



Public and Academic Libraries in Partnership

Advancing Digital Literacy in Illinois

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ITHAKA S+R

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Introduction

Community college libraries and public libraries play a vital role in bridging the digital divide by providing equitable access to technology, internet connectivity, and digital literacy across the United States.¹ Community college libraries support students' academic success by providing access to specialized software, online research tools, and technical instruction, while public libraries extend this support to the broader community by offering digital literacy workshops, lending devices, and providing multilingual technology support. However, these two library types often operate independently, and through forging collaborative partnerships they could enhance their impact and reach. Through partnership, these libraries can combine resources to ensure that individuals—regardless of income, background, or education level—can access reliable Wi-Fi, computer workstations, printing services, and one-on-one technology support and assistance. Together, they can create a seamless network of support that helps close gaps in digital access, empowering users to navigate an increasingly technology-driven world. This is especially important as technology is essential for accessing basic needs, serving as the gateway to housing applications, job searches, healthcare enrollment, educational resources, and government assistance programs.

This report highlights the second case study in a series of formal academic-public library partnerships, focusing on the academic-public library partnership between the Waubensee Community College (WCC) library system, Aurora Public Library District (APLD), and Messenger Public Library of North Aurora (MPL).² In its current form, this partnership primarily focuses on technology and broadband access, including digital literacy workshops. What started as a collaboration to celebrate Adult Education and Family Literacy Week, continues to evolve into a more sustainable partnership. In this study, we provide an account of the nascent partnership's development, the technology services that are

¹ Charlie Muller, "What Is the Digital Divide?" *Internet Society*, 3 March 2022, https://www.internetsociety.org/blog/2022/03/what-is-the-digital-divide/?gad_source=1&gad_campaignid=957374397&gclid=CjwKCAjwrvavBBhBjEiwAlr3OVMGwIH1WR4jOSb9UnpYSG80FYCiyYKx4PJ8GIWqaz5b4TGs6U53csxoCdgoQAvD_BwE.

² Elmira Jangjou, Sage J. Love, and Melissa Blankstein, "Maximizing Impact Through Collaboration at Chatham Community Library: A Case Study of a Joint-Use Library Partnership," *Ithaka S+R*, 18 June 2025, <https://doi.org/10.18665/sr.323040>.

currently in place, challenges the partnership has encountered, and opportunities for continued growth and additional collaboration.

Key takeaways

- Draw on existing relationships and professional networks to proactively develop strategic partnerships with other libraries that share a mission and commitment to addressing community needs.
- Start small with a focused initiative and then assess what works, build buy-in, and scale up based on what was effective.
- Allocate sufficient planning time and maintain consistent communication for coordinating across different institutional systems to ensure effective program delivery.
- Coordinate outreach and messaging to strengthen program visibility and improve participation across diverse library audiences.
- Appoint a central coordinator across partners to streamline logistics, support communication, and sustain momentum.
- Collect and act on community feedback to ensure that partnership programming remains responsive to evolving patron needs and to improve it over time.
- Maximize effectiveness by drawing on each institution's unique strengths and leveraging the individual expertise of library staff, while acknowledging that contributions may differ in form and scale.
- Use creative, low-tech ways to promote technology programs to reach residents with limited internet access or digital skills.

Methods

Interview protocol and thematic analysis

We conducted interviews with 12 participants across Waubonsee Community College (WCC) Library, the Aurora Public Library District (APLD), and Messenger Public Library (MPL) from November to December 2024 to gain insights into how they established and sustain their partnership and the challenges it has faced. These interviews explored participants' experiences with the public-academic library partnership, their understanding of the partnership's goals, and current practices for sharing resources and information between partners. We used snowball sampling to identify potential interviewees, with contact information provided by the WCC library staff who had signed up to participate in this case study through an open call for participants posted on the Ithaka S+R website. Research team members conducted the interviews virtually via Webex and recorded the sessions with the interviewees' consent. Each interview session lasted approximately one hour. Subsequently, an external transcription service was used to generate a transcript of the interviews. Two analysts analyzed the interview transcripts, undertaking a comprehensive open-coding process to create a thematic codebook. They next conducted a thematic analysis using Dedoose to analyze interview transcripts and report case study findings.

Institutional characteristics

Waubonsee Community College Library

WCC is a public institution with four campuses located in Sugar Grove, Aurora Downtown, Aurora Fox Valley, and Plano, Illinois. As of fall 2023, WCC reported an undergraduate enrollment of 8,324 students, comprising 4,582 women and 3,742 men. The student body is predominantly part-time (71 percent) and reflects the following demographic composition: 44 percent Hispanic, 41 percent White, 7 percent Black or African American, 4 percent Asian, 2 percent identifying as two or more races, and 3 percent

categorized as unknown.³ Approximately 30 percent of students were 25 years of age or older. About 15 percent of students were enrolled exclusively in distance education, while 26 percent were engaged in some form of hybrid distance education. The college employed 433 full-time staff members, including four full-time librarians and seven library technicians.⁴

The Waubonsee Community College (WCC) library system consists of three physical libraries across its four campuses, serving both WCC students and members of the surrounding community.⁵ The largest library is located at the main campus in Sugar Grove, Illinois, and primarily supports students, faculty, and staff. The downtown Aurora library, situated in the city center, regularly welcomes both college affiliates and community members. The third library, located at the Fox Valley campus in Aurora near a medical facility, primarily serves nursing and emergency medical technician students. Collectively, the three WCC libraries support a broad range of patrons, including adult learners, English language learners, student parents, and traditional college-age students.

Aurora Public Library District

The Aurora Public Library District (APLD), staffed by approximately 150 employees, serves the city of Aurora, the second-largest city in Illinois, through three branches: the Richard and Gina Santori Library (main), Eola Road Branch, and West Branch. As one interviewee described, each branch serves a distinct patron base reflective of the surrounding neighborhoods. The West Branch, the quietest of the three, primarily serves senior citizens and middle school-aged children, with limited overlap with local college student populations. The Eola Road Branch, located in a higher-income area, serves a population that includes families with young children, business professionals, and a relatively large number of students—many who share similar demographic characteristics with the Waubonsee students. In contrast, the Santori Library, situated in the city center just two blocks from Waubonsee’s downtown Aurora campus, serves a wide range of users, including students from Waubonsee and

³ Enrollment figures for American Indian or Alaska Native and Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander students each accounted for less than one percent of the total.

