



Diversity Works

Office of University Partnerships

Minority-Serving Institutions Developing Partnerships, Building Communities

Vol. 2, Issue 1

Bridging the Digital Divide One Neighbor at a Time

The partnership between Elizabeth City State University and nearby neighbor Herrington Village confirms that great minds do think alike—and also work very well together.

A grant from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development’s (HUD’s) Office of University Partnerships’ (OUP’s) Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU) program has allowed Elizabeth City State University (ECSU), a historically black university in North Carolina, and Herrington Village, a multifamily, HUD-assisted housing community, to create a much-needed computer lab for residents and community members while at the same time creating a real-world learning laboratory for ECSU students.



Morris Autry

ECSU: Seeking Opportunities that Benefit Students and the Community

ECSU’s administration, staff, and faculty are constantly looking for projects to add to the learning experience ECSU offers students. Of particular interest are projects that allow ECSU students to apply theories learned in the classroom to the local community. By complementing classroom instruction with real-world experience, ECSU ensures that its graduates are well-prepared, well-rounded, and community sensitive.

When Linda Hayden, Ph.D., a professor in ECSU’s Math and Computer Science Department, learned about HUD’s Neighborhood Networks Initiative, she brought the potential collaborative effort to the attention of Morris Autry, ECSU’s Community Development Program Director. Created in 1995, Neighborhood Networks encourages property owners to establish multiservice community

learning centers in HUD-insured and -assisted properties. One of the first federal initiatives to promote self-sufficiency and help provide computer access to low-income housing communities, Neighborhood Networks has become a family of more than 1,200 technology centers across the United States, Puerto Rico, and the U.S. Virgin Islands.

Autry immediately recognized the value that working with a local housing community to establish a computer center would offer ECSU, its students, and the community. And he also knew the community that would benefit from such a center—Herrington Village Apartments, located just across the street from ECSU.

“By working with Herrington Village to establish a Neighborhood Networks center, our students would learn all there is to know about creating such a learning center, from installing and networking hardware and loading software to teaching computer skills and working with youth,” says Autry. “It’s an ideal way to put to use what they’ve learned in the classroom while gaining experience and having a positive impact on the community. It’s the whole learning package.”

Herrington Village: Seeking a Partner to Provide Opportunities

Meanwhile, Clennie Banks, property manager at Herrington Village and ECSU alumna, was trying to

continued on page 2

figure out a way to provide residents of Herrington Village with computer access and other skills to increase their employment and educational opportunities.

“Every day, the younger residents would come to my office and ask if they could use the computer to complete their homework assignments,” says Banks. “I knew that a single computer could not meet their needs. I also knew that without computers, these children would be left behind, and the adult residents would miss out on jobs and educational opportunities.”

Turning Opportunity Into Reality

Before Autry could walk across the street to speak with Banks about a partnership, Banks was knocking on his door. “Even though we were already very interested in working with Herrington Village to establish a Neighborhood Networks center on the property, Clennie offered a convincing story regarding the need for a center,” says Autry. “Their needs matched perfectly our desire to offer students the chance to gain hands-on experience.”

To turn their concept into a reality, Autry and Banks assembled a team to develop an action plan. Banks assumed responsibility for working with HUD and the Herrington Village management team to secure space and retrofit the center. Autry developed the resources for operating the center, which included preparing the grant proposal for submission to OUP and securing technical assistance from the university.

To help Herrington Village create its computer center, ECSU provided:

- * Hardware, and software, including Microsoft Office.
- * Networking for computers and printers.
- * Computer chairs.
- * Preliminary funding for Internet connectivity.



Children at Herrington Village Center

- * Varying levels of computer courses and instructional classes.
- * Coordination of volunteers and tutors.
- * Activities for youth to interact with the ECSU team.
- * Special programs for residents, including events for Neighborhood Networks Week, Black Family Technology Week, and Kids Computer Camp.
- * Programs and activities in housing, healthcare, financial literacy, and social services.
- * Assistance in securing resources and funding to sustain the center.

“Today the partnership remains strong,” says Banks. “The university continues to offer basic and intermediate-level computer classes at the center. ECSU students also tutor elementary and high school students in our afterschool program.”

ECSU also gives continuing education credits to students who complete computer classes at the center. This has encouraged Herrington Village and neighborhood residents to enroll in other courses at ECSU.

Tips for Establishing a Partnership with a Neighborhood Networks Center

Autry has these tips to offer other grantees who may be considering establishing a partnership with a Neighborhood Networks center:

- * Encourage participation of residents and property owners in the initial planning stages of the center to help determine the level of interest and guide the center in program planning.
- * Determine the role and expectations of each partner and make sure that each partner can carry out its expected roles.
- * Complete an inventory of campus resources, such as faculty, students, grant writers, and equipment, and other community resources that could be useful in the partnership development and ensure that there are enough resources to adequately meet expectations.

