

What strategies has your organization employed to address digital inclusion? What has worked or has not worked well? And why do you believe that it has or has not worked?

Like colleges and universities everywhere, Red Lake Nation College (RLNC) was forced to rethink its learning delivery methods practically overnight due to the COVID-19 pandemic. RLNC's *Technology Suitcase Program* was able to address the issue of access and digital inclusion in some of the most rural and impoverished areas on the Red Lake Indian Reservation. Going further, the college was able to expand its toolkit for connecting students via virtual reality development, which holds long term promise for remote learners in a region of the state where winter conditions can cause the need for sheltering in place regardless of public health safety precautions.

The *Technology Suitcase Program* was created specifically as a means of closing the opportunity gap for RLNC's students, the majority of whom are Native American and live on the Reservation with little or no internet access -- and without the means to pay for it. The *Technology Suitcase Program* not only provided students with technology devices (laptop, VR headset, cell phone/hotspot), but also the services required to fully utilize them – all at NO cost to the students. The cost of the program is currently covered by CARES Act funding. Before the program, many students owned neither a laptop nor a cell phone, so relied completely on the College's computer lab for access to computers and the Internet.

RLNC's Technology Suitcase Program was available to all degree-seeking students. The project required identifying eligible students, distributing the technology packages, and delivering training for each recipient. Adoption rates were around 65% for the eligible student body with all recipients receiving training in individualized sessions and followed up with weekly drop-in tech support meetings hosted online.

Students had prior experience with the school's cloud-based provider for meeting and productivity tools, and this helped them adapt to the Chrome operating system on the laptops. Surprisingly, there were only several technical support issues reported during the fall semester.

An additional challenge was introducing students and faculty to virtual reality hardware and programming. Virtual RLNC (<https://www.vrlnc.com>) was initially created to host onsite virtual experiences. It has since been modified to include event recordings, classrooms, and games. It was designed to meet the College's technology priority for engaging students in the use of current technologies. The program is currently under review for improvements after a successful semester with increasing visitation and will continue to see modifications and improvements past the lifting of public health safety measures. Programming recommendations will be made based upon the findings of this current assessment with the goal of expanding collaboration among students.

By embracing the latest in virtual reality (VR) technology, this small Minnesota college has kept students engaged in ways basic videoconferencing cannot. The technology opened a whole new realm of creative teaching and learning possibilities for instructors and students alike. Training workshops and content creation will ultimately drive long-term engagement. The initiative provided an extra tool for connecting in a socially distanced learning environment, so it has been

successful in its original aim, but continued development will ensure long-term use and value beyond the current public health crisis.

Fortunately for students participating in the Technology Suitcase Program, their equipment will likely serve them beyond their time at the college. Each participant will keep their devices beyond graduation. With this digital access now available from their household, other members of their family can use the tools as well. For RLNC, this was an unintended benefit of the program, but one we've been pleased to hear about from our students.

The program is reviewed through our RLNC technology committee and governance committee, and aligns with the RLNC institutional technology priority to engage students in the use of technology. Initially, this VR project was created to host onsite virtual experiences and has been modified to include event recordings.