⁴ Demographic information sourced from Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), Fall 2023 data, accessed May 19, 2025.

⁵ For more information visit: <https://www.waubonsee.edu/student-experience/library/about/about-the-library>.

Aurora University, individuals experiencing homelessness, and other community members with varying educational and socioeconomic backgrounds. APLD's commitment to accessibility is evident in its bilingual signage and services, reflecting Aurora's multilingual population, including over 40 percent Spanish speakers. The library is guided by strategic goals such as "Elevate Community through Engagement, Partnership, and Communication" and "Connect the Community to Evolving Services and Technologies."⁶ This library's Digital Services Department played a key role in the public-academic library partnership.

Messenger Public Library of North Aurora

Messenger Public Library (MPL), located in North Aurora, is a smaller library system compared to the other two in the partnership. According to its website, the library serves over 7,600 residential cardholders, along with consortium members, reciprocal borrowers, and the general public.⁷ With a staff of nine full-time and 16 part-time employees, the library supports a patron base that includes families, college students, and adults primarily in their 50s and older. An interviewee shared that a notable area of focus is outreach to adults in their 20s and 30s, a demographic that tends to disengage temporarily from library use. In response, the library has developed off-site programming, including book clubs and game nights at local venues such as breweries, to re-engage this population. The Adult Services Department, which serves patrons generally between the ages of 30 and 85, played a key role in the public-academic library partnership. The library emphasizes its role as "a source to further literacy and learning for all ages" and "a connection to technology."

Post-case study partnership updates

Following the conclusion of our interviews, the digital literacy partnership has significantly expanded in both scope and scale. Two additional program sessions were held in February and June/July 2025, and a recurring technology program has recently been launched that rotates monthly among different locations across the library district. What began as a collaboration between one academic and two public libraries has now

⁶ For more information visit: <https://www.aurorapubliclibrary.org/WhoWeAre-13215>

⁷ For more information visit: <https://www.messengerpl.org/>

grown to a partnership of six actively participating libraries, with additional libraries expressing interest. To date, over 200 participants have attended these programs. In a related effort, partners have also initiated a district-wide library meetup for all libraries within Waubonsee Community College District 516. This gathering included representatives from most public libraries in the district, with plans to involve school libraries in the future. These meetings have created a valuable space to collectively discuss patron needs and shared challenges in the field, while also attracting interest from other college departments and external organizations, such as Fox Valley United Way.

In parallel, Waubonsee Community College officially launched its strategic plan, RISE 2030, which outlines a renewed institutional commitment to supporting both students and community members beyond traditional academic services.⁸ One of the plan's four guiding priorities, "REDEFINE Our Relationship with the Community," highlights the alignment between the college's strategic goals and the objectives of the partnership, affirming their broader role in responding to evolving community needs.

Sample characteristics

The sample consisted of 12 participants representing a range of roles involved in the public-academic library partnership, including both library professionals and individuals in non-library positions. Eight participants were affiliated with WCC, comprising five librarians, library staff, and library leaders, as well as three administrators from the adult education department, academic support services, and tutoring center. Two interviewees represented the adult services department of MPL, and one additional participant was from the digital services department of APLD. The majority of interviewees reported having experience working in both public and academic library settings or having engaged in previous collaborations with other colleges. The sample also included one community member and program attendee affiliated with APLD, offering a patron perspective on the partnership's technology initiatives.

⁸ For more information visit: <https://www.waubonsee.edu/about-waubonsee/why-waubonsee/institutional-reports/strategic-planning/rise-2030-strategic-plan>.

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Findings

Partnership formation and establishment

Preparation for the partnership began in summer 2024, leading to the launch of the first round of programming during WCC's Adult Education and Family Literacy Week in September. The partnership between WCC Library and the Aurora and Messenger Public Libraries emerged from a shared recognition of the growing digital literacy needs within their communities, including those of WCC students. According to interviewees, informal networks and pre-existing relationships among library staff played a foundational role in facilitating early conversations about ways to collaborate. As an MPL interviewee explained,

When I first started here at Messenger, I was interested in Waubonsee... and it just so happened that someone that I knew from another library had just gotten the job at Waubonsee, and I was like, 'Hey, you're my neighbor now. We should get together and talk.'

While none of the interviewees were aware of any prior collaborations between the two public libraries, WCC had engaged in short-term initiatives with each public library individually. These earlier connections and efforts laid the groundwork for a more formal and coordinated partnership. Initial collaboration comprised mostly informal referrals, with public library staff directing patrons to technology training sessions offered at WCC libraries and vice versa. Discussions around a more formal collaboration started independently between WCC library staff and each public library.

The idea of the partnership was formally initiated by a WCC library staff member responsible for outreach, who had worked at both public and academic libraries. This staff member convened representatives from all three libraries into a meeting to explore shared programming opportunities. An interviewee from MPL shared, "Right away, from the first meeting, we all really hit it off, and were very eager and enthusiastic." A key starting point was the proposal to jointly offer basic technology classes during Adult Education and Family Literacy Week as an initiative designed to promote awareness and engagement with this important event.

“APLD has the staff to do programs like these, Waubonsee has the space, and MPL has a great need from their patrons. Coming together, it’s all played out really well.”

A convergence of several motivations brought these libraries together. Although each institution was aware of both the technological gaps within their user populations and the importance of providing services in multiple languages, no single library had the staffing, space, and linguistic resources to meet these needs independently. As one interviewee explained, “APLD has the staff to do programs like these, Waubonsee has the space, and MPL has a great need from their patrons. Coming together, it’s all played out really well.” Resource sharing emerged as a practical solution that also aligned with each institution’s mission. Several WCC interviewees emphasized that the partnership supported their institution’s broader goals, such as promoting equitable access to education and fulfilling its role as “the community’s college.” One noted that the partnership goals aligned with the college’s mission “to have equity amongst educational opportunities and to provide new and exciting educational opportunities.”

