

The Digital Equity Leadership Lab (DELL): A case study of community leadership development to promote digital equity and justice

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Abstract

This paper presents the Digital Equity Leadership Lab in Baltimore, Maryland as a case study of community leadership development to promote digital equity and justice. While several studies of community leadership development exist, few are focused on its role in promoting digital equity and justice. This case study attempts to address this gap in the scholarly literature through the following research question: How might DELL serve as a community-based leadership training model to develop the next wave of digital equity leaders? Through our analysis of interviews with community leaders, outside experts, and community foundation staff, we discovered the following three main findings: (1) bringing national policymakers and advocates together with community leaders is powerful and transformative; (2) digital inequality is a social, not a technological problem; and (3) community leaders need access to a shared platform and to each other to create change. These findings suggest that community leaders can benefit from seeing their work within a digital equity ecosystems framework, which calls attention to the importance of the interactions that exist among individuals, populations, communities, and their broader sociotechnical environments that all shape the work to promote more equitable access to technology and social and racial justice. This case study concludes with recommendations for community leaders, including community foundations, working to uncover systemic discrimination shaping digital inequality today to advance digital equity and justice.

Keywords: digital redlining; digital discrimination; digital equity; digital justice; community leadership.

Introduction

Despite the fact that the internet is the most powerful technology of our lifetime, we have been taught very little about how the internet, and its related technologies, work. As advocates working to close the Digital Divide in Baltimore, it's critical that we understand how the internet and internet regulation work so that we can imagine and build new solutions for our communities. (Robert W. Deutsch Foundation, 2021)

In spring 2021, 25 community leaders from across Baltimore, Maryland came together with national experts in areas related to network engineering, federal policymaking, community broadband networking, and grassroots organizing for a five-week online program named the "Digital Equity Leadership Lab" (DELL). The program was created by amalia deloney, Vice President of the Robert W. Deutsch Foundation and staff at the Foundation. The program was created for "city residents who want to increase their understanding of the internet and

strengthen their capacity to advocate for fast, affordable and reliable broadband for all of Baltimore’s neighborhoods” (Robert W. Deutsch Foundation, 2021).

A May 2021 article described how DELL was created as a response to other digital inclusion programs across the U.S. that have failed to consider the technical aspects of the internet and social inequalities alongside broader internet policy and advocacy goals. As the Deutsch Foundation’s website explains, “the five-week program covered topics including laws governing the internet, core concepts about network engineering and the workings of community internet networks, like mesh networks” (Kirby, 2021). Its programmatic focus on bringing community leaders together with national experts, led by a community foundation, represents an innovative and impactful community-centered approach for the digital equity field.

This paper presents findings from a study of the DELL program as a case of community leadership development to promote digital equity and justice. While several studies of community leadership development exist, few are focused on its role in promoting digital equity and justice. This case study attempts to address this gap in the scholarly literature through the following research question: *How might DELL serve as a community-based leadership training model to develop the next wave of digital equity leaders?* Through our analysis of 21 interviews with community leaders, outside experts, and staff from the Robert W. Deutsch Foundation, we discovered the following three main findings: (1) bringing national policymakers and advocates together with community leaders is powerful and transformative; (2) digital inequality is a social, not a technological problem; and (3) community leaders need access to a shared platform and to each other to create change.

The qualitative data from this case study indicated participants’ desire to use the knowledge gained in the DELL program to promote what Wolfson, Crowell, Reyes, and Bach (2017) refer to as “emancipatory broadband adoption.” This conceptualization of digital inclusion programs as having emancipatory goals can help community leaders build community power. These findings suggest that community leaders can benefit from seeing their work within a “digital equity ecosystems” (Rhinesmith & Kennedy, 2020) framework, which calls attention to the importance of the interactions between individuals, populations, communities, and their broader sociotechnical environments that all shape the work to promote more equitable access to technology and social and racial justice. This case study concludes with recommendations for community leaders, including community foundations, working to uncover systemic discrimination shaping digital inequality today to advance digital equity and justice.

From the Digital Divide to Digital Justice

For decades, community leaders have played an essential role helping to ensure that local people are not disadvantaged by the introduction of new technologies. For example, when cable television became widespread in the early 1980s, community groups in the United States organized people across the country “to create local content and local channels, in effect trying to adapt it to the purposes of enhancing communication and local participation” (Strover, Chapman, & Waters, 2004, p. 466). These early advocates argued that cable television should be

a democratic medium to promote public access to communication technology and media diversity (Halleck, 2002; Howley, 2005). This approach to community-owned and community-led media initiatives was rooted in community development efforts to advance self-determination among underrepresented and historically marginalized populations (Rhinesmith, 2019).

Similar concerns emerged with the advent of the world wide web in the 1990s with some worrying that the “digital divide,” or the gap in access between those with and those without computers and the internet, would leave vulnerable groups behind. The current breadth of scholarship in this area over the past decades offers multiple perspectives on the digital divide, including: various conceptualizations of access (Clement & Shade, 2000); the shifts from access to use to skills (DiMaggio & Hargittai, 2001; van Deursen & van Dijk, 2011; van Deursen, & van Dijk, 2014) and their differentiated impacts (van Deursen et al., 2017; van Deursen & Helsper, 2018); effective use of the internet (Gurstein, 2003); internet infrastructure development in tribal communities (Duarte, 2017); the ability to maintain mobile device and broadband access (Gonzales; 2016; Whitacre & Rhinesmith; 2016); critical interrogations of the digital divide and digital inclusion (Eubanks, 2011; Gangadharan, 2012; Greene, 2021); intersectional perspectives (Noble, 2018); and the critical role that local social connections and community-based organizations play in helping people to access, use, and adopt the internet in their everyday lives (Helsper & Reisdorf, 2017; Jaeger et al., 2012; Katz & Gonzales, 2016; Kvasny, 2006; Pinkett, 2000; Rhinesmith, 2016).

While much of the current literature on the digital divide has called attention to issues related to gaps in technology access, skills, and use, fewer studies have focused on the role of power, privilege, and oppression in shaping digital inequality and calls for social justice (Eubanks, 2011; Greene, 2021; Noble, 2018). For example, Bach, Wolfson, and Crowell (2018) argued that the digital divide is not as simple as the binary “haves” vs. “have-nots.” Instead, the experience an individual has with digital technologies, including the financial rewards they can receive from applying these skills in the workforce, are deeply influenced by the structures of power in society. The Detroit Digital Justice Coalition created a set of “Digital Justice Principles”, which are rooted in access, participation, common ownership, and healthy communities. A key aspect of this framework “prioritizes the participation of people who have been traditionally excluded from and attacked by media and technology” (Detroit Digital Justice Coalition).