There is also a great deal to be said about forging a partnership with an alumnus. Because a common bond is shared, the partnership begins at a higher level than a fledgling partnership. “Clennie and her

continued on page 3

Bridging, continued from page 2

team are very accommodating in terms of scheduling computer classes and other center events often conducted in the evenings or at night,” says Autry. “They allow us to conduct hardware repairs and routine maintenance to computer hardware at times when our technicians are available. ECSU and Herrington Village are partners in every way. When they need us, they know they can count on us, and vice versa.”

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Lifelong Learning Center Helps Residents Improve Quality of Life

In 2003, Santa Maria, California, residents who were enrolled in community education classes completed a community needs survey. The results indicated the need for a local community resource center and educational classes, including English as a Second Language (ESL) classes, job-skills training, and access to technology. So in 2004, using its Hispanic-Serving Institutions Assisting Communities (HSIAC) grant, Allan Hancock College (AHC), in partnership with the city of Santa Maria, launched the development of the AHC Atkinson Lifelong Learning Center. In August 2006, the 2,500-square-foot center, which includes a state-of-the-art computer lab/technology center and a classroom, officially opened its doors to residents, particularly those in the low-income, predominately Hispanic northwest area of Santa Maria.

“These residents face multiple daily challenges. Limited transportation, English skills, and childcare and lack of formal education, complicated by unease about venturing into the unknown college campus environment, have a negative impact on their potential for education and economic advancement and make it difficult for them to access services,” says Ardis Nielsen, AHC Dean of Community Education and HSIAC Project Manager. “AHC has successfully removed some of these barriers in order to provide opportunities for education and workplace advancement.”

The Power of Partnership

“Constructing the center was a 2-year process that involved ongoing communication and collaboration between AHC and the city of Santa Maria,” says

Suzanne Valery, Ed.D., AHC Institutional Grants Director. Construction was a lengthy process that involved a HUD environmental assessment, bids, and site preparation, delaying the opening of the center by a year. During that time, the city of Santa Maria transformed one room inside its existing community center (which is now adjoined to the new Lifelong Learning Center) into a classroom so that AHC could begin offering classes to area residents. As a result of this collaboration, a strong partnership has formed, creating an environment of trust and respect that is needed to collaborate effectively on future grant work.

Center Programs and Services

The Lifelong Learning Center offers noncredit community education classes Monday through Friday from 8 a.m. to 10 p.m. and Saturday from 9 a.m. to 3:30 p.m. Classes are free and are open-entry and open-exit, meaning that students may enroll at any time and exit when they achieve their goals. All classes offered at the center are taught in English and Spanish.

“The computer lab is equipped with leading-edge computer hardware that surpasses any other computer lab on or off the AHC campus,” says Institutional Technology Director Carol Van Name. It contains 30 computers featuring the latest dual processor technology, flat screens, and software packages needed for classroom support, as well as workstations compliant with the Americans with Disabilities Act.

continued on page 4

In addition to a server and wireless network, the lab includes a data projector, a dropdown projection screen, and a multispeaker sound system. The site also has a remote data connection to the college's mainframe, which enables AHC's community education staff to register students onsite. In addition, the computers are equipped with the latest software programs to support classroom instruction in digital photography and ESL. Prior to the creation of this lab, ESL and computer noncredit students were using antiquated computers and cassette players and tapes in constant need of repair.

Campus-Community Engagement

"There has been great community support for the center. Local residents frequently express their gratitude because now they have an opportunity for personal and professional growth," says Neilsen. "AHC is committed to bringing the campus to the community and to sustaining and expanding the educational services it is providing at the Lifelong Learning Center. The popularity of the classes is an indication of the need for such a center in this community."

Various AHC staff and departments are committed to helping area residents take advantage of new services in their community. AHC President and Superintendent José Ortiz, Ed.D., describes the project as a "truly successful community partnership." He is so proud of the project that he has asked AHC's Board of Trustees to tour the facility. "All staff involved have felt a great deal of accomplishment and pride in being able to better serve the educational needs of those who are traditionally underserved," says Neilsen.

Future plans for the center include activities for children of students who attend classes and expanded course offerings. Santa Maria has established and furnished a room for educational activities for young children (ages 3 to 5) inside the community center adjacent to the new classrooms. AHC and Santa Maria are already discussing future collaborative community

education projects that expand existing center services and establish additional lifelong learning in other economically disadvantaged areas of the city.

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Allan Hancock College Atkinson Lifelong Learning Center ribbon-cutting ceremony

From On-Campus Computer Lab to Empowerment Hub

Obtaining knowledge. Building skills. Increasing your power to change and improve your life and community. This is the concept of empowerment in its purest form. And San Diego State University-Imperial Valley Campus is turning this concept into reality.