Another driver of collaboration was the opportunity to raise institutional visibility, particularly among individuals who had digital literacy needs but were hesitant to seek help. Offering technology training in a welcoming and multilingual setting could allow each library to reach new users and showcase available services. An interviewee from WCC identified “getting more traffic into the library” as a key goal of the partnership and noted, “We have a wonderful library at our downtown Aurora campus, but I’m not sure how many of our adult education students really have checked it out.” The initiative also helped to expand each institution’s professional networks across libraries and opened pathways for future collaborations. An interviewee from MPL explained these opportunities,

From my perspective, the whole point is to be able to reach more people and to figure out better ways to help the people that we’re already working with. I feel like that opens the doors to other partnerships. Which is great. I’ve made some connections at Aurora Public Library because of this, and we’re trying—I think they’re [also] trying to get other libraries involved. So, I think the point is just to really expand our net of the people that we can help

with these particular issues. And then we're starting to think about other stuff that we could do too.

At the time of the interviews, following the Adult Education and Family Literacy Week programs, many participants also discussed ongoing planning efforts for future classes, with aspirations to scale the partnership and secure grant funding to expand offerings, including the possibility of “bring[ing] affordable devices and internet access to [their] community.”

Technology access and digital inclusion

At the center of this partnership are the core values shared by the three libraries: digital equity, digital inclusion, and technology access. The partnership was founded with the goal of bridging the digital divide in the broader Aurora area by expanding access to technology resources, services, and education. As many interviewees across WCC, APLD, and MPL emphasized, both academic and public libraries serve similar patrons, and by working together, they can expand access to technology information and digital resources. They expressed a strong belief in the transformative value of technology, not only as a gateway to education and earning credentials, but also in securing and maintaining employment and long-term financial stability. As one library staff member at WCC expressed, technology access is “really at the heart of our partnership work.”

WCC’s Adult Education and Family Literacy Week in September 2024 was the partnership’s initial foray into bridging its community’s digital divide.⁹ The program consisted of nine classes in total, some of which were offered twice at different times and in both English and Spanish to accommodate users’ varying schedules and language needs. Classes, held in the afternoon and evenings, covered a range of topics, including email basics, introduction to Google Drive, basic computer skills, 3D printing, and introduction to Microsoft Word. Participants included a mix of college students and community members, where “about half of the

⁹ Since the time of the interviews, technology programs within the partnership have expanded, including two additional program sessions and the launch of a recurring, rotating technology series across the district, growing from two to six active library partners and engaging over 200 participants to date.

attendees were college students.” According to interview data, library users differ widely in age, race, ethnicity, geographic area, socioeconomic status, and digital literacy, which shapes the range of technology support and programming offered. Several interviewees noted that, as 40 percent of the population is Spanish-speaking, the partnership prioritized bilingual technology classes, offering English and Spanish instruction with translation support to ensure inclusive programming. As one library staff member at APLD shared:

The classes that we taught in September, every single one of those was offered first in English, and then in Spanish. We had the exact same content, the exact same lesson plan in the same place, but we basically either did them back to back; or afternoon and evening, we had English and Spanish, or Spanish and English. That was something that was very important to us in terms of an equity standpoint. We don't want someone to be locked out of the class just because English isn't their first language, so we made sure that everything was offered bilingually.

The partnership approached technology access as a fundamental basic need, much like food, clothing, and housing. One librarian highlighted that “we all kind of agreed that we viewed [technology] as a basic need and that there’s a role for us to serve.” Framing technology as an essential need informed every level of this partnership’s planning and implementation for the week’s activities. One interviewee reflected on the partnership’s broader view of technology access as a basic need:

How is this experience going to change their life? Is it going to let them do better in their Waubensee classes? Is it going to let them apply for a job which they wouldn't have been qualified for otherwise? If we can make that sort of difference in their life, even if it is just one person at a class, I think that's a successful partnership.

This approach can be found in the flyers created to help market and promote the week of technology classes. For example, although the flyers provided QR codes for participants to sign up for classes using a smart device, registration was not required to attend a class. This intentional choice reflected the partnership’s goal of reducing barriers to technology access by ensuring that participation didn’t depend on having a cell phone, smart device, internet access, or digital literacy skills—making the

events more inclusive for community members. Images of the flyers are included in Appendix 1.

By teaching patrons basic computer skills—how to use a mouse, how to turn on a computer, or how to send an email—as well as how to use Word, Google Drive, and other Microsoft Office programs, the partnership sought to meet its library users where they are. In direct response to community feedback identifying digital literacy and access as critical needs, the partnership designed classes and programming that met the immediate needs of their communities, and addressed varying levels of technology experience and know-how. Throughout the week, the libraries continued to collect additional information about what their patrons need: if participants were able to register for classes through a Google form, the form included a field for them to provide recommendations for additional programming. This feedback continues to inform what kinds of classes could be offered in the future:

And many times, as they would fill these Google forms out, they had attended a previous program during the week. So, then they would say, “A repeat of the prior program,” or they would ask for additional topics that we didn’t cover. We didn’t cover Microsoft Excel, but we did Microsoft Word, so a lot of them were asking to go into Excel and other topics like that.

The partnership also specifically aimed to address a broad spectrum of technology needs across diverse rural and urban areas. As one interviewee described, the district covers a wide and diverse geographic area. The western side includes highly rural regions, while the city of Aurora represents a more urban setting.

Taking into account geographic diversity involves recognizing the vital role that the partnership can play in terms of making technology accessible across a wide and vast region. Because many library users, including students, may experience transportation challenges, the library may already be the most accessible resource for them in their community. A notable benefit of the partnership is the ability to continue adding and strengthening inter-library collaborations with other libraries “to not only offer digital literacy classes but to offer other classes or to have faculty members go out and do speaking engagements in the library.” In other words, maintaining strong relationships and partnerships with other libraries affords library users across these communities greater access to

technology and learning opportunities.

As this partnership continues to evolve, it remains essential to recognize the inherent challenge of building technology-focused initiatives for communities that may lack reliable access to the very tools required to benefit from them. This digital divide creates a paradox: the individuals who could gain the most from technology classes and resources are often the least likely to see any digital outreach or register for events online. As one community college librarian noted, “we think everyone’s got a phone and can access everything,” highlighting a common misconception that can obscure the real and persistent barriers many individuals face in accessing technology, and ultimately reinforcing the very inequities these programs aim to address. To help bridge this divide the partnership is committed to “figure out, and continue to think about, and assess where we’re making folks aware about this work,” according to the same librarian.

