



Durham County Libraries Digital Navigators Grant

September 2022

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Supported by grant funds from the Institute of Museum and Library Services under the provisions of the federal Library Services and Technology Act (LSTA) as administered by the State Library of North Carolina, a division of the Department of Natural and Cultural Resources (IMLS grant number LS-250229-OLS-21)

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Suggested Citation

Davis, R. (2022). *Durham County Libraries Digital Navigators Grant*. North Carolina State University. <http://www.fi.ncsu.edu/>

Introduction

The city and county of Durham present a dichotomy when it comes to the digital divide, the gap between those with digital opportunity, access, and skills and those without. Durham and its outlying areas are perceived as having abundant resources and a well-educated population to support high-tech businesses, but there are many individuals operating without dependable digital devices, high-speed internet, or the skills to carry out basic functions. Even if individuals have basic access to the internet, the COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated the rate at which important institutions such as banks, utilities, and health care require online interaction. Thus, a lack of digital skills will prohibit individuals from being able to use their resources. Reaching those who need assistance with digital skills and resources remains an ongoing dilemma because they are not found in online information spaces where most others obtain services.

The Durham Digital Navigators project was envisioned as a pilot program for Durham County Library librarians or Digital Navigators to connect patrons to the three resources demonstrated to close the digital divide: low cost/free devices, low cost/free internet, and gateway digital literacy skills. The project was intended to benefit users who, prior to the pandemic, used the library as their primary connection to computers, the internet, and digital support. When the library branches were open, librarians answered questions about computer usage and taught basic digital literacy skills in group classes. Patrons also came to the library to use computers there, or with their personal devices to use the free Internet in the buildings. In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, this LSTA EZ grant aimed to serve increased numbers of library users and other potential library users impacted by the digital divide who were unable to physically visit a library branch by providing Digital Navigators who are trained to assist patrons with digital needs. Whether the need was patrons' digital devices or internet, information access, or digital skills, Digital Navigators worked with them (usually one-on-one) to improve their ability to discover information and obtain information resources.




Executive Summary

For this project, the Durham County Library hired a Digital Navigator Consultant who trained employees and volunteers to be knowledgeable Digital Navigators who guided people through acquiring basic technology and the skills to use it independently. Those Digital Navigators then provided sessions to members of the public in various locations, mostly outside the library, designed to increase access to digital services and provide on-the-spot assistance rather than scripted lessons. Aided by external evaluators, project leaders tracked participation through intake forms and exit surveys, observations, and interviews. Based on project results, the program leaders and evaluation staff are pleased to offer a collection of materials along with best practices and lessons learned for other libraries looking to expand services that narrow the digital divide. This project has built a foundation upon which Durham County Libraries may continue to build services that increase citizens' access to digital tools and resources.

To offer comprehensive services including access to low-cost or free devices, information about low-cost internet options, and an overview of free digital literacy classes, Durham County

Library entered a formal partnership with Digital Durham. Digital Durham is a collective of 15 member organizations dedicated to digital equity in Durham County. They offer assistance to citizens in need of digital resources, connecting them with already existing programs and organizations such as Durham Public Schools and Durham Housing authority. The partnership with Digital Durham offered grant leaders that pre-existing network of connections and resources that could aid their patrons. Though the start of the grant year was filled with delays due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, the project was able to realize success through meeting users where they were, in places they would already have frequented. Staff and volunteers were trained to help individuals using previously created Digital Navigator training materials, with important personalization features added by the Digital Navigator Consultant. Library staff and project leaders were then able to connect Digital Navigators with individuals in need by partnering with community organizations already helping high-needs individuals who are often left behind as the world moves to required digital access for services like health care and banking.







Goal

The goal of this Digital Navigator program was to address patrons' digital needs by	
providing one-on-one instruction through Digital Navigator sessions driven by the patrons' goals. In those sessions, Digital Navigators assisted with:	
	providing information access , both improving users' ability to discover information and ability to obtain information resources.
	providing lifelong learning opportunities with digital literacy skill instruction to improve users' general digital knowledge and skills.
	filling out forms for low-cost and free computers from Digital Durham partner organizations and signing up for low-cost internet through the affordable connectivity program.

