

CHAPTER 5

Digital Equity in Higher Education

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Introduction

Building on pandemic relief and recovery programs, the United States federal government is making historic investments through the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA) in advancing digital equity, literacy, and inclusion for all. An important component is the 2021 Digital Equity Act (DEA), which provides \$2.75 billion over five years to promote digital equity, literacy, and inclusion initiatives at the local, state, and national levels. While past federal funding for digital equity and inclusion targeted individuals or K-12 school and public libraries (e.g., E-Rate Program, Affordable Connectivity Program, Emergency Connectivity Fund, Connect America Fund, Universal Service Fund, and Emergency Broadband Benefit), the unprecedented level of funding offered through DEA is available to libraries of all types—including community college, college, and university libraries.

This chapter provides background on the legislation, enumerates the covered populations and communities, outlines potential digital inclusion activities that could be funded, and describes the process for academic libraries wishing to seek funds from state and federal sources.¹ It describes steps taken at the national level (by the American Library Association (ALA) and its higher education division, the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL)) to activate and engage librarians and advocate on behalf of



libraries with the United States Department of Commerce National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA) which is administering the funds.

Additionally, since over half the funds will be spent by states, this chapter includes a discussion of consortial involvement in the state planning phase in Illinois and Louisiana. Our hope is that readers appreciate how state and federal library advocacy efforts rely on individual library involvement and understand how the DEA provides an opportunity to leverage federal funds to expand the work of academic libraries to advance digital equity for their communities. Because there is unlikely to be another opportunity like this in our lifetime to further the good work libraries are already doing, our aim is to assist librarians in seeking funds to support covered populations in their communities.

DEA Background

The IJJA recognizes the important role that community anchor institutions, like libraries, play in creating a digitally equitable future for all. Libraries of all types—including those at higher education institutions—are eligible for funding to further an IJJA goal of providing the resources needed to equitably expand the adoption and use of the internet so everyone can experience the benefits. In particular, the DEA (part of IJJA) provides \$2.75 billion over five years to promote digital equity, literacy, and inclusion initiatives at the local, state, and national levels. Academic libraries can leverage DEA funds to expand the work they are already doing to advance digital equity for their communities, including

- providing access to broadband and devices within the library and beyond;
- building information and digital literacy skills; and
- supporting workforce development and entrepreneurship.

Academic libraries can apply for grants to support or expand ongoing work or start up new programs. This can include training that covers basic and advanced digital skills, such as information literacy; workforce development programs (e.g., developing student workers as peer research coaches, offering residencies in digital scholarship, supporting workforce development in the broader community); distributing free or low-cost equipment (e.g., Wi-Fi or laptop lending); and constructing, upgrading, or expanding public access computing centers.

Covered Populations

DEA funds are targeted to promote digital inclusion and broadband adoption among specific populations and communities that have been disproportionately impacted by digital inequity. Many academic libraries already serve students and community members in these covered populations, which include:

- households with income \leq 150% poverty level
- individuals with language barriers (e.g., English language learners, low literacy)

- members of a racial or ethnic minority group
- individuals with disabilities
- primarily reside in a rural area
- veterans
- incarcerated individuals (other than individuals who are incarcerated in a Federal correctional facility)
- age 60 and above

Timeline of Stages

DEA funding is distributed in three sequential stages:

Step 1: \$60 million for State Digital Equity Planning Grants. States and territories had one year to develop their digital equity plans to promote digital equity, support digital inclusion activities, and build capacity for broadband adoption for their residents. Most states and territories received their planning grants in the fall of 2022 and released draft plans for public comment in late spring 2023 through early 2024.² They were required to engage community partners during the planning process, including libraries.

Step 2: \$1.44 billion for the State Digital Equity Capacity Grant Program. Once their digital equity plans are approved by the NTIA, states and territories will receive funding based on a formula to implement their plan over the next five years. We expect states to start receiving their funds to carry out plans in mid-2024.