Community leadership development

The field of community development studies offers key insights that can be used to examine community leadership development efforts to promote digital equity and social justice. An important aspect of this literature has focused on the importance of building community capacity. As Mayberry, Daniels, Willcock, and Yan (2020) described,

Community capacity is the development of the skills, knowledge, and infrastructure to effectively promote health, prevent disease, improve the quality of life, and engage local communities in self-determined activities for desired change to an undesirable social condition. (p. 839)

One important component of this literature is the differentiation between asset-based and deficit-based, or needs-based, approaches to building community capacity and community leadership. As Nel (2018) described,

Community leadership, common to all community development projects, is the enabling of the relational capacity of community members to initiate the creative and often hidden potential of the community and turn it into initiatives driven by empowered community members. (p. 839)

This “asset-based community development” approach, or ABCD, popularized by Kretzmann and McKnight (1993) recognizes the strengths that exist in communities and works to further enable these assets through their appreciation and cultivation.

Another important aspect of the appreciative leadership approach that Nel (2018) described is its focus on relationship building. This approach stands in contrast with other theories of leadership development, such as “contingency model” (Fiedler, 1967), which argues that leaders develop their skills through a variety of activities contingent on their own lives and community. Rather, appreciative leadership recognizes the relational aspects of leadership development and its value in community contexts. As Nel argued, “Adopting this leadership approach will become the key to ensure that community members are empowered, self-reliant citizens, driving their own future.”

In working to develop community leadership capacity to mobilize local resources and generate collective action, Mayberry, Daniels, Willcock, and Yan (2020) argued that one way to achieve community engagement is to recruit informed local community residents, who may be the employees of community-based organizations (CBOs), community clinics, academic institutions, or other human services organizations, to build the community capacity from the roots. The authors maintained that “informed and empowered community residents are the catalyst for building a sustainable capacity” (p. 124) to reduce health disparities seen in socioeconomically vulnerable communities. Seen in this way, the authors explained that local leadership development through community engagement is an effective way to promote community health and well-being.

The community development literature has identified certain qualities that community leaders need to ensure that their leadership efforts are community-driven in ways that seek to transfer power from the powerholders to community members. Even though leadership structures are, in part, created and maintained by a community's own unique make-up and the unique personalities of its leaders, specific components of leadership structure are potentially generalizable to all communities. For example, Nel (2018) maintained that relationships and trust are at the heart of such leadership efforts, coupled with qualities such as inspiration, vision, humility, and flexibility. “Community leadership is also about providing support to each other, learning together, and collaborating with others to create a future” (Nel, 2018, p. 841).

While several studies of community leadership exist across multiple scholarly fields, there are currently no studies of community leadership development initiatives to promote digital

equity and justice. This case study attempts to address this gap in the scholarly literature and contribute insights for community leaders across the US and around the world.

Connecting Digital Inequality in Baltimore to Systemic Oppression in the US

To understand the context for our case study of the Robert W. Deutsch Foundation's Digital Equity Leadership Lab (DELL) and its response to digital injustice in Baltimore, Maryland, it's necessary to begin with a brief history of the colonization, enslavement, structural racism, and economic injustice against Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) that began over 400 years ago in the area that is currently known as the City of Baltimore.

Historical context

Baltimore, Maryland is located on the ancestral homeland of the Susquehannock, Nentego (Nanticoke), and Piscataway people. After European settlers began colonizing the area starting in the 1600s, many Native peoples were "decimated to low numbers, absorbed by larger villages and tribes, and eventually forced to move west with large tribes beyond the Mississippi River through Indian [removal] policies" (Begay, 2019). Baltimore was established in 1729 by a group of wealthy Marylanders that "pushed through the State Legislature a town charter for Baltimore" (City of Baltimore, n.d.). The State of Delaware recognized the Nanticoke as a Native American tribe in 1881, and it wasn't until 2012 when the first recognized tribes of Piscataway heritage were recognized in the State of Maryland. However, there are still no federally recognized tribes in Maryland.

During the 1950s, the U.S. government pursued aggressive settler-colonial policies, known as the "termination era" (University of Alaska Fairbanks, n.d.) when federal support for tribes was withdrawn "in order to 'free' the Indians and assimilate them once and for all," often into urban areas (Dockry & Whyte, 2021, p. 96). The 1956 Lumbee Act prohibited the Lumbee Tribe from pursuing federal recognition (McKie B.P., 2017). The homeland of the Lumbee Tribe is located in southeastern North Carolina where the tribe takes their name from the "Lumbee River that winds through tribal territory, which is mostly rural and otherwise characterized by pines, farmland, and swamps" (Minner, 2019). Members of the Lumbee Tribe in North Carolina moved to Baltimore "seeking jobs and a better quality of life" explained Ashley Minner, a Fellow with the Robert W. Deutsch Foundation who has been working to build a digital archive of the Lumbee community in Baltimore (Robert W. Deutsch Foundation, 2021).

Members of the Lumbee Tribe established the Baltimore American Indian Center (BAIC) in 1968 to support the Native American community by providing "services that included education, skills training, workforce development, childcare, afterschool arts, and seniors programs, as well as health and healing services" (Baltimore American Indian Center, 2018). The BAIC's website explains that over time many members of the Native American community moved out of Baltimore to seek more "affordable housing and sustainable job opportunities" (Baltimore American Indian Center, 2018). During this same time, "Baltimore underwent a massive urban renewal development project, and many Lumbee residences were destroyed." BAIC has since shifted its focus to "prioritize cultural heritage preservation and education programs, with health,

housing and employment-related services provided on an ad hoc basis” (Baltimore American Indian Center, 2018).

Baltimore's founding depended not only on stolen land but on stolen people as well. The forced labor of enslaved Africans built the City of Baltimore. Whitman (1997) described how slavery spread in Baltimore between 1770 and 1815 with enslaved people working in “shipyards, craft shops, and an early chemical factory” (p. 11). The historian explained that slavery expanded much more “vigorously” in Baltimore than in any other part of Maryland during this time. Slaveholding peaked around 1810, with “merchants, ship captains, public officials, and professionals such as doctors, lawyers, and bankers” making up the majority of urban slaveholders, as well as craft workers and manufacturers (Whitman, 1997, p. 11).

In spite (or because) of the progress made through the Emancipation and Reconstruction, white property owners and politicians continued to systemically deny freedom to African Americans, including through Jim Crow laws (Baltimore’s Civil Rights Heritage, 2019). While Baltimore’s mandate to segregate Black and white people in the city was shot down by the U.S. Supreme Court, “those restrictions were soon replaced with equally efficient redlining and blockbusting practices, as well as private racial housing covenants” (Cassie, 2020). In 1937, the Federal Home Owners’ Loan Corporation (HOLC), which was part of the New-Deal-era Federal Housing Administration, created the “Residential Security Map of Baltimore Maryland.” As the Johns Hopkins Sheridan Libraries and Museums website explains, “In drafting the map, cartographers used the colors red, yellow, blue, and green to ‘grade’ Baltimore neighborhoods based on potential risk factors for residential mortgage lenders” (Johns Hopkins Sheridan Libraries University Museums). These “risk factors” represent a larger systemic issue of racist housing policy in the U.S.