"[One participant] was surprised because she is low income, and she uses her internet to do certain things. And she was like, 'Wait, so I can instead of like \$75 a month, I could pay \$18 a month for the internet because I'm a veteran?... it's not publicized.'"

- Digital Navigator

Outcomes

Information gathered through surveys, observation and interviews showed	
	increases in participants' comfort with or improvements in gateway digital literacy skills.
	a reduced number of households without a computer, and a reduced number of households without internet.
	partnerships with organizations where people in need gather increased the library's access to potential participants.
	increases in comfort and ability of volunteers and staff members to share basic digital literacy skills that support patrons' digital needs.
	strategic moves towards sustainability for recruiting new volunteers.
	training materials and handbook(s) were compiled and maintained in a condition ready to train more Digital Navigators.

Program Details

Digital Navigators

The concept of Digital Navigators has been around for some time, though not always under that name. The National Digital Inclusion Alliance started using the term "digital navigator" in April 2020. As they state, "Digital navigators are trusted guides who assist community members in internet adoption and the use of computing devices. Digital navigation services include ongoing assistance with affordable internet access, device acquisition, technical skills, and application support" (NDIA, 2021). For Durham County Libraries to be able to offer a Digital Navigator program, they would first need a Digital Navigator Consultant who would compile, create, and organize materials for use with training Navigators and educate participants. The Consultant would also train Digital Navigators, seek partnerships, and schedule outreach times and dates.

Materials Created

Digital Navigator Handbook
([English](#) and [Spanish](#))

Digital Navigator Training
[PowerPoint](#)

Families Moving Forward
[Slides](#)

Digital Navigator Training
[Resource Document](#)

The ultimate goal of the Digital Navigator sessions was for the learners to discover ways to help themselves when Navigators weren't available. The training for Digital Navigators consisted of previously developed materials curated, with additions, to personalize for Durham County Library needs. It was conducted in-person or online with individuals or small groups as members were added to the cohort. The Digital Navigator Consultant trained 10 library staff and volunteers to assist patrons in this way during the term of the grant, and four more at the end to help sustain the efforts of the Digital Navigators. Due to the ongoing pandemic, the Navigators were trained to run Digital Navigator sessions in-person, over-the-phone, and/or in a socially distanced setting. Stakeholders had many compliments for the Consultant's work as the lead - obtaining partners, personalizing training, and making the resources easy to use.

Digital Navigator Sessions

The Digital Navigators typically used the handbook to guide their conversations with and assist patrons who learned how to access low-cost internet, find low-cost/free devices, and practice basic digital literacy skills. Often, participants came to the sessions with particular needs such as accessing email on the phone or understanding how the phone files match what is on their computer or tablet. As they were trained, the Navigators and participants collaborated to reach the participants' goal (i.e., actually connecting their email to their smartphone). At the end of the session, the participant received the handbook, which often had highlighting or writing from the session to help them remember what was shared. As the table below shows, sessions were held in three locations during the grant period, and, while one partnership requested more of a formal class format, all sessions were intended to increase participants' access and ability to navigate digital tools and spaces (i.e., find low cost/free devices, access low cost/free internet and practice gateway digital literacy skills).

Outreach Summary

While some Digital Navigator sessions occurred at branch libraries, most were held at three different locations: The Durham Center for Senior Living, Families Moving Forward, and the NCCU Community Health Fair.

Partnering Organization	Sessions	Participants	Type of Session
Durham Center for Senior Life	16 sessions April 29 - August 19	~65 participants, as indicated by the number or exit surveys	One-on-one sessions. Seniors arrived for drop-in sessions during a scheduled and advertised time when Digital Navigators would be available. Many stayed for help with multiple issues or multiple sessions.
Families Moving Forward	3 sessions April 28 May 3 May 12	7 families	Large group sessions with a presentation geared towards families in transition who may need help getting internet, devices, or assistance with other digital needs.