Institutional contributions and shared resources

A central feature of this academic-public library partnership is the intentional sharing of resources, knowledge, and expertise, which enhances each institution’s ability to serve its respective communities while broadening the partnership’s collective reach. Importantly, each library brought distinct expertise, resources, and knowledge to the table—Waubonsee Community College provided organizational capacity and physical infrastructure, Messenger Public Library led outreach and promotional efforts, and Aurora Public Library District contributed curriculum development and bilingual instructional support. This distribution of responsibilities allowed the partnership to function efficiently and equitably, without overburdening any single institution. The themes that emerge across these shared resources include maximizing the use of **physical space**, coordinating **staff expertise** across institutions, amplifying visibility and engagement through joint **outreach and marketing efforts**, and expanding **access to technology**.

In terms of **physical space**, unlike a joint-use library model where a single library space is shared between different libraries, this partnership leveraged WCC’s downtown Aurora campus library to host the majority of the Adult Education and Family Literacy Week workshops and classes. The

college's large computer lab—with 30 desktops and additional laptops—was a critical asset, especially compared to the more limited workshop space available at the two public libraries:

We have public computer labs with close to that number of computers, but our computer labs that are available for workshops, the biggest one we have is 12 computers. So, to be able to go into Waubonsee's campus and into their library, it was wonderful to have that sort of space, because we hope that we can reach a lot of people.

In addition, a library staff member at Waubonsee shared:

Waubonsee provided the space for all of the programs because we have so many different campus locations. And we had a classroom in our library that is all computers, so it was perfect for this.

Library staff also represent another critical shared resource. Many interviewees, particularly those in administrative or leadership positions at each institution, described their responsibilities as contributing to program planning, administrative support, and idea generation. Frontline library and college staff contributed through delivering instruction, class facilitation, and bringing domain-specific expertise, particularly related to digital literacy and the needs of adult learners and college students. All three libraries dedicated time and staffing to the partnership, bringing with them a wide range of expertise—from technology instruction and workshop design to bilingual support—thereby enriching the capacity to meet the wide range of user needs. As one librarian at Waubonsee put it, “And you know, a lot of times, we both have our different expertise. So, we kind of fill gaps that each other might have.”

For example, partners shared responsibility for providing bilingual education and translation support to ensure equitable access to digital literacy programs for Spanish-speaking community members. Afternoon sessions were primarily supported by WCC's Tutoring Center and Adult Education staff, while evening sessions were staffed by bilingual personnel from APLD, aligning with each institution's typical staffing availability. This coordination allowed for consistent translation support across programs without overextending any single partner. APLD led the fully Spanish-language sessions, leveraging their prior experience offering similar programs. Meanwhile, WCC staff provided translation assistance for classes but did not serve as primary instructors, which respected their

job roles while still ensuring inclusive delivery.¹⁰

With regard to **outreach and marketing**, each library promoted the AEFL Week of technology classes through coordinated efforts, such as sharing event flyers—both digital and physical copies—and through social media posts. Similar to the ways in which each library distinctively provided technology resources and support for the Adult Education and Family Literacy Week, each library contributed uniquely to the outreach efforts. For example, MPL played a particularly prominent role in the promotional efforts by leveraging its strong social media presence to significantly increase visibility and engagement around the week's events. As a public librarian from MPL explained, “We're really good at marketing, just trying to hit all the areas; Facebook and email, and we mail out our newsletter.”

Both WCC and APLD hung up posters and had flyers made to help promote the technology classes. WCC also advertised the event on their library website. Further, the libraries maintain a spirit of ongoing collaboration by actively promoting each other's individual events, even outside the scope of their formal partnership initiatives and events. For example, as the partnership was getting underway, WCC and MPL helped to promote an upcoming event at APLD—“a pop culture convention designed for both kids and adults to have fun.”

Technology sharing was a hallmark of the partnership, with each library contributing different materials and expertise. WCC hosted the technology-focused programs, including a 3D printing demonstration, where APLD contributed the 3D printers and designed the curriculum, which was grounded in their already existing programming. MPL provided paint and other hands-on materials to enhance the 3D printing demonstration and makerspace component.

Overall, while WCC and APLD contributed staffing, space, and instructional support, MPL, as the smaller of the three systems, focused its efforts on promotion and outreach. Departments within WCC, including Adult Education, the Tutoring Center, and the Outreach Office, also played critical roles. The college's Adult Education Department, in particular, helped identify community needs, promoted programs, and supplied Spanish-speaking instructors to ensure multilingual access. The APLD

¹⁰ At the time of the interviews, WCC did not have bilingual librarians available to support the digital literacy programs. Since then, the addition of bilingual staff has strengthened their ability to support subsequent rounds of programming.

Digital Services Department was central in providing instructional leadership for the technology classes, while WCC's tutoring center also contributed staff to support instruction and Spanish translation. An interviewee from MPL highlighted the collaborative spirit that defines this partnership:

Sometimes ... where you collaborate on something, and it's like everyone has to be contributing their fair share. But fair looks differently depending on who you are in your makeup, and we don't have as many staff as Aurora. ... And so, I'm really grateful for their good attitude of like, "Yeah, we're going to work with these other libraries," and they might not be able to teach as many classes, but it's benefiting everyone as a whole. And I think it can be a challenge to find some organizations and groups that are okay with that.

Shared resources have been a cornerstone of this partnership's success, but not without challenges. Navigating multiple library calendars and aligning staff availability across institutions can be complex, particularly given differing work schedules and hours of operation. Additionally, there is a growing need for more translation and interpretive support to effectively serve the area's bilingual needs. As the partnership looks toward future growth, important questions arise around challenges in staffing, management, sustainability, and identifying which institution will take the lead in housing and maintaining expanded initiatives.

Management and coordination

Collaborative planning and communication

The management of the public-academic library partnership is characterized by collaborative planning, strong communication, and shared responsibilities among the partner institutions. A dedicated outreach library staff member at WCC was consistently identified as the central coordinator of the partnership. She was recognized for initiating early conversations, setting meetings, handling logistical tasks, and facilitating communication across institutions:

It sounds like such a small detail, but you really have to have a person who's organizing meetings, and putting out a doodle poll, or just finding a way to actually bring the people together. So, [she's]

been really helpful with that; like, “All right, I'm going to put together a poll. We're all going to vote. We're going to schedule a meeting. This is when we're meeting.” I swear, 90 percent of the work is just getting us all together.