Step 3: \$1.25 billion Digital Equity Competitive Grant Program. This program is for eligible entities, including community college, college, and university libraries, to promote digital inclusion and spur greater broadband adoption among covered populations. This will be a competitive grant program administered at the federal level annually for four years.

In addition to DEA, NTIA has another state-formula grant, the Broadband Equity and Deployment (BEAD) Program, with \$42.5 billion to expand high-speed broadband access infrastructure, deployment, and adoption. Like DEA, states first received funds to develop their five-year action plans and build capacity to support their efforts. While BEAD aims to build infrastructure that provides reliable high-speed, affordable internet access, there is also a goal of ensuring the community has the skills and understands the benefits of using it. The states' implementation period starts in 2024.

National Level Support and Advocacy

Once IJIA became law, NTIA leaders strongly recommended that stakeholders be active during each state's planning process, and ALA—with its public and academic library

divisions—activated and supported the library community in becoming engaged. Just a few months after IJJA was signed into law, the association convened a Mellon-funded workshop on digital inclusion and broadband in June 2022. It included a wide range of speakers and participants from individual libraries, state library agencies, policy experts, and federal agency officials who shared their work and perspectives. Subsequently, ALA issued a report³ that captured the convening’s themes and a toolkit for librarians on digital equity resources.⁴ The report highlighted examples of the many ways libraries of all types are instrumental in supporting and advancing digital equity and recommended that

- state broadband leaders and policymakers include state library agencies in statewide digital equity planning groups and leverage their unparalleled reach into all public libraries to strengthen communications and outreach statewide;
- state and local education agencies include K-12 school librarians and college and university library leaders in digital equity planning and deployment;
- libraries increase awareness of their local technology assets to improve coordination across all levels of government and develop grant proposal ideas for the forthcoming funding programs;
- Congress enables sustainable funding for digital equity through measures like the Digital Equity Foundation Act; and
- federal agencies continuously work to reduce administrative and record-keeping barriers that limit participation by small libraries and other community-based entities and increase incentives and streamlining for consortial applications.

The toolkit and report were the starting point for substantial outreach to raise awareness and activate librarians and community partners, including magazine articles,⁵ a newsletter,⁶ explainer handouts,⁷ webinars,⁸ and conference presentations.⁹

Additionally, ALA advocates on behalf of libraries with NTIA through meetings, listening sessions, and comments as agency officials develop procedures for administering DEA and BEAD funds. For example, ALA issued a policy brief for state and federal decision-makers¹⁰ and provided thirty-five pages of detailed comments to the NTIA on behalf of the nation’s libraries.¹¹ Additionally, ALA participates in the NTIA’s Digital Equity Leaders Network,¹² which meets regularly to share best practices, resources, and strategies to bridge the digital divide.

The NTIA recognized how crucial libraries are for achieving national digital inclusion goals in materials they created to assist recipients in better understanding the state digital equity planning grant program and the requirements set forth in the notice of funding opportunity. Specifically, they released a guide for states and territories on leveraging libraries¹³ and incorporated many library examples in a resource for state broadband offices on how digital equity programs can approach health equity.¹⁴ Additionally, a representative from NTIA participated in a panel at the 2023 ALA Annual Conference and

emphasized that the agency had encouraged states to involve state and local libraries in the planning processes and implementation for both BEAD and DEA.¹⁵

ACRL is not alone in recognizing the substantial opportunity DEA provides for higher education institutions to reduce the digital inequity that hampers the ability of many students to participate fully in their education. The American Association of Colleges and Universities offered an on-demand webinar¹⁶ and seven-month online institute “designed to accelerate the work of teams seeking to enact ambitious strategies to pursue digital equity on their campus, in their community/region, and/or in their state.”¹⁷ The State Higher Education Executive Officers Association and American Association of Community College Trustees offered a webinar inviting higher education leaders to learn about the policy context and relevance of DEA to their stakeholders.¹⁸