The map (Figure 1) below represents a visualization of the impact of this harmful policy, which has become known as the practice of “redlining” in communities of color. Researchers and journalists have shown how this discriminatory federal policy has had far-reaching impacts beyond housing to other areas, such as policing (Badger, 2016). The effects of discriminatory housing were compounded by the Great Migration, “the exodus of more than 6 million African Americans from the rural South to cities in the North—or in Baltimore’s case, almost North—Midwest, and West between 1910 and 1970, [which] was one of the largest internal movements of people in U.S. history” (Cassie, 2020). The Black population in Baltimore tripled during this time, “growing from less than 85,000, 15 percent of the city’s overall population, in 1910, to more than 420,000 and a near majority by 1970” (Cassie, 2020). This period also coincided with a lack of housing for Black workers and European immigrants, work that was segregated by race (King, 2014, p. 433).

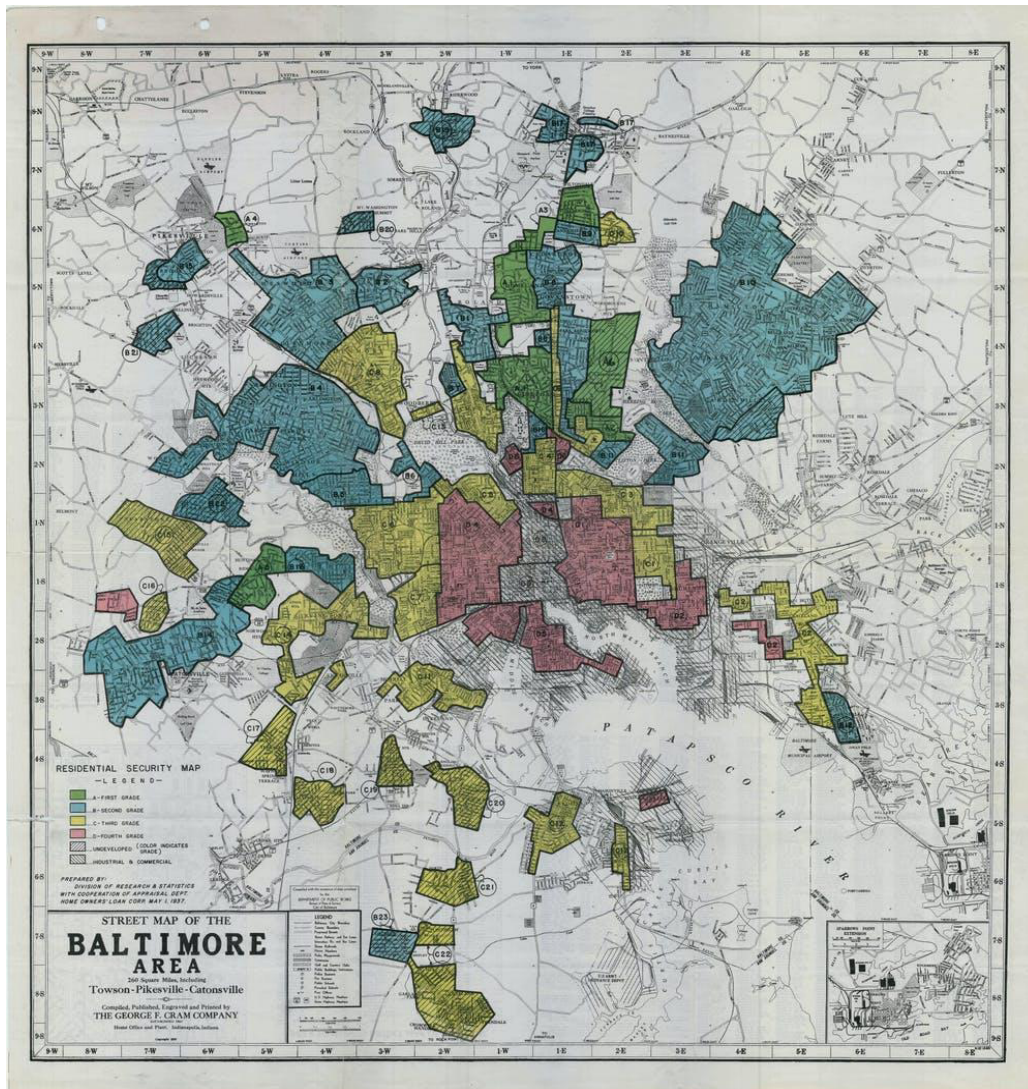


Figure 1. "The Baltimore Redlining Map: Ranking Neighborhoods" (Johns Hopkins Sheridan Libraries University Museums, 2017)

Years of systemic discrimination against economically impoverished and oppressed minority groups "laid the groundwork" (Booker, 2018) for two major uprisings in Baltimore: the 1968 uprising following the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. (Robert L. Bogomolny Library Special Collections, n.d.) and the death of Freddie Gray, a 25-year-old Black man, who lived in Baltimore and died in police custody (Flores-Koulisch & Shiller, 2020). Baltimore has a long history of police violence against poor communities and communities of color, especially against Black men. For example, "On February 7, 1942, Baltimore police officer Edward Bender unlawfully shot and killed Thomas Broadus, an unarmed African American soldier" (Estreet et al., 2015, p. 65). In more recent years, increased access to video through social media platforms, which have been shared more widely on commercial media outlets, has increased awareness of police brutality against Black Americans outside of the Black community. This widespread distribution of the victimization of Black people on the internet has prompted critical internet scholars to call for a deeper investigation into "the political economy of Black death" (Black Power Media, 2016). The

1968 uprising and the death of Freddie Gray deeply affected the Black community in Baltimore. Both demonstrated the ongoing threat of police brutality and a lack of federal and municipal investment in Black neighborhoods beyond over-policing.

Digital Injustice in Charm City

To understand the digital divide in Baltimore one must begin by acknowledging the history of colonization, land theft, slavery, systemic racism, and white supremacy that has shaped the United States, and more directly the digital injustices that exist in Baltimore. The HOLC's map above offers one strategy to investigate how a history of discriminatory federal housing policy has impacted access to resources, participation in policymaking, common ownership of public resources, and healthy communities for Black, Indigenous, and people of color. In 2020, the Abell Foundation shared maps (Figures 2 & 3) created by Baltimore City's Department of Planning, which used data from the American Community Survey to highlight Baltimore's digital divide (Abell Foundation, 2022).