“I swear, 90 percent of the work is just getting us all together.”

Many interviewees emphasized that regular planning meetings have been well-organized and instrumental in coordinating logistics, aligning goals, and refining the structure of the partnership. Although preparation for the initial round of technology classes was constrained by a short timeline, the experience prompted partners to begin planning earlier for future, subsequent sessions, particularly to allow sufficient time for tasks such as coordinating with WCC’s marketing department. The continued planning team meetings after the first round of programs offer opportunities to debrief, brainstorm, and discuss sustainability strategies. One of the interviewees described the benefit of having conversations among partners:

I think a successful partnership really comes down to not just achieving the goals, but also having the self-awareness and self-reflection to understand what didn't work and what maybe was a surprise that worked, and you can strengthen on. And I think this partnership really works because we're bringing in a lot of diverse perspectives on the issues and the needs of the students. So, it's not just two people from the library collaborating. It's a lot of different partnerships and different stakeholders at this point.

Planning meetings are held primarily virtually, with occasional in-person or hybrid formats. An interviewee noted that WCC’s available space enables the partners to host in-person gatherings when needed. Communication also takes place via email, which is used for coordination and sharing meeting notes, as well as a recently adopted Microsoft Teams channel to support ongoing collaboration. An interviewee from MPL shared that some instructors use SharePoint to exchange instructional materials. A library leader from WCC emphasized the importance of having enough staff capacity to enable team members to participate in the partnership activities:

Sometimes it's hard to get folks to be able to have time to get off of a public service desk and go do these things. And so, we've been able to do that, make sure that we've got staffing and coverage so that we can allow folks to do this important work out in the community, which I think is important.

Feedback mechanisms were essential for adapting and improving the partnership's programming. Interviewees described several methods for gathering feedback, including attendee registration Google Forms, follow-up emails, informal verbal feedback, and documentation via shared Teams channels. An APLD interviewee explained how the technology programs were created based on community feedback: "Obviously this is a community need, so, let's do exactly what they're asking for. I think it really came exactly from community feedback and the people who we serve." Registration surveys also collected contact information and preferences for communication, which proved valuable for follow-ups and reminders. Additional feedback from WCC faculty offered valuable insights into students' digital literacy challenges, helping to identify specific needs that the partnership could address. An interviewee explained:

You're not gonna call the IT department just because your students don't know how to upload something in Canvas. But who can support the faculty? [The Library] can support faculty there. So,... I think [it] is important for us as a department just to establish and create awareness of all that we can actually do for our students and for our faculty.

Sustainability considerations

Despite describing a generative collaborative model, interviewees acknowledged several operational challenges for this relatively new partnership. Differences in institutional systems and timelines, particularly for outreach and approvals, occasionally created barriers. For example, one interviewee noted the need for additional college-level approvals for outreach efforts, which was addressed by WCC's Community Engagement Department: "[The Community Engagement Department] have been able to jump in and give us some of those higher-up okays that we would need that we were waiting on for longer periods of time." Discrepancies in marketing timelines across institutions also posed challenges for promoting joint programs. According to an MPL interviewee, "all three of us are on totally different timelines." This interviewee pointed to consistent programming as a potential solution to working on schedules

and timelines: “I think once we get something repeating, that we can put in the newsletter, it will make a huge difference for our patrons.”

While interviewees described the partnership as progressing smoothly, they also expressed concerns about long-term sustainability and the need for continued coordination and institutional support. Maintaining momentum can be especially challenging in a partnership that involves multiple stakeholders across many institutions—many of whom have competing priorities or may leave their roles. An WCC interviewee shared,

I think, maintaining-wise, it is going to be a challenge to build a system in place that maintains it, that's not just people-dependent. And since this is none of our primary responsibility at the moment, it becomes a little bit harder to always make that the focus. And that, I think, is going to be a struggle. Overall, though, I think it does help that everybody in this group is very supportive of each other.

Interviewees identified numerous opportunities for enhancing and sustaining the partnership. In addition to offering more frequent programs, some interviewees expressed interest in expanding the partnership to include additional libraries, organizing geographically distributed technology classes, and extending services to rural areas to address transportation barriers. Other suggestions included addressing additional community needs such as access to childcare, food, and affordable internet or devices. For instance, one interviewee noted,

Childcare is a big one. I think about how we could continue to collaborate amongst ourselves, whether it's public libraries, private libraries, community colleges, and other state agencies to help support the community around those things. So, leverage all efforts and connect them to create a better holistic approach. I feel that that's where it's lagging. But I do think there is conversation at a surface level about the needs.

A community member who participated in the first round of technology classes also provided their insights about advertising the partnership resources. They believe it is critical to clearly highlight the joint involvement of both the college and the public libraries in outreach materials. As they explained, “make sure that both Waubonsee and Aurora Public Library are in the main [subject] line when you're advertising,” to help reinforce the collaboration and draw in patrons who may be more

familiar with one institution than the other.

Interviewees also highlighted the reciprocal learning that occurs through collaboration as an important opportunity to scale and sustain the partnership. For example, MPL staff expressed interest in participating in WCC events, such as resource fairs in the future, while WCC staff reported gaining a deeper appreciation for the public libraries' roles in community support. According to an interviewee, the partnership “helps us reimagine how we serve our community and what are some things the public libraries are seeing that we might be able to address as a community college.” Another interviewee noted that highlighting the success of the partnership could help secure leadership buy-in and potential funding support:

These classes are just an initial almost like a test case to prove that there is a successful collaboration here and that there is opportunity to grow the partnership. And then once we have a few successful rounds of that, I think we'll have a better case to go up to the leadership and say, “Hey. We wanna make this bigger.”

Funding support

This academic-public library partnership does not receive dedicated funding support in its current format at the local, state, or federal level. However, the libraries are actively exploring the possibility of grants and other funding opportunities to sustain the partnership. Several interviewees emphasized a pressing need for targeted financial support to increase and expand class offerings, hire more instructors to teach technology and digital literacy classes, and expand access to technology devices, equipment, and hardware. With increased funding, the partnership could expand its reach and more effectively bridge technological gaps for both students and community members in this geographically diverse area. As one interviewee expressed:

If we could find supplemental money to support us, we could have regular classes and have multiple classes of the same topic, so that we could fit more people in. And there's just a lot, lot more we could do.