Since over half the funds will be spent by states, consortial involvement in the state planning phase has been crucial. The Consortium of Academic and Research Libraries in Illinois (CARLI) and LOUIS: The Louisiana Library Network have participated in statewide planning as have their individual member libraries. These two consortia have involved librarians in speaking out and have equipped them to advocate for their students. This chapter turns next to descriptions by CARLI and LOUIS of how they sought to influence their state planning processes by participating in statewide listening tours, providing feedback to surveys, and reviewing and commenting on each state’s draft Digital Equity Plan.

Illinois Consortial Involvement

In early 2023, three Illinois library consortia—CARLI, the Illinois Heartland Library System (IHLS),¹⁹ and the Reaching Across Illinois Library System (RAILS)²⁰—pledged to collaborate to respond to Illinois’ Digital Equity Plan and the state’s BEAD Proposal. IHLS and RAILS are multitype regional library systems, which were established by the Illinois Library System Act (75 ILCS 10/) and are funded by annual area and per capita grants from the Illinois Secretary of State’s Office/Illinois State Library. CARLI is supported by the University of Illinois System and serves 128 academic libraries throughout the state. Importantly, the two regional systems and CARLI share members; all three organizations are dedicated to serving libraries throughout Illinois. They (or their predecessor organizations) have been in place since the late 1960s (IHLS and RAILS) and 1980 (CARLI).

This coalition of library agencies submitted a joint response to the BEAD Initial Proposal from the Illinois Office of Broadband in late October 2023²¹ and submitted another shared response to the draft Digital Equity Plan in late January 2024.²² Both responses were shared through many communication channels with member libraries, and consortia have strongly encouraged individual library responses from their more than 1,700 member libraries statewide. Consortia have urged an amplification of the message of the positive impact of libraries on broadband and digital equity and the prominent,

primary role that libraries not only can play in future implementation designs but currently do play in bringing digital equity to Illinois residents of all ages.

The three consortia have joined together to build a cohesive statewide library voice related to the role of libraries in digital equity and broadband funding. Thanks to a statutory foundation built long ago, Illinois provides a network of resource sharing and opportunities for collaborative efforts. Illinois libraries of all types—public, academic, K-12, and special—cooperatively form a fabric of support and services to school children, adult learners, retirees, college students, and every other type of resident. Illinois is working as a state to ensure that all library voices are heard by broadband and digital equity decision-makers.

Consortia provide services at scale, frequently saving time and money, and promoting quality results. Consortia can support—either directly or through ancillary arrangements—focused, expert implementation, allowing member libraries to concentrate on promoting their institutions’ missions. This collaboration among Illinois consortia is critical for Illinois academic libraries; together, the three consortia can amplify ideas and concerns and bring awareness to the role of libraries on campus and in the community. Building on the partnerships already in place in Illinois, the vision for initiatives such as training, advancement of new technologies, support and consultation for services and programs—all of which are priorities for Illinois academic libraries—can be shared with and amplified by libraries.

Working together throughout the state and inspired by a vision of a united set of priorities, consortia and their members envision new capacity, services, and programs that can be propagated throughout the state’s libraries, all in support of education and lifelong learning. Illinois is drawing on lessons learned decades ago about the strength of replicating success, reducing duplicative administrative structures, sharing expertise, and the power of collaborative work to achieve shared goals. Consortia leaders talked in 2023 and 2024 with their members about how to ensure Illinois libraries of all types maximized the power that DEA funding could have.

