of any public two-year college in the United States. Nearly eighty percent of the students enrolled are of Native American origin, and many of them come from the nearby reservations.

The area surrounding Gallup is defined by rugged mountains, covered with wild desert flowers. To the west of the city are the beautiful red canyons of the Navajo and Hopi nations; to the south is the historic Zuni Pueblo. Traditionally, Gallup has been trading post and meeting place for the surrounding area (drawing as many as 100,000 people on busy weekends).

Gallup's role as the commercial and educational center of the region has not changed in recent years. Many of the students commute long distances to study at UNM-Gallup. The University draws students from both Arizona and New Mexico. The school is seeking to improve ties with Navajo Nation Chapter Houses in Chilee, Arizona, as well as the Zuni Tribal Government in order to better accommodate out-of-state students studying at Gallup.

In addition to reaching out to commuting students, the University is also interested in engaging local high schools in university programming. The school already maintains an on-campus charter school for at-risk youth, but it would like to reach to more local schools (many of which support large numbers of at-risk students). Through the pilot program the university seeks to "more effectively support and collaborate with these existing connections and establish structures to provide a clear educational pathway for student achievement."

## Talking Circles Online at UNM Gallup

A highlight of the community leadership pilot project has been the implementation of community "talking circles" whereby participants help identify barriers to student success and solutions to address those problems. One of the recommendations from the Gallup talking circle conducted on May 6, 2008 was the continuation of the talking circles online. What we uncovered, however, is that out of 165 participants, 60 do not have Internet access or even the infrastructure to acquire it, such as land-line phones or even electricity.

When the community leadership engagement team at the University of New Mexico at Gallup started discussing the creation of 'talking circles' online to problem-solve on student success issues, the team members knew there could be pockets of limited Internet access. But the team did not imagine the magnitude of the digital divide. The problem had received national attention eight years earlier, including a visit by President Clinton to the Navajo nation pledging to close the digital divide. Sixteen-year-old Myra Jody of the Navajo nation won an IMac in a random drawing of 25,000 contestants, after applying for the computer giveaway from San Jose-based Awz.com.

After Myra won the computer, the company could not contact her to tell her she won because she had no phone. Awz had to locate her through her school and discovered that she lives in Ganado, a Northeastern Arizona reservation, in a trailer without telephone service and without running water. An expensive extended land line was needed for Myra to be able to connect and then, of course, there was the cost for keeping the line operating.<sup>5</sup>

Soon after Myra's story hit the national news, President Clinton visited the Navajo reservation to speak about his efforts to bridge the digital divide, with Myra present at the news conference. President Clinton said:

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<sup>5</sup> Gordon, Andrew, Door Jessica and Gordon Margaret. "Native American Technology Access: The Gates Foundation the Four Corners." *The Electronic Library*. Volume 21 Number 5. 2003 pg. 428-434.

*There is a cruel irony here. For more than 50 years after the Code-Talkers<sup>6</sup> were able to communicate with one another, over great distances in the Pacific, it is still hard to communicate between many parts of the Navajo Nation itself. In much of America, it takes just a modest amount of money and time to get someone on the Internet. But here, an astonishing 37 percent of the households are without electricity; about 70 percent without phone service; more than half without work.*

But even with the presidential acknowledgement of this great divide, a year later Myra still did not have the Internet, until Globalstar, a satellite phone business in San Jose, learned that not much had changed since Myra won the computer and decided to install the equipment to connect the teen to the Internet in April 2001. The company agreed to pay the \$1-a-minute charge for at least a year.<sup>7</sup>

But during that time the Navajo Nation had already been working at bridging the digital divide with a combination of effective planning, substantial private investment, a \$475,000 Technologies Opportunities Program (TOP) grant from the of the Department of Commerce's National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA), and strategic partnerships with StarBand and Northern Arizona University (NAU). Eventually, the Southwestern Navajo Nation Virtual Alliance (SNNVA) brought broadband Internet access to 110 Navajo communities, called chapters, across the entire reservation.

The Gates Foundation had also started a Library Program, which increased access to technology throughout the United States, including Indian reservations. The program equipped more than 10,000 public libraries with computer packages consisting of a rich assortment of hardware, software, installation, training and ongoing technical assistance. "This program has reached into communities, large and small, providing free access to computer technologies and the Internet for poor citizens throughout public libraries, and enhancing the visibility and viability of libraries throughout the country."<sup>8</sup>

But while public libraries provide excellent opportunities to increase Internet access in most states, even in very rural areas, "they are totally inadequate in Indian country."<sup>9</sup> The Navajo Nation, with a population of 180,462 encompassing 26,867 square miles and crossing state boundaries, has only one tribally-run public library: the Navajo Nation Library in Window Rock, Arizona. For all the 49 tribes in the Four Corners states, which include Arizona, New Mexico, Colorado and Utah, being targeted by Gates Native American initiative, there are only 36 tribal libraries recognized by their state library."<sup>10</sup> In the state of New Mexico alone, there are 21 tribes but only nine tribes with state recognized libraries. There are simply too few facilities and too much distance between them to provide consistent Internet access.