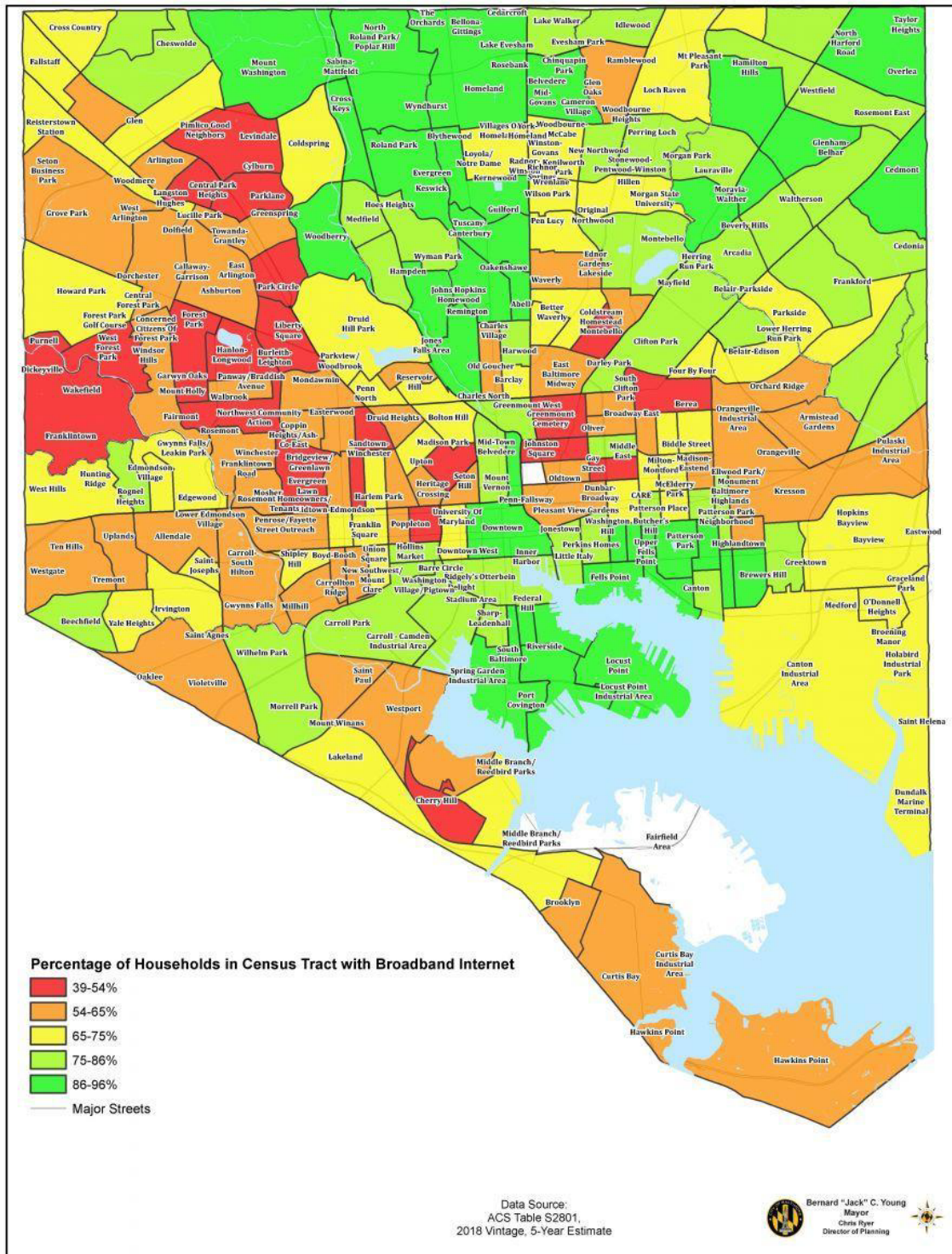


Figure 2. "Percentage of Households in Census Tract with Broadband Internet" (Abell Foundation, 2022).

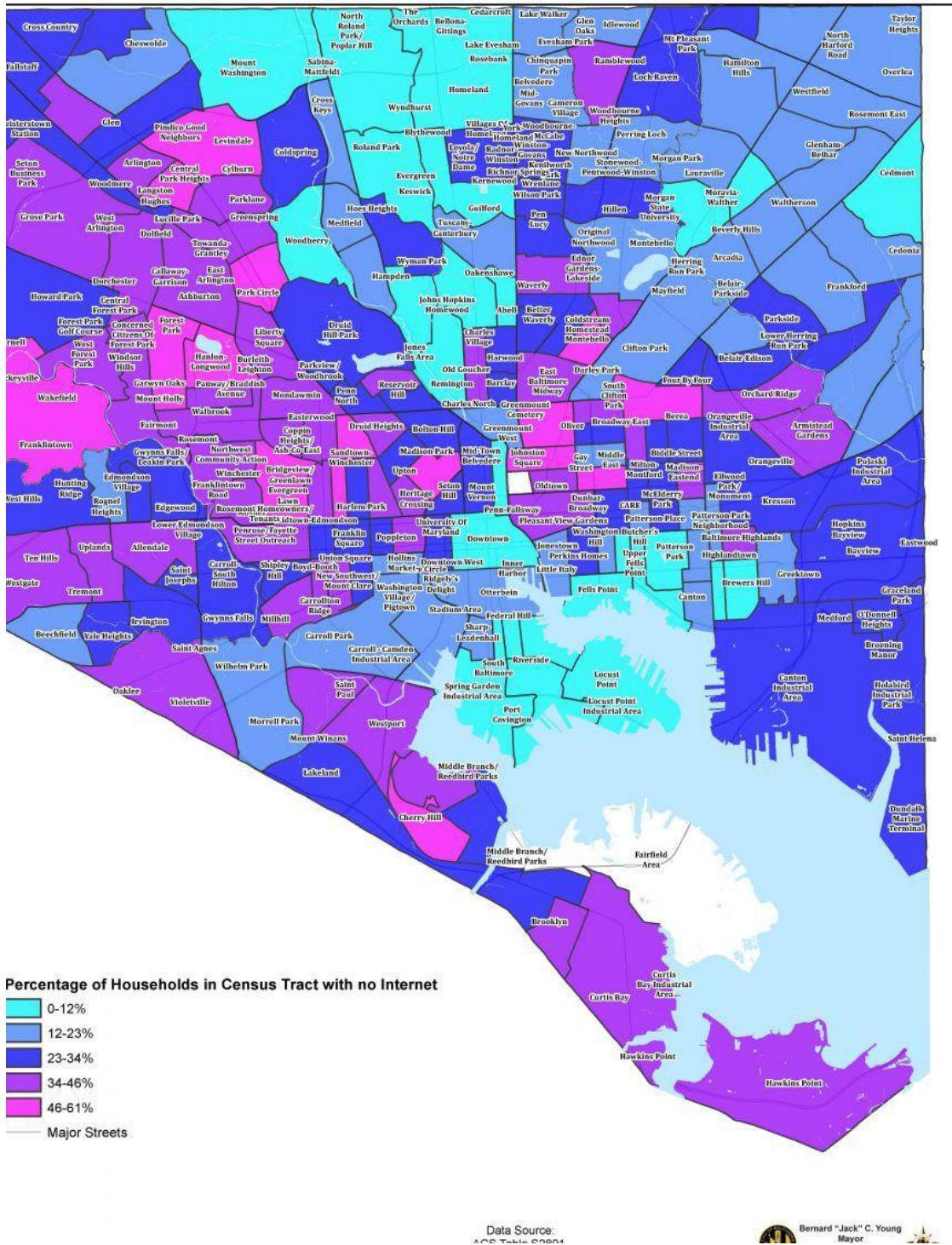


Figure 3. "Percentage of Households in Census Tract with No Internet" (Abell Foundation, 2022).

