



# THE DIGITAL EQUITY LEADERSHIP LAB [DELL]

A CASE STUDY OF

## Community Leadership Development to Promote Digital Equity and Justice

COLIN RHINESMITH, Ph.D | October 2021

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## THE DIGITAL EQUITY LEADERSHIP LAB AS A DIGITAL JUSTICE RESPONSE

*“Despite the fact that the internet is the most powerful technology of our lifetime, we have been taught very little about how the internet, and its related technologies, work. As advocates working to close the Digital Divide in Baltimore, it’s critical that we understand how the internet and internet regulation work so that we can imagine and build new solutions for our communities.”*

Robert W. Deutsch Foundation (2021)<sup>1</sup>

In spring 2021, 25 community leaders from across Baltimore came together with national experts in areas related to network engineering, federal policymaking, community broadband networking, and grassroots organizing for a five week online program named the “Digital Equity Leadership Lab” (DELL).<sup>2</sup> The program was created by amalia deloney and staff at the Robert W. Deutsch Foundation for “city residents who want to increase their understanding of the internet and strengthen their capacity to advocate for fast, affordable and reliable broadband for all of Baltimore’s neighborhoods.”<sup>3</sup>

A May 2021 article described how DELL was created as a response to other digital inclusion programs across the U.S. that have failed to consider the technical aspects of the internet and social inequalities alongside broader internet policy and advocacy goals. As the Deutsch Foundation’s website explains,

Working on digital equity over the last 20 years, deloney has observed that residents in Baltimore understand the concept of the digital divide, but don’t grasp the power of the internet in its totality. To provide that broader lens, the five-week program covered topics including laws governing the internet, core concepts about network engineering and the workings of community internet networks, like mesh networks.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> “The Digital Equity Leadership Lab (DELL),” *Robert W. Deutsch Foundation*, accessed October 1, 2021 <https://www.rwdfoundation.org/dell>

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Donte Kirby, “This Baltimore program aims to create the next wave of digital equity leaders” *Technical.ly*, May 11, 2021, <https://technical.ly/baltimore/2021/05/11/digital-equity-leaders-lab-deutsch-foundation>



The DELL program also builds upon the Deutsch Foundation’s many years of community engagement to address the digital divide and promote social justice in Baltimore.

The DELL is rooted in the practice of learning forward, the belief that we can increase our effectiveness and results when we are part of a learning community committed to alignment, shared responsibility and continuous improvement. It is also aligned with Robert W. Deutsch Foundation’s belief that internet access is a prerequisite for social and economic inclusion.<sup>5</sup>

## GOALS OF THE DELL PROGRAM

DELL’s goals include the following:

- To convene advocates from across sectors, zip codes, disciplines, and backgrounds to share and learn together;
- To strengthen the relationships between internet advocates through meaningful interaction;
- To introduce new concepts and information that will help to advance shared goals;
- To support a culture of collaboration and encourage participants to work together to analyze and refine current solutions to digital equity challenges in their organization, and in the field;
- To encourage reflection, adaptation and innovation by learning from each other’s successes and failures.<sup>6</sup>

To achieve these goals, DELL was created as a five week virtual community-leadership development program centered on the following topics: The role of the telecom industry and the digital divide (Week 1); Network Engineering 101 (Week 2); Intro to Community Broadband Networks (Week 3); Federal Advocacy: Why Local Voices Matter (Week 4); and “Roundtable Conversations: Building The Internet We Want” with racial justice leaders (Week 5). Leaders from across the country joined each DELL session to share their expertise as guest presenters. Learning in DELL took place during virtual workshops and also throughout the week in a virtual online community platform.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>5</sup> “The Digital Equity Leadership Lab (DELL),” Robert W. Deutsch Foundation.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.



## CASE STUDY RESEARCH DESIGN

### Research Question

The purpose of this research was to investigate the Digital Equity Leadership Lab as a case study of community-based leadership development to promote digital equity and justice in Baltimore and beyond. The case study sought to examine the following research question:

*How might DELL serve as a community-based leadership training model to develop the next wave of digital equity leaders?*

The study also pursued the following additional research questions:

- **R1:** What is the role/opportunity of community leaders in shaping the internet of the future for their city? How is this different from the past?
- **R2:** What capacities are needed for local leaders to build this vision?
- **R3:** What mindset changes are needed in the “field” to accommodate new leaders whose expertise is not technical?
- **R4:** How are classes like DELL modeling the belief that Cities are the Laboratories of Democracy?
- **R5:** What is the ideal pathway for a local leader to develop these skills and enter a leadership role?
- **R6:** What scaffolding is needed to make this possible? And how can other agencies/organizations support this pathway? (i.e. fellowship program, project grants)

### Significance of Study

The case study is significant because it addresses a lack of understanding in both the scholarly literature and in practice about the role of community-based leadership development to promote digital equity and justice. By providing qualitative data and analysis, the goal of the research is to help explain how DELL’s model of community-based leadership can inform the next wave of digital equity leaders across the country. Findings from the study should also be useful for other grassroots organizers, philanthropic organizations, policymakers, and other key stakeholders interested in promoting leadership in digital equity and justice initiatives nationwide.