Since libraries proved not to be a viable option for Native Americans to close the digital divide, the Gates Foundation decided to provide non-competitive grants to every tribal entity in the Four Corners area, which enabled the tribes to propose how best to serve public access needs while respecting tribal integrity. As in the U.S. Library program, the package was far more than equipment, and included detailed preparatory work, installation, training and technical support. Tribes have received workstations and servers, laser printers, digital cameras, and whatever has been required for Internet connectivity, designed to fit local circumstances.

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<sup>6</sup> Navajo men, some as young as 15, who enlisted in the Marine Corps in World War II, helped to develop an ingenious code based on Navajo language, and became the communications link to and from the front lines of the allies in the Pacific War. There are many American military commanders from that conflict who will say that the United States might never have taken Iwo Jima, or won countless other battles in the Pacific if it weren't for the bravery, the sacrifice and the unbreakability of the code of the Navajo Code-Talkers. President Clinton. 2000. April 7.

<sup>7</sup> Independent. Gallup Web Edition. April 5, 2001. *Ganado teen ager finally gets Internet connection.*

<sup>8</sup> See footnote #6

<sup>9</sup> Native American Technology Access: The Gates Foundation in Four Corners. Vol.21 Number 5. 203.

<sup>10</sup> Gordon, Andrew, Door Jessica and Gordon Margaret. "Native American Technology Access: The Gates Foundation the Four Corners." *The Electronic Library*. Volume 21 Number 5. 2003 pg. 428-434.

“The isolation from appropriate telecommunications infrastructure meant that many of these settings could only be connected to the Internet via satellite. The choice among satellite vendors was left up to the Navajo nation, who ultimately chose OnSat Network Communications. Now 43 tribes in Arizona, New Mexico, Colorado and Utah area are participating in the Gates NAATP program. Equipment has been set up in all 161 settings (111 in the Navajo nation alone), only 21 of which are libraries. More than 100 of these sites required satellite equipment in order to be connected to the Internet.

### **Where do things stand in 2008?**

The Gates project was nearly a decade ago and the computers are old (Pentium 2). The chapter houses are replacing them slowly. Most of the chapter houses have satellite with onSat or T1 circuits or dial-up and some do not have access at all.<sup>11</sup> The chapter houses have limited computers, which mean users who have seniority will have priority. On their website, the Navajo Nation has an application for agencies providing services to access their computer as the tribe attempts to be able to solidify its e-government strategy. The ITTH project has been encouraging those locations to purchase high-end computers and to create a small lab open to the public. Until that happens, however, access remains limited.

The 2007-2008 Navajo strategic plan endorses expanded Internet access as a vital tool to directly serve citizens. “The intent is to provide connections throughout the reservation where information access is just a click away...where information services are streamlined and secure, and where citizens have an immediate voice in an open and energetic public forum.”

Until reservations are able to increase their capacity and provide public access to technology, the digital divide will remain for many residents in the reservation, given that the telephone penetration rate is only 37.4% in Navajo Nation households compared to 94.6 percent in U.S. households in 2000. Also, wireless is not a true option for Internet access. In the Gates research on the Four Corners region, it is noted that a few people have cellular phones yet do not have electricity. When their cell phone batteries run out, they have to walk miles to someone’s home to be able to recharge their phones. The per capita income for Navajos living in a reservation is a mere \$7,269 (and only \$6,976 for the Pueblo of Zuni). Even with double increases in per capita income, most Native Americans would remain below the poverty line. People in the Four Corners region are simply less able to purchase computers and pay for the Internet than most Americans. Unfortunately, this means that the digital divide continues to be a significant reality.

### **The Proposed Solutions**

Besides the initiatives going on within the tribes to bridge the digital divide, team members of the community engagement pilot initiative are trying to make the most of the severely limited resources at hand. Currently, members of the Community Leadership Engagement Team are meeting with Gallup public school officials to see if talking circle participants can have access to school computers. This would only be available in Gallup and on the Zuni reservation. If that relationship does not come to fruition, it seems that talking circle participants without computers will have to wait until another venue is created, and such an endeavor would require additional (and so far unsecured) funding. The hope of UNM Gallup officials is to be able to create two community learning centers with computer labs within each reservation (Zuni and Navajo), through a grant from the federal government. The college has written a proposal to the U.S. Department of Education.

The proposal is titled: “Creating Indigenous and Relevant College Learning Experiences” (CIRCLE) and it will build on the progress made during the last three years at UNM-G using Title III and Lumina Achieving the Dream (AtD) funding that developed teaching and learning structures that increased the enrollment and retention of students at the college. If funded, the project will focus on strategies that will not only build on “lessons learned” from these initiatives, but will transform the college into an institution

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<sup>11</sup> Colin Arcivo, Consultant

that will more fully reflect the culture and needs of the surrounding region. The ultimate goal is for UNM-Gallup to become a showcase of “best practices” for Native American higher education. A key portion of this grant will provide for the reservation computer labs, which will be staffed by UNM personnel who will also be providing academic support services to students.

In the meantime, for individuals with the Internet, a chat room via Google is being created to allow them to continue to work on the institutional and community change needed for student success in the area and when access is arranged for the others they will be welcomed to begin to dialogue for positive student and community change.