Several interviewees expressed their interest in pursuing grant opportunities collaboratively, leveraging collective capacity and expertise to secure the partnership's sustainability and longevity. For instance, several interviewees confirmed that MPL, in particular, is actively exploring grant opportunities that might be available because they have a staff member who is an expert in grant writing. As one MPL librarian shared, "in terms of actual funding, we're looking into grant money," which would enable the partnership to "find refurbished equipment for people who are in need and can't afford a laptop."

Although the partnership itself does not receive direct federal or state funding, each participating individual library secures financial support through various channels, particularly to expand community basic needs resources and services. For example, MPL receives a limited amount of funding from the state, which varies from year to year. The library also has a strong relationship with the Village of North Aurora when it comes to annual budget planning. However, as one library staff member noted, "we're competing with other community organizations for that funding," which can limit resources. The APLD benefits from grants provided by organizations such as the Illinois Library Association, local nonprofits, and businesses. A notable example is a grant from Comcast, which enabled the library to organize and host technology workshops.

A key challenge the partnership faces in securing funding or pursuing grants stems from limited staff capacity and time. Successfully navigating the current funding landscape requires not only the ability to identify appropriate and available grant opportunities, but also the knowledge of how and when to apply—something that can be especially difficult without dedicated personnel.

Library basic needs and services

Broader technology and basic needs support

While the core of this particular partnership focuses on technology as a basic need, each library in the partnership independently invests in technology resources and services beyond the scope of more formal collaborative programming, reflecting a shared yet locally tailored commitment to digital equity. These independent investments are especially critical for WCC, as students' technology needs have grown

significantly since the COVID-19 pandemic. As an interviewee from the WCC library shared:

During the height of the pandemic when we were working remotely trying to get technology to students, a student had—in one of our more rural areas—had gotten a hotspot, but it wouldn’t work still. And so, we had to get a different one. And then somebody on the library team drove it out to them to make sure it worked right.

This proactive approach underscores the vital role the WCC library plays in bridging the digital divide in its student community, especially for students facing geographic barriers to technology and internet access. The WCC library also offers “technology supports that provide students with any type of need” in their physical space, such as providing access to essential tools like Wi-Fi, laptops, and calculators. Notably, the WCC library also tracks student participation in its laptop lending program. These insights reveal that, “nearly half of the students that utilize this program are Pell eligible,” which reinforces the library’s commitment to technology as a basic need.

Similarly, the APLD and the MPL strive to meet the technology needs and demands of their respective communities. At the APLD, staff regularly assist patrons with career-focused skills such as applying for jobs online, creating resumes, setting up or navigating LinkedIn accounts, and developing basic computer skills—services that reflect a broader commitment to basic digital literacy. Sometimes these services are offered through organized programs or workshops, while at other times, library staff directly support patrons by helping them locate information or resources—for example, *where* to apply for unemployment benefits or *how* to create resumes by providing a template. While MPL shares this commitment, limited staffing and the added time required to coordinate with an external IT company to secure equipment limit the amount of one-on-one support they can provide.

Each participating library also offers distinct essential services and basic needs resources beyond the scope of technology and digital literacy. This diversity presents valuable opportunities to the partnered libraries for mutual learning and growth leveraging each library’s strengths to create a more comprehensive, coordinated network of support. By aligning efforts and expanding existing services, the partnership has manifold potential to address a broader range of needs beyond technology for students and community members alike. The following sections highlight the various

ways each library in the partnership supports additional basic needs independently of the partnership.

Waubonsee Community College Library

At WCC, the library was operating under the academic affairs umbrella at the time of the interviews, yet its impact extended well beyond traditional academic support.¹¹ One of the interviewees described how “the college has its own initiative” for basic needs, but that the library “serves as a bridge there.” While the library does not offer services that directly impact food or housing insecurity for example, it plays a crucial connecting role, helping students navigate available on- and off-campus support systems. For instance, the library maintains a research guide available on its website that includes a regularly updated inventory of community-based resources, ensuring students have easy access to vital information, such as counseling services.¹² Additionally, staff are trained to refer students to the appropriate departments—such as counseling, food banks, financial aid, or other student support services—when more specialized help is needed:

We've got forms that we as library staff can fill out to help students discuss with the departments that handle those things. We've got some forms that can outline, “Student XYZ is having an issue finding a place to sleep at night.” And then we can get them directed to the correct person. So, nothing is immediately in our hands, but we can play a role in helping the students or community members get those resources.

Additionally, physical spaces in the library are designed to support student parents, offering family collections with books, games, and coloring pages so children can stay engaged while their caregivers study.¹³ As one interviewee shared, “we do have family collections at each of our locations

¹¹ As of July 2025, the library has been reorganized under the college’s “Academic and Student Success” division.

¹² “Community Resources & Partners: Overview,” Waubonsee Community College, <https://guides.library.waubonsee.edu/CommunityPartnersandResources>.

¹³ Post-study, preparations are underway to install family workstations at the Downtown location, featuring enclosed play areas for children while a parent or guardian studies. While not exact, the image provided offers a visual approximation. Lactation pods will also be added to the Downtown and Fox Valley libraries.

so that when parents come in with their kids and they're in a study room or whatever they might be doing."

Aurora Public Library District

At the APLD, a wide range of basic needs resources and services are offered to support the diverse and evolving needs of the community through both in-house staff and external collaboration with community-based organizations. An interviewee noted that APLD employs a business librarian dedicated to professional development, resume assistance, career and workforce development, and business networking, as well as a community history librarian who assists patrons with genealogical research. Beyond these in-house offerings, APLD maintains strong partnerships with local organizations, including Mutual Ground, which supports survivors of sexual assault; the Association for Individual Development (AID), which offers clothing, counseling, and housing guidance; and Hesed House, the second-largest homeless shelter in the state of Illinois. The library also hosts services like tax assistance and legal aid through "Lawyers in the Library" programming and similar events that bring in community-based aid providers focused on food and clothing distribution.

