Fall 2016

Dear rural and broadband stakeholder,

The MSU Extension Intelligent Community Institute continues to work throughout Mississippi and rural communities to address the digital divide. This challenge is the number-one threat to community economic development in the 21st century. Because of this, any efforts require multiple parties to make sure rural communities transition to, plan for, and prosper in this dynamic and disruptive digital age.

For the 2016 report, we would like to share with you what the Institute and its partners have been doing to reduce the digital divide among rural communities through both outreach and research. Please do not hesitate to contact me if you have any questions, or, better yet, if you are interested in helping rural communities through this transition.

Sincerely,

[Signature]

Dr. Roberto Gallardo
Associate Extension Professor & Leader
MSU Extension Intelligent Community Institute
The Intelligent Community Outreach Process (ICOP) consists of four steps: awareness, checklist, implementation, and recognition. This process merges an asset-mapping community development approach and the worldwide Intelligent Community Forum (ICF) indicators used as a roadmap. These indicators include broadband connectivity, innovation, knowledge workforce, digital equality, marketing, and sustainability.

A total of 37 meetings/presentations/webinars were completed to educate and increase awareness regarding the digital age and its applications, as well as its implications for rural communities, reaching 1,477 people across 7 states including Mississippi, Ohio, Louisiana, Nebraska, Texas, Kentucky, and Colorado. A TEDx talk is included among these awareness efforts, with 870 views on YouTube.
If requested by the community, the checklist is the next step. It is completed by a local champion or champions. Once the checklist is completed, the Institute compiles a report and discusses it with key community leaders. This group of leaders also identifies priorities that are organized into action items to be implemented in the short- to mid-term. Two additional communities completed the checklist this past year, bringing the total to eight, of which four are active in the implementation phase.

The implementation phase deploys Extension and non-Extension programs and resources to address the priorities identified. Some outputs worth highlighting during this past year include:

- completing a municipal website.
- receiving a fiber-ready certification for a community’s industrial park (completed by the Enterprise, a regional economic development organization).
- facilitating a broadband connectivity townhall meeting.
- providing dash/dot robots and mini iPads to Extension agents.
- securing funding for a downtown WiFi hotspot (completed by our partner, the Enterprise).
- completing an information technology and workforce needs survey of small businesses in a local community.
- loaning iPads to the Mississippi Children’s Museum.
- completing multiple digital literacy workshops.
If the community desires, the Institute can submit a nomination package on behalf of the community to the ICF award committee. Though it is the final step in the ICOP, it is not the end of the road for the community. With a digital mindset in place, the community can move on in a sustainable way. No nominations were submitted this year, as the communities decided they want to complete more action steps and document more outputs.

In order to better conduct outreach, innovative Extension programs have been designed and launched this past year. Current efforts are focusing on securing funding to expand these programs. Several are worth mentioning:

- **Virtual Incubator Program (VIP):** This program provides training to entrepreneurs and small business owners regarding multiple online presence strategies. One-on-one technical assistance is then provided to participants to make sure they are comfortable enough on the topics learned. Two VIPs were completed, reaching more than ten small business owners and entrepreneurs.

- **E-Front Door:** This program was designed and implemented in partnership with the Social Science Research Center and the Mississippi State University Communications Department. Communications students assess a community online, complete a “secret shopper” visit, and present their findings to community leaders. The objective is to help rural communities proactively manage their online reputation.

- **Master Technology Innovator:** This Extension program relies on local county agents to recruit tech-savvy volunteers and place them in community anchor institutions to provide technical assistance and technology-related presentations. This effort not only helps with leadership skills of the volunteers, but also helps with digital inclusion throughout the community, which reduces the digital divide.

- **Digital Works:** This program, conducted in partnership with Digital Works Ohio, trains and places participants in jobs working from home. A total of eight participants graduated. Unfortunately, only one secured a job, while three made it through multiple rounds of interviews but were not offered a job. In one case, the Internet speed available at the participant’s home was not sufficient.
To wrap-up the outreach conducted during this past year, it is worth showcasing several articles/stories highlighting the Institute’s work:

- Wired Magazine article
- MIC.com story
- MSU Extension story

Research

The Institute also focused on advancing research that contributes knowledge regarding the digital age and its implications for rural communities.

- The book *Responsive Countryside: The Digital Age & Rural Communities* discusses characteristics of the digital age, the quickly changing socioeconomic landscape, issues associated with digital applications, and what role the Extension Service can play in helping rural communities make the transition to a digital mindset.
- Five Extension publications were released this past year. A three-article series of community economic development publications focused on key concepts, approaches, and frameworks and issues. In addition, a digital divide publication looked at Mississippi through multiple indicators to shed light on the breadth and depth of this issue. Finally, a telework publication focused on telework statistics in the state at the Census tract level.
- The Institute developed a national county-level digital divide index (DDI) for broadband infrastructure/adoptions and socioeconomic characteristics. The DDI ranges from 0 to 100, where a lower number denotes a lower digital divide. This index will be updated annually. The objective of the DDI is to serve as an objective and pragmatic tool for policymakers and community leaders to jumpstart conversations on this critical topic.
• Four white papers regarding the impact of digital age applications on rural communities were published this past year. The four white papers include: (1) Broadband and Civic Engagement in Rural Areas: What Matters?; (2) Does County Broadband Access Affect Civic Engagement?; (3) Developing Intelligent Communities: Investigating Benefits and Barriers of Telemental Health in Mississippi; and (4) eBaby4u Improving Infant Feeding Among African American Teen Mothers through Social Media.

In addition, four quarterly newsletters were sent to 117 subscribers, with an average open rate of 52.8 percent. Also, a three-article series was published in partnership with the Daily Yonder, looking at the rural “gig” economy and how it has evolved over time.

Funding

The Institute secured a total of $43,000 in external funding this past year. One project funded by the Northeast Regional Center for Rural Development and in partnership with Oklahoma State University will analyze the Rural Establishment Innovation Survey to develop an innovation index and better understand the role of technology in rural innovation. Results from this study will be discussed in the Spring of 2017.

A second project funded by the Verizon Foundation focuses on introducing STEM concepts to children. Funds have been used to purchase wonder packs (dash/dot robots and mini iPads) for trained county Extension personnel to conduct events. More than nineteen (19) events have taken place reaching more than 250 children.