In May 2020, Dr. John Horrigan produced a report for the Abell Foundation which found that 96,000 households (40.7%) in Baltimore did not have access to a wired internet connection at home in 2018. A “wired” connection generally refers to internet service that is provided through a cable, or wire, that comes into the home, as opposed to a cellular, or wireless, internet connection. Additionally, the report noted,

- Some 59.3% of Baltimore households have wireline internet service.
- Across a selection of 33 cities, 69.9% of households have wireline service.
- Nationwide, 69.6% of households have wireline service. (Horrigan, 2020)

By comparing the HOLC’s “Residential Security Map of Baltimore Maryland” map (Home Owner's Loan Corporation, 1937) with the two maps of households with broadband and no internet service in Baltimore above, it’s clear to see that the yellow “C - Third Grade” and red “D - Fourth Grade” areas on the HOLC’s map, which indicated the 3rd and 4th lowest trends of “desirability in neighborhoods from a residential point of view” reflect the same neighborhoods identified in the City’s maps as having the lowest percentage of broadband access—including no internet access at all.

Furthermore, Horrigan’s (2020) study found that the digital divide in Baltimore exists acutely along income, race, and ethnic lines. The author added, “For poor households in Baltimore, wireline broadband is a rarity relative to their upper-income neighbors, with just one-third of the lowest-income Baltimoreans with wireline access” (p. 14). In addition, Horrigan (2020) explained that “Half of African American households and less than half of Hispanic ones have a wireline broadband subscription compared to three-quarters of white households” (p. 15).

This alignment between historic discriminatory federal policies and the present-day digital divide is not unique to Baltimore. In fact, “digital redlining,” as critical race and internet scholars have described, can be found in many U.S. cities. As Gilliard and Culik (2016) explained, “Digital redlining is not a renaming of the digital divide. It is a different thing, a set of education policies, investment decisions, and IT practices that actively create and maintain class boundaries through strictures that discriminate against specific groups.” Gilliard and Culik’s (2016) critical analysis opened the door to ask deeper questions beyond who has access to the internet and who does not. It provides a strategy to examine the relationship between the systemic oppression of BIPOC communities and the ways in which federal regulation and internet policy have impacted people’s ability to access and use the internet—a connection that few current digital inclusion programs across the nation are making in practice. In other words, we might ask ourselves the question: “*What does justice look like in digital equity programs?*”

The Digital Equity Leadership Lab as a Digital Justice Response

The DELL program also builds upon the Deutsch Foundation’s many years of community engagement to address the digital divide and promote social justice in Baltimore.

The DELL is rooted in the practice of learning forward, the belief that we can increase our effectiveness and results when we are part of a learning community committed to alignment, shared responsibility, and continuous improvement. It is also aligned with Robert W. Deutsch Foundation's belief that internet access is a prerequisite for social and economic inclusion. (Robert W. Deutsch Foundation, n.d.)

Goals of the DELL program

DELL's goals include the following:

- To convene advocates from across sectors, zip codes, disciplines, and backgrounds to share and learn together;
- To strengthen the relationships between internet advocates through meaningful interaction;
- To introduce new concepts and information that will help to advance shared goals;
- To support a culture of collaboration and encourage participants to work together to analyze and refine current solutions to digital equity challenges in their organization, and in the field;
- To encourage reflection, adaptation, and innovation by learning from each other's successes and failures. (Robert W. Deutsch Foundation, n.d.)

Digital Equity Leadership Lab Workshops

To achieve the goals listed above, DELL was created as a five-week virtual community-leadership development program focused on the following topics presented during each of the 90-minute workshops listed below:

- Week 1: The role of the telecom industry and the digital divide
- Week 2: Network engineering 101
- Week 3: Intro to community broadband networks
- Week 4: Federal advocacy: Why local voices matter
- Week 5: "Roundtable Conversations: Building The Internet We Want" with racial justice leaders across the country.

Each week, leaders from across the country joined the sessions with participants and Robert W. Deutsch Foundation staff to share their expertise as guest presenters. Learning in DELL took place during virtual workshops and throughout the week in a virtual online community platform. (Robert W. Deutsch Foundation, n.d.)

Digital Equity Leadership Lab Orientation

Before the first week of the DELL workshop series, Robert W. Deutsch Foundation staff held an orientation session to welcome participants, provide an overview of the DELL program, and to introduce RWD staff and experts. The DELL orientation began with a land acknowledgement of the Native inhabitants of the land that is currently known as Baltimore. After the 23 community leaders in the Spring 2021 cohort had an opportunity to introduce themselves, the "Learning Journey" for DELL was introduced. These activities included the following: guidelines, a 1:1 activity, the "DELL design," the online community that was available to the cohort, and the

closing. These activities are briefly shared below to provide insights into the foundation for community leadership development in the program.

Guidelines

The following community guidelines were then laid out during the orientation as a foundation for developing and deepening relationships during the 5-week program.

- Treat each other with respect
- Be generative, use “yes, and”
- Use “I” statements
- Critique ideas, not people
- Look for what’s possible, not what’s wrong
- Be present
- Bring a problem with a solution
- Take care of yourself
- Listen to understand
- Ask questions
- Limit jargon
- One speaker at a time

1:1 Activity

After the guidelines were established, the orientation quickly moved to an “impromptu networking” session to begin developing and establishing relationships between the participants. The directions for the activity asked participants to work in pairs for three different rounds spending 5 minutes each in their pair per round, switching pairs after each round. Before each round, the participants were asked to introduce their names and affiliations (organization, neighborhood, etc.) before answering the following prompts:

- Round 1. Describe the first time you used the internet. How old were you? Where were you? What were you doing? What other details can you remember? (Partner with birthday closest to today goes first.)
- Round 2. What is the most important impact the internet has had on your life: Personally/ Professionally. (Partner who is youngest goes first.)
- Round 3. If you were the internet fairy, what would you wave your magic wand and change right now? (Partner with biggest shoe size goes first.)

The design of the DELL program was then introduced with the following welcoming vision statement: “Welcome to the Digital Equity Leadership Lab, a space to learn, share, create and sustain the energy, focus and knowledge we need to reimagine the future of the internet for our communities.” This vision for DELL participants was followed by this statement: “The internet is the most important technology of our lifetime. Why? Because it’s a global infrastructure that has the power to enrich lives, empower communities and be a force for good in society.”

Who is the internet for?

The next slide is perhaps the clearest statement of the values inherent in the DELL program.