Illinois has been allocated over one billion dollars of federal broadband funding through BEAD and DEA. Both programs require plans that include stakeholder input and a public comment period. The Office of Broadband²³ in the Illinois Department of Economic Opportunity and Commerce²⁴ was working in fall 2023 on their plans for using this funding to advance broadband access and digital equity in Illinois. Fortifying the three-consortia partnership is an intense effort for direct engagement with the state broadband representatives. Consortia shared with the decision-makers the scope of the efforts already underway to engage libraries with these opportunities and to acquaint Illinois broadband officials with the constellation of library organizations involved. Staff at the broadband office are eager to form additional connections in this many-layered environment; not only is outreach required throughout the application process, but successful implementation of robust plans will require conduits throughout communities, including all types of libraries.

Louisiana Consortial Involvement

Facing an unprecedented pandemic in 2020, the Louisiana Board of Regents (BOR) assembled a team to address the Digital Divide's impact on higher education, identifying goals like faculty training for online teaching and digital skills training and device access for faculty, staff, and students. LOUIS—a consortium of forty-seven public and private college and university libraries and a program of the BOR—implemented digital literacy training across the state's campuses using the Northstar Digital Literacy platform, often in libraries but also with campus partners. Building on this successful implementation and in anticipation of the passage of the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act in 2021, the BOR partnered with Connect LA: The Office of Broadband Development and Connectivity,²⁵ the State Library of Louisiana, and the Louisiana Department of Education to plan a digital inclusion pilot project.²⁶ Crucially, the BOR created a full-time position to manage digital inclusion efforts in Louisiana higher education and in communities across the state. To reach the BOR goal for 60 percent of all working-age adults (ages twenty-five to sixty-four) in Louisiana to hold a degree or high-value credential by 2030,²⁷ Louisiana needs to provide adults with low digital skills the opportunity to gain those skills, access to devices, and affordable internet. The resulting one-year statewide digital inclusion pilot program ran from October 2022 through September 2023. LOUIS provided professional development opportunities to existing library staff in five parish public library systems, who were trained as Digital Navigators in a cohort learning model to address digital literacy needs in Louisiana. The navigators received training from partners, such as the National Digital Inclusion Alliance and Northstar Digital Literacy, on conducting digital literacy instruction,²⁸ using online platforms, program planning, and identifying affordable broadband resources. The navigators then provided digital skills training in multiple modalities and provided resources to connect individuals to affordable internet and devices.

Due to the early work on bridging the digital divide, LOUIS and BOR were key contributors to the development of Louisiana's Digital Equity Plan (DEP). LOUIS and BOR worked with Connect LA, the University of Louisiana's Blanco Public Policy Center, and the Louisiana Association of Planning and Development Districts as they conducted stakeholder outreach and drafted the DEP. LOUIS advocated for a library-specific focus group to ensure that the work already being done in libraries was acknowledged and that libraries were recognized as community anchor institutions. As a result of the digital inclusion pilot project, LOUIS was able to make recommendations for sustainable statewide implementation of digital literacy instruction in public libraries and higher education institutions. When the draft DEP was released in May 2023,²⁹ LOUIS and BOR worked directly with partners to ensure that postsecondary education was included in key activities, including broadband availability and affordability, device availability and affordability, online accessibility and inclusivity, and digital skills.

In preparation for the release of the DEP draft, LOUIS staff worked closely with member libraries to keep them informed. LOUIS created digital equity plan guidance documents³⁰ for LOUIS members and for public libraries. This provided basic information about the plan, funding, requirements, and best practices for submitting public comments, as well as directing their attention to specific sections that are applicable to their interests. LOUIS conducted outreach through library-focused discussion lists, a digital inclusion listserv, virtual webinars, and conference presentations. When areas within the plan required clarification or expansion, LOUIS connected key stakeholders in the library community with the information they needed to provide accurate up-to-date information and ensure the resulting DEP is comprehensive and sustainable.