<p>NCCU Community Health Fair</p>	<p>1 session April 30</p>	<p>88 participants</p>	<p>Digital Navigators had a table at this local health fair and shared information with attendees as they came by.</p>
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One Digital Navigator commented on how they personalized sessions saying:

“Going into the Senior Center and working there with people trying to help them use [something] on their phone, I have to write out using paper, draw a picture of icons. Like what the zoom icon looks like and this is what steps [to take], then watching her do it...she’s like ‘Oh okay, so yes, it’s not this hard, it is really just a click.’”

-Digital Navigator

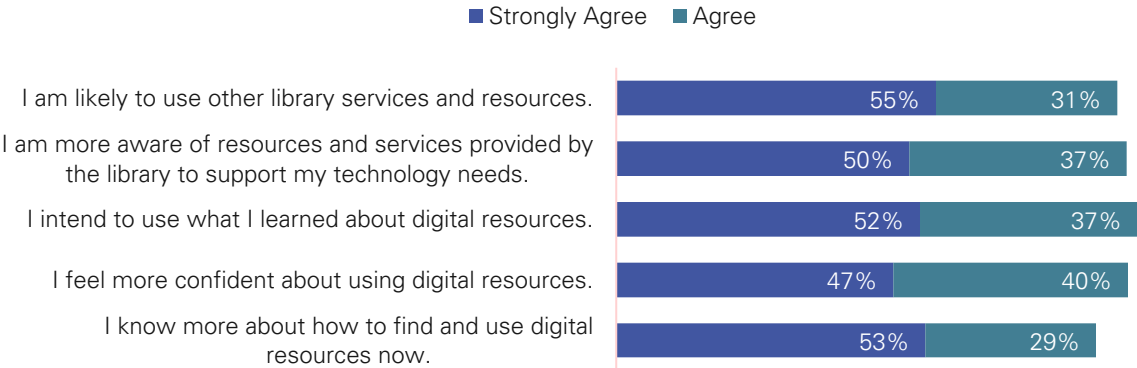
Outcomes

Fifty-two participants agreed to fill out intake forms and at least 65 individuals agreed to take exit surveys. Any forms presented to the participants were voluntary and most agreed to assist with our data gathering. A paper version was offered to participants, and this was most popular with the senior participants. The answers on paper were entered into Qualtrics by Friday Institute staff.

Participant Evaluation

On the exit surveys collected, participants rated the Digital Navigator sessions highly. All five areas rated were above 80% of participants “agreeing” or “strongly agreeing” with statements regarding the quality of the support they received.

Please indicate how much you agree or disagree with the following statements:



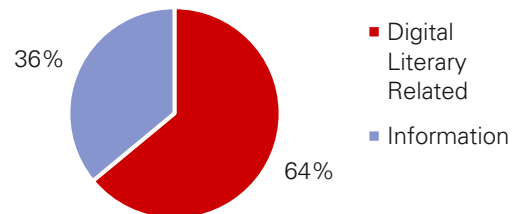
100% said the Digital Navigator session gave them the tools to help solve their problem.

Increased Skills

Part of the digital divide involves access to tools and the internet. Once individuals obtain those items, a lack of skills can continue to limit access to the items and information needed online. When participants filled in intake forms, the biggest item they needed assistance with was digital skills. This included items such as getting into email, which 29% indicated they needed help with. Other examples of specific things they came for help with included downloading tax information, help deleting old information and how to use apps on their phone. The following charts show what types of help participants received according to the exit surveys:

What did you get help with today?	
Learning how to use technology.	59%
Finding a low-cost computer or device.	13%
Finding low-cost internet service.	7%
Other	21%

Other Help Requests
(21% of those reported)



"It's a journey, but I got enough information in one hour to move forward."