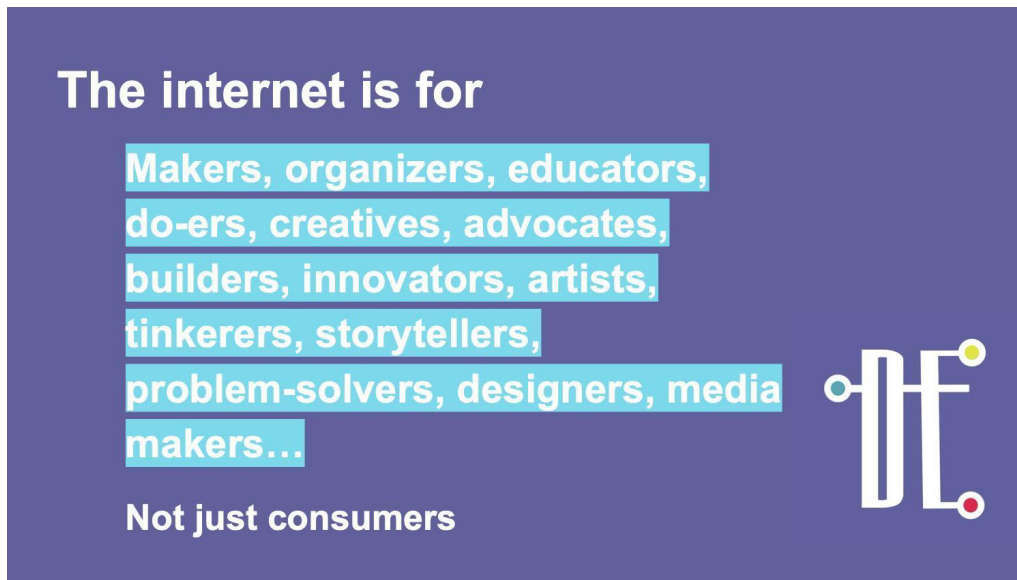


Figure 4: “The internet is for” slide from the DELL program orientation.

Weekly format

The next part of the orientation for participants described the weekly format and what participants should expect -- and what DELL expected from them -- during the subsequent five weeks.

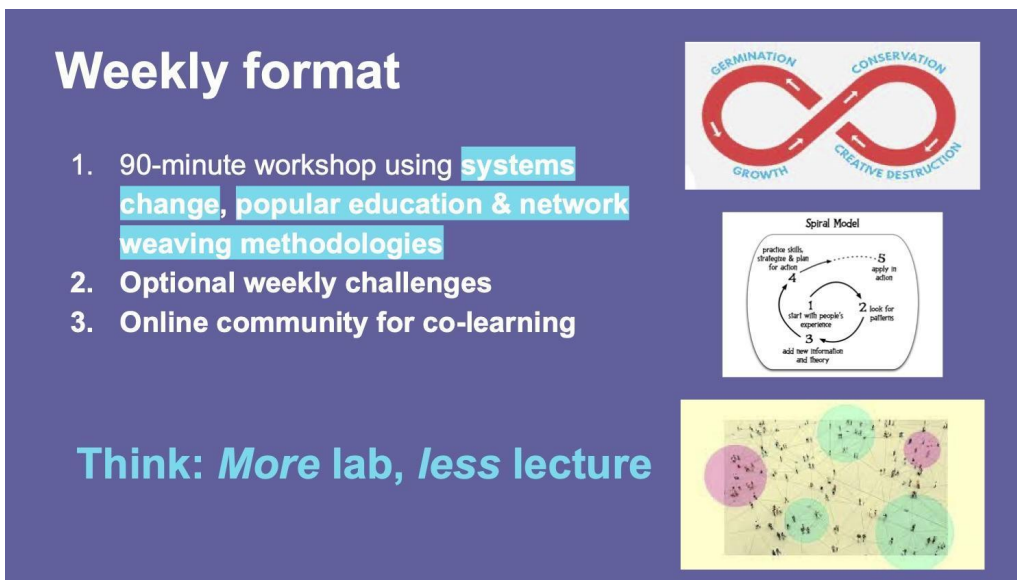


Figure 5: “Weekly format” slide from the DELL program orientation.

Expectations of the participants

DELL workshop participants were also expected to show up each week guided by the following, as described by the orientation materials:

- Your lived experience

- Your unique perspective
- Your love of community
- Your creativity
- A desire to collaborate
- A willingness to teach and learn
- A curious mind
- A generous spirit
- A desire to learn
- A willingness to engage

DELL virtual community and program archive

As mentioned, the Robert W. Deutsch Foundation staff set-up an online virtual platform to allow participants to stay connected in-between meetings and continue to deepen their relationships. Additional information about the guest speakers was shared on the online platform, as well as the slides and recordings of their talks following each session. The site also served as a space to share news and information both locally and nationally about current news and events related to digital equity.

Case Study Research Design

Research question

The purpose of this research was to investigate the Digital Equity Leadership Lab as a case study of community-based leadership development to promote digital equity and justice in Baltimore and beyond. The case study sought to examine the following research question: *How might DELL serve as a community-based leadership training model to develop the next wave of digital equity leaders?*

The study also pursued the following additional research questions:

- R1: *What is the role/opportunity of community leaders in shaping the internet of the future for their city? How is this different from the past?*
- R2: *What capacities are needed for local leaders to build this vision?*
- R3: *What mindset changes are needed in the "field" to accommodate new leaders whose expertise is not technical?*
- R4: *How are classes like DELL modeling the belief that Cities are the Laboratories of Democracy?*
- R5: *What is the ideal pathway for a local leader to develop these skills and enter a leadership role?*
- R6: *What scaffolding is needed to make this possible? And how can other agencies/organizations support this pathway? (i.e., fellowship program, project grants)*

Significance of study

The case study is significant because it addresses a lack of understanding in both the scholarly literature and in practice about the role of community-based leadership development to promote digital equity and justice. By providing qualitative data and analysis, the goal of the research is to help explain how DELL's model of community-based leadership can inform the next wave of digital equity leaders across the country. Findings from the study should also be useful for other grassroots organizers, philanthropic organizations, policymakers, and other key stakeholders interested in promoting leadership in digital equity and justice initiatives nationwide.

Participants

15 of the 25 participants in DELL's spring 2021 cohort participated in the study. Dr. Colin Rhinesmith and Deutsch Foundation staff recruited these individuals using a recruitment script approved by the Simmons University Institutional Review Board, which oversees research with human subjects. In addition, 4 national experts were invited to participate in the research, 3 of whom participated as guest speakers and the 4th who participated in a review of a follow-up grant application process led by the Deutsch Foundation. Lastly, 2 staff members of the Deutsch Foundation also participated in the study. The goal was to gather multiple perspectives in response to the same questions asked of each participant for the case study.

