

***Literacy Minnesota* — Digital Equity Community Report Response**

The International Institute of MN in response to the COVID-19 crisis began teaching all adult English classes virtually in March of 2020. This included: 3 levels of English for work instruction, College Readiness Academy, Nursing Assistant Training, Dietary Aide training and Professional Leadership Training as well as community orientation class for newly arrived immigrants and refugees. This transition was almost over night with no planning or direction. There were many missteps and understandable confusion along the way. However, the patient determination of our students and the perseverance of staff has produced creative solutions, redefined community and an extensive list of new and developing skills.

Biggest barriers:

Internet access: Reliable internet has been difficult to achieve for our students and has created disruption in the instruction they receive in missed hours of class. This results in lost contact hours with student, teachers having to repeat instruction and students falling behind or dropping out of class. Working with large internet providers to secure affordable internet access took time and persistence. Consistent, reliable, broadband internet needs to be a basic utility for everyone in our community in order for distance learning to be equitable and successful for all.

Computers: Through the quick response of our development and grant writing team we were able to secure funding to give laptops to students who did not have them. We also utilized other nonprofits such as PC's for People to ensure students had the technology they needed to be successful in class. We have found it is important for students to have a fully functioning computer to participate in class as opposed to a phone or ipad, although these have worked as a stop gap. This is especially true for the Northstar digital literacy, which is not accessible on phones. In most cases students are allowed to keep their laptops after the class has finished. We have found this is important for the student to continue doing synchronous work after a class has ended through Northstar, Read theory and other online learning tools. A computer is also essential in job searching and doing almost every function of life right now. In order to assure digital equity, students need to own the devices they receive. This also saves on staff time who would have to track down and retrieve devices from students.

Digital Literacy: Low digital literacy has prevented many students from attending or continuing in classes. To combat this inequity, more time has been spent at the front end of a class to build digital literacy skills in students. In some cases, we have extended the length of class time and duration to accommodate for the additional teaching. Orienting students to a digital classroom takes time, but is essential to the success of students. Onboarding has also been extended to include making sure student has access to links, materials and technology required for the class. In order to provide access to classes for students with very low digital literacy we have found that providing paper materials has allowed them to continue to participate without having to navigate so much technology.

Tech support: For students to learn how to use computers and trouble shoot while in class. This has required additional staff time. We have found it is important to have at least one teaching assistant or volunteer in the virtual classroom to assist students and run behind the scene technology so that the lead teacher can focus on teaching.

Future:

Moving forward, we believe that we will continue to offer digital classes to students. We have been able to reach and serve students who have limited access to transportation and childcare through online classes that we were not as able to serve with only in person classes. In fact, class sizes and waitlists have gone up across all programs. We also recognize that having digital literacy skills is essential to fully participate in the American way of life. Therefore, teaching students to master these skills will allow them equal access to community resources, jobs and opportunities. Financially, we are unsure if we will be able to continue to provide computers and internet access to students, but we do believe that this will be an ongoing need. Programs that will provide students affordable or free computers and internet will be important for us to partner with. Spaces in the community that can provide access to computers and internet in a safe way will also be essential to ensuring digital equity.

In order to support these continued digital equity practices we will also need additional staff to help provide tech support to students and teachers.