- Participant

Open-ended answers to the survey question about what the participants liked the most about the program were classified by content. The majority of comments included **information-oriented** answers that said they learned how to use technology like smartphones or increased their digital literacy. **Communication-oriented** answers were about 30% of the comments and included comments about the Digital Navigators having clear communication skills, providing friendly assistance, and personalizing delivery in ways such as working to understand the problem and giving instructions slowly.

"[The thing I liked most was] probably the ease at which you can ask for help. I admire how concise they are."

- Participant

Increased Access

Evaluators observed **repeat visitors** to sessions at the senior center, and after the first two weeks, there were often participants waiting for Digital Navigators to arrive so they could get help. Participants also reported **increased access** to high-speed home internet service and through referrals to refurbishers or other low-cost device providers. Thanks to participant reporting, we know there was increased access to adequate devices from those who said they obtained items from places like the non-profit Kramden Institute, a Digital Durham member organization. Kramden refurbishes devices to share with citizens in need. See kramden.org for more information.

"You all showed me how to do [what I needed] and I learned more hands on."

- Participant

Challenges and Areas of Need

In the exit survey about 80% of the participants said that they didn't have any changes to recommend for the program. Of those who did give suggestions, the top suggestion (10%) was to have more libraries with Digital Navigators. A few asked for a longer period of time for the session(s) and one simply commented "accessible".

Though demand was relatively low for materials and services in other languages, there were still instances of need for Spanish materials and support, as well as other languages, like Chinese. The Digital Navigator Handbook was translated into Spanish in response, but there was not always a Digital Navigator with Spanish language skills to work with individuals.

Finding time during the workday to find more partners and train more library staff to be Digital Navigators will continue to be a challenge as library personnel are already working at and beyond capacity, though recruiting volunteers enabled more individuals to receive assistance. For partnerships, finding groups already sponsoring gatherings like the NCCU Health Fair can be a double benefit, connecting the library with another institution AND allowing them to meet with participants already in attendance.

Sustainability

One of the goals of the Digital Navigator program was to make sure the efforts toward this grant would build further capacity for Durham County Libraries to improve their assistance with digital issues. Before the end of the contract, the Digital Navigator Consultant had already begun training new Digital Navigators (volunteers) at the library and at the Durham Center for

Senior Life. The Volunteer and Program Coordinator of the Center confirmed the organization's commitment to continuing the work already begun, so will have even more seniors with digital skills. The Center has already considered new grants from different sources and potential partners to get more volunteers into the building. As the following quote shows, the Durham Center staff agree with and understand the Digital Navigator approach:

"[The program was not about seniors] handing over a phone to a family member, but about empowering and teaching them how to do it."

- Partner Organization Representative

At the end of the grant period Durham Library staff held a sustainability meeting inviting stakeholders to come with ideas for ensuring the work of Digital Navigators continues. Ideas documented include ideas for new partners and places to meet learners, such as Back to School Fairs, and ways to make sure the Durham Library staff are all trained. As an additional sustainability strategy, the Durham Public Library grant leader indicated that they would be forming a standing Digital Navigator Committee. After a short break, that committee will brainstorm some things to do to continue the work.

"What I see as most valuable for this program is that it's joining the conversation of Digital Navigator programs and thinking about how we can do this work best (for Durham County). And I hope that that conversation is built upon after our work as well, and that someone takes it and makes it better."

- Digital Navigator Consultant

Lessons Learned

Reaching Participants is the First Obstacle

The focus of this project is to help those who have less access to technology-driven forms of communication. When looking to find these people, programs must be ready to use more traditional forms of communication such as paper flyers, ads in newspapers, phone calls, and in-person meetings. Efforts can be multiplied by canvassing the community for partners beyond schools and churches to assist with closing the digital divide. Unless a prior relationship exists with schools or churches, they are often overloaded with program requests, and many have proven to be interested but not able to follow-through with support for additional programs. It will also help to continue mapping known networks (i.e., Digital Durham member organizations) to connect with those already doing work to reach people without access to technology. Once a partnership is obtained, leaders must keep searching for the next partner, not relying solely on one source.