Table 1: Participant characteristics*

Name	Title	Organization	Participant Type
Rachel Brooks	Lead organizer	Baltimoreans United in Leadership Development	Community Leader
Liesje Gantert	Executive Director	Village Learning Place	Community Leader
Beth Harber	Senior Program Officer for Community Development and Environment	Abell Foundation	Community Leader
Aaron Kaufman	Community Projects/Community Spruce-Up Grant Program Manager	Central Baltimore Partnership	Community Leader
Leon Pinkett	Director	Baltimore Arts Realty Corporation	Community Leader
Lilian Trotman	Community Liaison; Core Member	Mount Sinai Baptist Church of Baltimore City; Re-Build Johnston Square Community Organization	Community Leader
Phillip Westry	Board Member and Vice President	Greenmount West Community Association	Community Leader

Christopher Mitchell	Director of the Community Broadband Networks Initiative	Institute for Local Self-Reliance	National expert
Gigi Sohn	Distinguished Fellow; Senior Fellow and Public Advocate	Georgetown Law Institute for Technology Law & Policy; Benton Institute	National expert
Greta Byrum	Co-Director; Co-Founder	Community Tech NY; Community Tech Collective	National expert
Francella Ochillo	Executive Director	Next Century Cities	National expert
Jane Brown	President and Executive Director	Robert W. Deutsch (RWD) Foundation	RWD Foundation Staff
amalia deloney	Vice President & Director of Digital Equity	Robert W. Deutsch (RWD) Foundation	RWD Foundation Staff

** Note: Other participants were involved but chose to remain anonymous. While not included above, we acknowledge them and are equally grateful for their participation, support, and expertise.*

Data collection and analysis

Dr. Rhinesmith conducted the interviews with the participants above using an IRB approved interview protocol that was co-designed by Dr. Rhinesmith and Deutsch Foundation staff. Foundation staff scheduled the interviews at a time that was convenient for the participants. Dr. Rhinesmith led the interviews, which were recorded over Zoom. Jie Jiang and Malana Krongelb, graduate students in the Simmons University School of Library and Information and research affiliates with the Digital Equity Research Center (<https://dercenter.org>) provided research support in analyzing the responses to the interview questions.

The research team analyzed the participants' responses to gain a better understanding of DELL participants' perspectives after having been a part of the program. This approach was not used to evaluate whether the participants developed a better sense of themselves as community leaders. Rather, the purpose was to gain their insights on these issues, after having participated in the DELL program, which certainly influenced their thinking about these topics in many cases.

Limitations of the study

The case study has several limitations. First, Dr. Rhinesmith was unable to participate in the DELL workshop sessions directly. However, he did have access to the recordings. The results of this study might have been different had Dr. Rhinesmith had an opportunity to participate in all the activities as they unfolded. Second, due mostly to time constraints, Dr. Rhinesmith was not able to interview all the participants in the DELL spring 2021 cohort, including all the outside experts that participated as guest speakers. This shortcoming also limits the overall perspectives that could have been gathered, analyzed, and reported for this study. Finally, Dr. Rhinesmith does not live in nor is he originally from Baltimore. Therefore, there is quite a bit of local cultural context

and understanding that is missing from the data analysis and final reporting. Given these limitations, the case study represents a snapshot of a segment of views on the DELL program and its potential to influence similar types of programs in Baltimore and across the country to promote digital equity and justice.

Case Study Findings

An analysis of the interviews with community leaders, national experts, and Deutsch Foundation staff reveals three broad themes that emerged from the qualitative data. Particularly in response to the DELL program as a community-leadership development program to promote digital equity and justice. These include the following,

1. Bringing national policymakers and advocates together with community leaders is powerful and transformative.
2. Digital inequality is a social, not a technological problem.
3. Community leaders need access to a shared platform and to each other to create change.

This section provides more detail in each of these three areas before moving on to a discussion and recommendations for researchers, practitioners, and policymakers.

Bringing national policymakers and advocates together with community leaders is powerful and transformative.

In response to questions about the role of community leaders in shaping the internet of the future for their city, almost all the DELL participants talked about how much they were impacted by hearing the stories of former policymakers at the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) who participated in the Week 4 Session titled “Federal Advocacy: Why Local Voices Matter” with Gigi Sohn and former FCC Commissioner Mignon Clyburn. Community leaders repeatedly noted how this session and the program overall helped to demystify the internet policy process, empowering them to feel that it was possible for them to take action and get involved in shaping the internet to better serve their communities. As Rachel Brooks, Lead Organizer with Baltimoreans United in Leadership Development, explained,

We need to flip the hierarchy entirely. That's what I think. So, whatever the head honcho sees should be held by the folks who are actually using [the internet], and then shaping policy to help people in their life, versus people who are selling it.

Several community leaders noted that after the DELL program they felt more equipped with the knowledge needed to “speak up” to ensure that internet policy is not created without them.

Other participants talked about how they believed DELL played an important role in engaging community leaders with the belief that they could help to inform policymakers and help them to get them elected to ensure that broadband access is not only available but designed and developed with their best interests in mind. Others noted that policymakers need community leaders to help them better understand where there are gaps in internet access. As Christopher

Mitchell, Director of the Community Broadband Networks Initiative with the Institute for Local Self-Reliance, explained,

I think it's really important to have a local enthusiastic group of people that feel empowered to speak about this, because I think the people who are often empowered to speak about it are people who work in the area, often for profit companies, which I don't think is necessarily a bad thing, but they shouldn't be the only ones that feel like they're competent to speak about these issues and how to resolve them. And so I think programs like DELL are essential to give people confidence to be able to engage in these discussions and to prioritize them on an agenda that has many different challenging items to deal with for any city.

The Deutsch Foundation staff who were interviewed for the study noticed that the DELL participants' language changed over the course of the program. Through the sessions, participants were better able to use vocabulary, identify the problems, and articulate comprehensive solutions on their own. Jane Brown, President and Executive Director of the Robert W. Deutsch Foundation noted that community leaders' power is "in their ability to inform policymakers and elected officials," and she noted that DELL helps show people they have that agency to affect change and contact policy officials as empowered citizens.

Several community leaders noted the importance of being educated about internet policy issues and having a greater awareness and understanding of how to advocate for and with their communities. In other words, community leaders felt they became more empowered to take action and to inspire others in their communities to join them after having heard the words of encouragement and support from national advocates and former FCC officials.

Digital inequality is a social, not a technological problem

The DELL program empowered community leaders to better engage internet policy and advocacy. The program also helped participants gain a deeper understanding of how the internet works, which in turn has helped them to better engage others in their communities. Several DELL participants mentioned that a critical part of internet advocacy is the ability to increase their knowledge around the "technical stuff" and its relationship to digital equity. Aaron Kaufman, Community Projects/Program Manager with the Central Baltimore Partnership, explained,

I think the fear of the Internet has to be something that we chip away because it's not going anywhere. If you want to be able to have economic mobility or social mobility or, to be able to access resources, to be able to apply for jobs, whatever it might be, the Internet is the tool of the present in the future. We need to really reduce this fear of the Internet, so that people can use it in a massive way.