Since 2020, LOUIS and the BOR have worked closely with the Louisiana academic library network to provide professional development, outreach, and resources for library staff and students. This was made possible through the governor's Emergency Education Relief Funds and partnerships formed with both public and private higher education institutions across the state. Since then, some member libraries have received grant funds to further develop their own campus and community digital inclusion efforts through the Institute for Museum and Library Services, the Emergency Connectivity Fund, and NTIA Connecting Minority Communities Pilot Program.³¹ LOUIS is continuing to support member libraries and the larger library community through grant writing workshops, digital inclusion-focused webinars,³² and a resource-focused newsletter³³ to ensure Louisiana libraries are poised to receive DEP-related grant funding to further their digital inclusion efforts for the people of Louisiana.

How To Seek Funding

As the examples from Illinois and Louisiana show, consortia play an important role in engaging with state broadband representatives so that libraries are recognized as valued partners in reaching their states' digital inclusion goals. Academic libraries have two pathways to seek DEA funds for digital equity, literacy, and inclusion initiatives aimed at covered populations. The first is through \$1.44 billion in capacity grants to implement each state's digital equity plans *over the next five years*. Interested librarians should find and read their state plan very carefully to be sure anything they wish to propose meets the goals and objectives as articulated by their states.³⁴ It may strengthen a proposed idea to work with campus partners like TRIO, student services, tutoring, writing center, disability services, and career services. It is crucial to show that library programs and partnerships align with state priorities. Leaders in all states invested a full year in holding listening sessions, conducting research, examining data and history, and then synthesizing and prioritizing to create a focus for each state. Not every worthy idea could be included.

The second pathway for DEA funds is at the federal level through a \$1.25 billion competitive grant program administered by NTIA *annually for four years*. These grants

will focus on multi-state-, regional-, or national-level efforts that align with federal-level goals and objectives. As this publication underwent final review in spring 2024, NTIA had not yet issued a call for proposals, and we anticipate rules will be announced in mid-2024.

In addition to DEA funds, states are expending BEAD funds to build high-speed internet infrastructure and get all Americans online. Eligible uses include adoption and digital equity programs, workforce development programs, and vocational training. States have a four-year implementation period, starting in 2024, and interested librarians should read their state's BEAD plan, too, to look for possibilities.

We see many opportunities for academic libraries to expand digital skills training and workforce development. When you propose programs, position library information literacy instruction, citation management workshops, technology training, and research consultations as digital skills training. Explain how additional funding will allow your library to scale up workforce development through student employment, internships, practicums, fellowships, and residencies for those from covered populations. Describe how this experiential learning imparts the digital competencies that help students launch their careers. Show granting agencies that you are well-positioned to effectively steward funds and further their goals for improved digital equity by lending more laptops or Wi-Fi hotspots. Explain that your proposed learning commons, computing equipment, or digital innovation lab with equipment, software, and technical support will advance digital equity. Convince grant reviewers that, with more funds, you could reach more people from covered populations.

Conclusion

State and federal library advocacy efforts rely on individual library involvement as well as collective action, meaning there are many opportunities for involvement. Through DEA and BEAD, academic libraries can leverage federal funds to expand their work advancing digital equity for students, faculty, and their broader communities. Librarians should look to their consortia for ongoing support, such as grant writing workshops, webinars, and guidance on how to access state funds for digital inclusion activities and, in the future, to national associations as plans develop for multi-state-, regional-, or national-level efforts. We hope this chapter equips librarians to seek funding support that furthers their digital inclusion efforts so that covered populations in their communities can gain skills, equitably use the internet, and experience the benefits. We encourage all librarians to avail themselves of this historic opportunity to extend important work that is central to libraries.

Epilogue

The landscape of digital equity funding has undergone significant shifts since we drafted this chapter in spring 2024. In July 2024, NTIA released their first competitive grant notice

of funding opportunity and in January 2025 recommended forty-one organizations be awarded more than \$369 million. The Louisiana and Illinois offices of broadband development marked early progress when they received NTIA award letters in November 2024 and January 2025, however Executive Orders issued by President Trump in the first weeks of his term have raised questions about the availability and timing of federal grants and loans through NTIA and other federal agencies.

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Notes

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