Know Your Learners

Use intake forms as well as conversations to discover what participants' needs are: devices, internet access, and/or skills. Additional considerations to note are participants' level of literacy and confidence to complete tasks. These will influence how long sessions take and what sorts of training and support might be accomplished. Digital Navigators found that asking questions and really listening to answers, along with co-creating goals for each session helped target the learners' needs and allowed both the Navigator and participant to gauge the session's success.

"My expectation was that people would tell me what their needs were, and that I was in service to those needs."

- Digital Navigator

Make Plans for Sustaining Success

Staff time can be a real barrier for Digital Navigator programs, as staff time is expensive, particularly during a labor shortage and a time which for many libraries is a budgetary crisis. To mitigate this situation, leaders can work with partners to identify volunteers who might continue the work at a location without the library's assistance in case there is no longer capacity to handle that effort. As the Digital Navigator Consultant explained below, ways can be found to generate the Digital Navigator sessions.

"Our project was not an expensive project. It hired someone who had some dedicated paid time to build the infrastructure. It required an independent evaluator, the Friday Institute... but the actual navigations, right, that really just required people power...I would like people to know that this is an affordable program for their library, they can find a way to make it work."

- Digital Navigator Consultant

Conclusion

Digital Navigators teach digital literacy and skills and help individuals find digital access, but they are also problem solvers, troubleshooters, and clue finders. Because no two participants will have the same background, abilities, and resources, and there is no way to predict what type of device they may need help with. With the right training, Digital Navigators can be flexible, empowered, and rewarded. The rewards are those critically important incremental steps towards a society where all citizens have equitable access to digital tools and information.

As a result of this grant, Durham County Library:

- Trained staff and volunteers to be navigators and partner with Digital Durham and others to sustainably scale this work.
- Curated and modified information from Digital Durham partners to create a Digital Navigator Handbook that addressed Durham County's needs for Digital Navigator sessions that connect people to low-cost/free internet, devices, and basic computer skills.
- Created hard copies of materials that help patrons find digital literacy courses, low devices, and/or low-cost internet.
- Provided Digital Navigator services for many Durham residents, who were able to get low-cost internet, free devices and/or assistance with building digital skills.
- Posted materials developed during Durham's Digital Navigator program online under a creative commons license so that any library or patron can access the materials.
- Developed best practices to share with other Digital Navigator programs.

The Digital Navigator program aimed to increase digital inclusion through laptop ownership, home internet connectivity, and digital skills training, though as a whole, the results appear that the program ultimately focused on digital literacy skills. These were the majority of questions Digital Navigators were asked, so for the population reached, this appeared to be the primary need. Despite these results, I3 Connectivity Explorer data suggests that device ownership and internet connectivity are needs in Durham County, and this may be an area to explore in further digital divide efforts.

The potential for the total number of people served continues to increase, given the compilation of materials, Durham Library leadership's dedication to training more Durham County Librarians to be Digital Navigators, and the Durham Center for Senior Life's recruitment of volunteers to continue the service. The work done in Durham contributes to a larger push for this type of program across the state, as well as the nation. Imagining where Digital Navigator programs might go next is full of possibilities. Directions for further steps might be to have a Digital Navigator that focuses on digital health literacy, or online banking. Libraries might also consider ways to provide Digital Navigator access for those with needs of any sort, whether physical, social-emotional, or intellectual.

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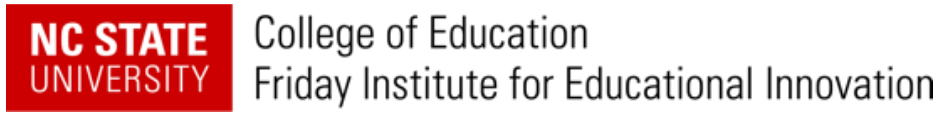
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