Other participants mentioned that having the vocabulary and knowledge needed to engage in internet policy and advocacy can help them better articulate the issues they encounter both at the local level and with industry experts. Leon Pinkett, Director of the Baltimore Arts Realty Corporation, mentioned that with this knowledge people will be able to better organize others in their communities as well as inside companies to empower them to better advocate for and influence those within their organizations to create change.

While some of the outside experts mentioned that connections between social inequalities and digital inequalities are often invisible to the general public, Next Century Cities Director Francella Ochillo added that the pandemic made digital (in)equity much more visible in ways it had previously not been for many Americans. Regardless of race or ability, Ochillo added, the digital divide is always associated with poverty. The uniquely American association of poverty being shameful adds additional barriers in addressing the digital divide.

All these perspectives are important reminders that digital inequality will not be solved by technology alone. Digital equity is a social issue that must acknowledge the historic oppression and systemic discrimination against BIPOC and/or poor communities to achieve digital justice.

Community leaders need access to a shared platform and to each other to create change

Several participants recognized the critical role that Amalia Deloney and the Deutsch Foundation played in bringing everyone together, providing the training and support for the DELL program, and being a champion to promote community leadership for digital equity and justice in Baltimore. As Leon Pinkett, explained, “It is such an asset to have a dynamo [like Amalia] who has a life of passion in this area to really push people to where they may never have been before.” However, some participants also mentioned that they wished this platform that the DELL program created could continue after the program with ongoing opportunities for community education, leadership development, and support.

Several DELL participants from Baltimore mentioned they wished they had more opportunities to spend time with each other in a social way outside of the DELL program, particularly since the DELL workshops were offered online due to the pandemic. This observation is not as much of a critique of the DELL program as it is a strong indicator of the need and desire for community leaders in Baltimore to have more access to each other during and after the program ends. In response to a related question about whether participants believed there is an ideal pathway for local leaders to develop internet advocacy and leadership skills one participant who wished to remain anonymous mentioned that are three things that are necessary to create a shared infrastructure to promote digital equity in Baltimore: (1) a digital equity officer within the city who can lead initiatives at the city level; (2) more local groups focusing on digital equity would be helpful to begin acting as “tentacles throughout the city;” and (3) more fellowships to support the work.

Lillian Trotman, a community liaison and core member of the Mount Sinai Baptist Church of Baltimore City and the Re-Build Johnston Square Community Organization, mentioned that beyond time, money, training, and awareness of the internet policy and advocacy issues, people need access to a shared platform to get involved in digital equity work. As she explained,

In the community where I participate, we have, and I would call it a strong community organization. Because of the work that is going on in our community, we have a ten-year master plan, and people are starting to see the results. And, because they are seeing the results, more and more are coming to the meetings. This last month we had just as many people on Zoom as we had in the room. They are starting to see that we are serious about

what it is that we want. So I think when you are serious and people start seeing results, they want to become a part of it.

Ms. Trotman also mentioned that everybody can contribute to digital equity work in some way. Therefore, a shared platform where other people in the community see people working together and achieving shared goals would encourage both individual and collective participation. This identification of the need for a shared platform to continue the work also indicates that participants in the DELL spring 2021 cohort expressed a desire to use the knowledge they acquired through the program to take action to create real change in their communities.

Recommendations

Findings from this case study of the spring 2021 Digital Equity Leadership Lab program reveal several key ideas and action steps to advance digital equity community leadership development.

Recommendation #1

- Capacity building and train-the-trainer models are important for community leadership development, but without access to policymakers and advocates on a national level, community leaders may lack a holistic view and understanding of the problems and community-developed solutions to these problems.

The qualitative data gathered from community leaders, outside experts, and Deutsch Foundation staff emphasize the important role that community leaders play in leading digital equity and justice work. However, without a broader understanding of how the internet works, as well as how this knowledge can be used to advocate for policy changes, community leaders may not have the necessary language, framing, tools, and capacity needed to push for change on a national scale.

Recommendation #2

- Community leadership development programs to promote digital equity and justice must provide support systems for community leaders to come together through a shared infrastructure, including both platforms to share ideas and spaces to convene, to continue the work after the training is over.

Findings from the study support the idea that “digital equity ecosystems” (Rhinesmith & Kennedy, 2020) matter for community leaders working to create change in their communities. This is because digital equity ecosystems recognize the importance of the “interactions between individuals, populations, communities, and their larger sociotechnical environments that all play a role in shaping the digital inclusion work in local communities to promote more equitable access to technology and social and racial justice” (p. 1). These interactions, or relationships, need to be cultivated and sustained over time. Identifying organizations, resources, and support within these ecosystems is vital to the success of the work.

Recommendation #3

- Digital inclusion work is vital to help those without access to computers and the internet. However, this work must be rooted in an understanding of how power, privilege, and oppression shape digital inequality, as well as how this knowledge can be used to address systemic barriers to social and racial justice.

The qualitative data from this case study indicated participants' desire to use the knowledge gained in the DELL program to promote what Wolfson, Crowell, Reyes, & Bach (2017) refer to as "emancipatory broadband adoption." By this, the authors mean the following,

Programs aiming to bridge the digital divide must address some of the other reasons that marginalized communities do not adopt broadband. To this end, we contend in this article that a community's relationship to communication technology—and their ability to see it as a political and cultural tool that can be utilized not just instrumentally, but more broadly as a way to fight oppression and build collective political power—is a substantial factor leading to what we call emancipatory adoption.

This conceptualization of digital inclusion programs as having emancipatory goals can help researchers, practitioners, and policymakers to understand the importance of rooting the work within a justice framework. The idea of digital equity ecosystems offers a way to move from digital equity to digital justice, which also builds upon the Detroit Digital Justice Coalition's principles of "access, participation, common ownership, and healthy communities" (Detroit Digital Justice Coalition, 2022).

Conclusion

In this paper, the Digital Equity Leadership Lab was presented as a case study of community leadership development to promote digital equity and justice. Community leaders, outside experts, and RWD Foundation staff provided their insights and expertise to help answer the following overarching research question: *How might DELL serve as a community-based leadership training model to develop the next wave of digital equity leaders?* The following findings emerged: (1) bringing national policymakers and advocates together with community leaders is powerful and transformative; (2) digital inequality is a social, not a technological problem; and (3) community leaders need access to a shared platform and to each other to create change.

Recommendations were provided to help advance future work and research in digital equity community leadership development. The case study showed how community leaders can benefit from seeing their work within a digital equity ecosystems framework, which calls attention to the importance of embracing the interactions and growing the relationships that exist between and among individuals, populations, communities, and their broader environments that help shape this work. Lastly, the case study recommends that community leaders working to advance digital equity and justice must continue to uncover the systemic discrimination of poor communities and communities of color that experience digital inequality today.

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