Using funds awarded from its 2000 and 2003 Hispanic-Serving Institutions Assisting Communities (HSIAC) grants, San Diego State University-Imperial Valley Campus is facilitating and supporting the empowerment

continued on page 5

of residents of the colonia-designated areas of Calexico, California. By equipping individuals with knowledge, skills, and resources, the university is empowering residents to improve their lives, manage and adapt to change, and contribute and generate change in their communities.

From the friendly environment of its on-campus computer lab-turned-empowerment hub, HSIAC staff and San Diego State Continuing Education Department staff mentor residents in business development and provide instruction in language and computer literacy and workforce development.

Helping Residents Succeed

The road to success often begins with a referral from one of the university's ongoing partnerships with several local agencies. Participants of the California Work Opportunity and Responsibility to Kids (CalWORKs) government assistance program and the state rehabilitation program that serves unskilled laborers injured while on the job are referred to the HSIAC staff for further assistance.

"A large majority of our residents are CalWORKs recipients," says Susana Fuentes, HSIAC Director and director of the university's Division of Continuing Education. "They are mostly unemployed, non-English-speaking, female heads-of-households ranging from their early 30s to their mid-50s. We want to empower them, to help them to become self-sufficient, and to help them care for their families. We also provide assistance for workers injured on the job who need to learn a new skill. That new skill is normally computer technology."

Confronting and Eliminating Barriers

The university's empowerment hub began when HSIAC staff members realized that many of the first residents who were referred to the university wanted to establish their own businesses. However, with no financial resources or contacts and minimal knowledge of the process and requirements for establishing a business, the goal of residents owning their own businesses seemed unattainable. The HSIAC staff served as mentors and coaches to these residents.

"One of the main objectives of the first HSIAC grant was to help residents who wanted to establish a business," says Fuentes. "Many were unaware of the various steps involved in developing their own businesses, such as licensing, inspections, and city requirements.

In many instances they had to travel to four or five different venues to secure such information, which proved discouraging to them. We helped to educate them about the process and to organize their efforts, often accompanying them for support."

Limited skills in speaking and understanding English also prevented residents from getting the information they needed to start their own businesses. "The university was already offering English as a second language (ESL) instruction and we further incorporated this component into our program."

HSIAC staff also used grant funds to purchase several computers for the computer lab to reinforce basic literacy skills. All the computers' commands are in English, and all of the writing exercises using the keyboard are done in English. Participants also gained instruction in Microsoft Office applications and Internet research.

Expanding Skills

With its 2003 HSIAC grant, the university purchased more computers to serve more members of the community. While these computers continue to reinforce language skills, they also allow the center to expand its services. With the computers, residents perform job searches, create resumes and cover letters, and develop PowerPoint presentations.

"These presentations are important to residents because they help them gain confidence using language skills in front of an audience," says Fuentes. "This helps develop their confidence in communicating with others, which is important if they are granted a job interview or must seek information relating to developing their own business. It's a confidence builder."

Staff also offer instruction in mathematics and promote critical thinking with residents. The goal is to help residents learn and become comfortable with English and to develop strong cognitive and verbal skills, not just repeat responses or answers they hear in class. "We want to promote different levels of thinking among residents," says Fuentes. "We want them to think spontaneously and to not just respond to the usual language cues."

The center also provides information on employment possibilities, how to dress for success, and various educational opportunities available to residents. Local government and private agencies are often invited to the center to give presentations on the services they offer to the community.

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From On-Campus, continued from page 5

Overcoming the Obstacles

Trying to grasp new technology in a new language and then use both to communicate effectively is challenging. “The fact that these residents do what they do is amazing,” says Fuentes. “This is a different world for them. They face financial, technological, educational, and language barriers, but are undeterred from getting help.”

So far, the determination of residents has proven successful. Some residents have established their own businesses, including catering and decorating services for community events. Some have gained employment in the retail industry, and others have enrolled at a junior college or are attending cosmetology school.

“This is only the beginning for them,” says Fuentes. “Their goal is to be productive members of society, and with their improving language and computer skills,

they are well on their way to achieving this. Their children see them attending college to gain these skills and now their children’s vision has expanded. They are saying, ‘I want to go to college to not just attend a class or learn computers; I want to earn a degree.’”

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HUD’s Office of University Partnerships (OUP) provides grants to institutions of higher education to assist them and their partners with the implementation of a broad range of community development activities including neighborhood revitalization, housing, and economic development. This newsletter, *Diversity Works*, highlights the efforts of grantees in OUP’s Historically Black Colleges and Universities, Hispanic-Serving Institutions Assisting Communities, Tribal Colleges and Universities, and Alaska Native-Native Hawaiian Institutions Assisting Communities grant programs and includes a variety of interesting projects, compelling grantee profiles, and other valuable resources for minority-serving institutions.