Messenger Public Library of North Aurora

MPL plays a unique role in the Village of North Aurora and Aurora proper by serving as a bridge between the community and essential basic needs resources. While the library does not directly provide basic needs services, it actively connects patrons with organizations that do. For example, MPL serves as a physical collection site for donations on behalf of local groups like Mutual Ground, pet shelters, and organizations serving older adults. An interviewee shared one practical and well-received initiative is the availability of free diapers in all restrooms, offering immediate relief to families during emergencies. The library also regularly invites community organizations to host programs and workshops onsite, helping raise awareness and build relationships between community-based service providers and residents.

Several MPL library staff members shared that the library fosters community care through creative initiatives like the "Kindness Hats" program. Patrons are invited to "knit and crochet winter hats and donate them back to the library, and then we distribute them to domestic violence shelters and food pantries" and other local service organizations.

Additionally, MPL maintains a resource guide with an up-to-date list of community-based services available at the circulation desk for librarians, further enhancing its role as a trusted point of connection for individuals seeking basic needs support. This resource guide is intended as a behind-the-desk tool for staff at the main desk to “help other people than a tool for them to help themselves.”

Key recommendations

Emerging from the interviews are several key recommendations for institutions and libraries interested in developing or formalizing partnerships that can enhance community outreach and access to resources and services, including those related to basic needs. While perspectives varied based on participant’s roles and experiences, three important themes stand out: maintaining **consistent communication**, fostering a **community-focused approach**, and leveraging **institutional strengths**. Together, these themes help to illustrate what a sustainable academic-public library partnership entails, as well as give shape to how similar partnerships might begin to take form—providing academic and public libraries with a foundation for meaningful collaboration.

Several interviewees underscored the importance of maintaining **regular and consistent communication**—both within the core institutions involved in the partnership and with external collaborators (such as community-based organizations). Clear, coordinated communication across these relationships was described as essential for building trust, sustaining engagement, and identifying areas for collaboration. By establishing shared communication norms early on, libraries are better positioned to engage productively with both existing and prospective partners. One interviewee emphasized that the potential benefits of open communication far outweigh the risk of being ignored or rejected: even if the outcome is uncertain, it’s always worth initiating contact with prospective partners. To that end, several interviewees recommended that communication efforts be grounded in shared missions or community goals to surface natural areas of alignment. As one librarian put it, “I would just say don’t ever hesitate to reach out to someone in your community that’s either a public library or an academic library and just make that contact.”

Interviewees also encouraged partners to keep “open lines of communication and set realistic goals and expectations about what each partner can contribute.” In a partnership between community college and public libraries, this means taking the time to understand each institution’s distinct strengths, resources, and constraints. For example, one partner may offer deeper subject expertise, while the other may have stronger community outreach networks or access to broader basic needs resources and services. Maintaining regular communication can also help partners anticipate and address potential scheduling conflicts, staffing limitations, or shifts in priorities before they become barriers to collaboration.

Further, while communication and collaboration are distinct aspects of partnership work, they are deeply interconnected: effective collaboration depends on clear, consistent communication, especially when multiple partners are involved. To help streamline lines of communications, some interviewees emphasized the importance of organizing communication in a shared system, such as Google Docs or Microsoft Office, “to be able to have a [shared] space, and not just a hundred emails that are all over the place.” One interviewee also advocated for “having regularly scheduled meetings” at least a few times a month, whether in person or virtual, to keep everyone aligned and engaged, especially with the core members of the partnership. Interviewee’s emphasis on communication highlights its critical role in sustaining internal cohesion and ensuring that all partners—new or long-standing—remain informed and connected.

Another recurring theme was the importance of **grounding the partnership in a community-centered mission** that responds to the needs of a diverse library user base. As one public librarian emphasized, patrons’ needs should be met “by directly engaging with feedback from the community.” An interviewee echoed this sentiment, noting that identifying and addressing “crucial needs for students and community members” helps to overcome significant barriers. By actively incorporating community input, partnerships can ensure that their services, events, and resources remain relevant, inclusive, and responsive.

Grounding the partnership in a community-centered approach goes beyond the application of user feedback and extends to how librarians engage with patrons on a daily basis. One program participant recommended that key staff promote partnership events and resources through casual, everyday conversations with library users—not just through

formal announcements or flyers. This approach reflects a deeper commitment to relational, person-centered outreach—one that values trust-building and responsiveness just as much as information-sharing in real time. As this same Adult Education and Family Literacy Week participant suggested:

You're not trying to inundate them—it's a fine line between not being intrusive and at the same time just dropping little crumbs of interest that might spark someone's attention.

Lastly, several interviewees suggested that successful academic-public library partnerships should recognize that each institution brings unique resources, expertise, and constraints, and therefore, should focus on leveraging distinct **institutional strengths**. For this partnership in particular, libraries divided responsibilities based on capacity, expertise, and available resources—such as WCC providing the space for the programming, APLD providing the curriculum development, and MPL supporting outreach. As one interviewee explained, “we can really better serve our community [in partnership] than when we're all just trying to work in our individual parameters,” underscoring the value of collaboration that honors each partner's distinct role while working toward shared goals.

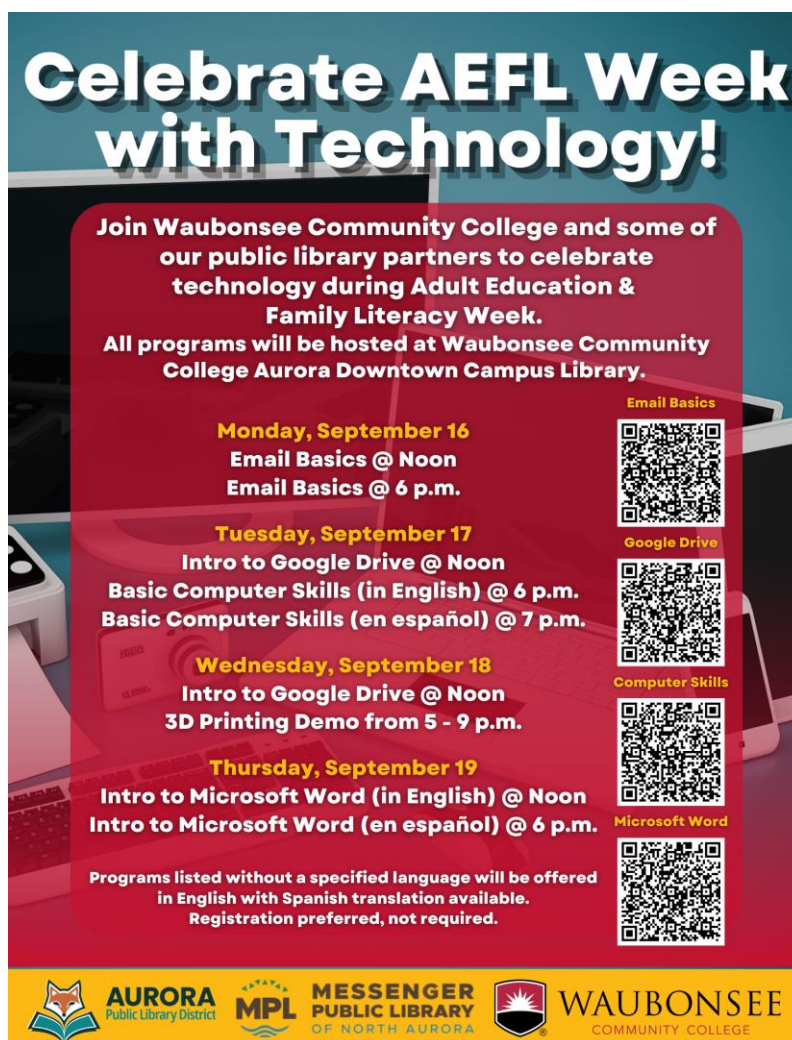
Another interviewee emphasized that effectively leveraging institutional strengths also requires being realistic about capacity, noting, “the other thing would be to also know what is on your plate and not overwhelm yourself because you can take on a bit more than you can chew sometimes.” Utilizing specific institutional strengths enabled the libraries to offer programming and resources with a smaller investment of time and staff than would be required if each institution were working independently, making participation more feasible, especially for those with limited capacity and resources. Taken together, these reflections point to the importance of partnerships that are not only collaborative but also strategic—grounded in a clear understanding of what each institution can realistically contribute.

Conclusion

This case study of the partnership between Waubonsee Community College Library and two public library systems—Aurora Public Library District and Messenger Public Library of North Aurora—highlights the potential of public and academic library partnership models to expand access to resources, foster cross-institutional collaboration, and serve the evolving needs of both students and community members. The findings reveal that shared goals, complementary strengths, and a mutual commitment to community service play a vital role in establishing partnerships that try to address digital literacy needs across a broad spectrum of patrons. Rooted in informal relationships and shaped by a spirit of cooperation, the partnership has developed into a coordinated initiative offering bilingual technology training and a practical model for inter-institutional collaboration.

The case study findings also underscore opportunities for further growth. These include improving coordination across different institutional systems, aligning outreach timelines, navigating approval processes, identifying funding sources, supporting additional basic needs, and ensuring long-term sustainability. Building on their foundational programming, the partnership could begin to explore joint programming around other basic needs to better serve community members experiencing complex challenges. The experiences of individuals involved in this partnership offer actionable lessons for other communities exploring similar models. As these libraries look to the future, their continued ability to evolve collaboratively will be key to deepening its impact. These findings will be integrated with insights from additional case studies on public-academic library partnerships to inform a broader set of strategies that can support institutions in expanding their collaborative capacity and addressing community needs more effectively.

Appendix 1: AEFL Week Flyers



Above is one of the flyers used to promote AEFL Week between Aurora Public Library District, Messenger Public Library of North Aurora, and Waubonsee Community College. As pictured, the week-long program consisted of nine classes in total. A QR code was attached to the flyer in order to make signing up for the program accessible from a cell phone or smart device, though registration for each event was not necessary for participation. Alternatively, as pictured below, library users whose first language is Spanish, could access the same flyer where all events were specified in Spanish.

¡Celebra la Semana AEFL con Tecnología!

Únase a Waubonsee Community College y a nuestros socios en las bibliotecas públicas para celebrar la tecnología para la Semana de Educación para Adultos.

Lunes - 16 de septiembre

Conceptos Básicos de Correo Electrónico a las mediodía

Email Basics



Martes - 17 de septiembre

Introducción a Google Drive a las mediodía
Habilidades Básicas de Computación (inglés) a las 6 p.m. y (español) a las 7 p.m.

Google Drive



Miércoles - 18 de septiembre

Introducción a Google Drive a las mediodía
Demostración de impresión 3D de 5 p.m. a 9 p.m.

Computer Skills



Jueves - 19 de septiembre

Introducción a Microsoft Word (inglés) a las mediodía y (español) a las 6 p.m.

Microsoft Word



Los programas sin un idioma especificado se ofrecerán en inglés con traducción en español. De preferencia sería mejor registrarse, pero no es requerido.



AURORA
Public Library District



MESSENGER
PUBLIC LIBRARY
OF NORTH AURORA



WAUBONSEE
COMMUNITY COLLEGE

Email Basics & Etiquette

Learn basic email skills and etiquette
through your local library and
Waubonsee Community College!

Monday, September 16
Noon OR 6 p.m.

Lunes 16 de septiembre a las
Mediodía o 18:00 horas

Program offered in English with Spanish
translation assistance available.
Registration preferred, not required.



Help us celebrate Adult Education and Family Literacy Week by
participating in a technology basics program at Waubonsee
Community College's Aurora Downtown Campus Library!



AURORA
Public Library District



MESSENGER
PUBLIC LIBRARY
OF NORTH AURORA



WAUBONSEE
COMMUNITY COLLEGE

The top image serves as the introduction to the "Email Basics and Etiquette" class. Just below, the Spanish version of the same class highlights the partnership's commitment to inclusivity, ensuring that language is never a barrier to learning and education.

Conceptos Básicos de Correo Electrónico y Etiqueta

¡Aprenda habilidades básicas de correo electrónico y etiqueta a través de su biblioteca local y Waubonsee Community College!

**Lunes 16 de septiembre
a las mediodía o 18:00 horas**

Programa ofrecido en inglés con
traducción en español
disponible.

De preferencia sería mejor
registrarse, pero no es requerido.



¡Ayúdenos celebrar la Semana de la Educación de Adultos participando en un programa de conceptos básicos de tecnología en la Biblioteca del Campus Aurora Downtown de Waubonsee Community College!



AURORA
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MESSENGER
PUBLIC LIBRARY
OF NORTH AURORA



WAUBONSEE
COMMUNITY COLLEGE