## Participants

15 of the 25 participants in DELL’s spring 2021 cohort participated in the study. Dr. Colin Rhinesmith and Deutsch Foundation staff recruited these individuals using a recruitment script approved by the Simmons University Institutional Review Board, which oversees research with human subjects. In addition, 4 national experts were invited to participate in the research, 3 of whom participated as guest speakers and the 4th who participated in a review of a follow-up grant application process led by the Deutsch Foundation. Lastly, 2 staff members of the Deutsch Foundation also participated in the study. The goal was to gather multiple perspectives in response to the same questions asked of each participant for the case study.

**Table 1. Participant Characteristics\***

NAME	TITLE	ORGANIZATION	PARTICIPANT TYPE
Rachel Brooks	Lead organizer	Baltimoreans United in Leadership Development	Community Leader
Liesje Gantert	Executive Director	Village Learning Place	Community Leader
Beth Harber	Senior Program Officer for Community Development and Environment	Abell Foundation	Community Leader
Aaron Kaufman	Community Projects/Community Spruce-Up Grant Program Manager	Central Baltimore Partnership	Community Leader
Leon Pinkett	Director	Baltimore Arts Realty Corporation	Community Leader
Lilian Trotman	Community Liaison; Core Member	Mount Sinai Baptist Church of Baltimore City; Re-Build Johnston Square Community Organization	Community Leader
Phillip Westry	Board Member and Vice President	Greenmount West Community Association	Community Leader
Christopher Mitchell	Director of the Community Broadband Networks Initiative	Institute for Local Self-Reliance	National Expert
Gigi Sohn	Distinguished Fellow; Senior Fellow and Public Advocate	Georgetown Law Institute for Technology Law & Policy; Benton Institute	National Expert
Greta Byrum	Co-Director; Co-Founder	Community Tech NY; Community Tech Collective	National Expert
Francella Ochillo	Executive Director	Next Century Cities	National Expert
Jane Brown	President and Executive Director	Robert W. Deutsch Foundation	RWD Staff
amalia deloney	Vice President & Director of Digital Equity	Robert W. Deutsch Foundation	RWD Staff

\* Note: Other participants were involved but chose to remain anonymous. While not included above, we acknowledge them and are equally grateful for their participation, support, and expertise.



## **Data Collection and Analysis**

Dr. Rhinesmith conducted the interviews with the participants above using an IRB approved interview protocol that was co-designed by Dr. Rhinesmith and Deutsch Foundation staff. Foundation staff scheduled the interviews at a time that was convenient for the participants. Dr. Rhinesmith led the interviews, which were recorded over Zoom. Jie Jiang and Malana Krongelb, graduate students in the Simmons University School of Library and Information and research assistants with the Community Informatics Lab, provided research support in analyzing the responses to the interview questions.

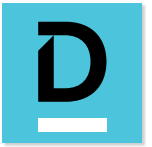
The research team in the CI Lab at Simmons analyzed the participants' responses in order to gain a better understanding of DELL participants' perspectives after having been a part of the program. This approach was not used to evaluate whether the participants developed a better sense of themselves as community leaders. Rather, the purpose was to gain their insights on these issues, after having participated in the DELL program, which certainly influenced their thinking about these topics in many cases.

## **Limitations of the Study**

The case study has several limitations. First, Dr. Rhinesmith was unable to participate in the DELL workshop sessions directly. However, he did have access to the recordings. The results of this study might have been different had Dr. Rhinesmith had an opportunity to participate in all the activities as they unfolded. Second, due mostly to time constraints, Dr. Rhinesmith was not able to interview all the participants in the DELL spring 2021 cohort, including all the outside experts that participated as guest speakers. This shortcoming also limits the overall perspectives that could have been gathered, analyzed, and reported for this study. Finally, Dr. Rhinesmith does not live in nor is he originally from Baltimore. Therefore, there is quite a bit of local cultural context and understanding that is missing from the data analysis and final reporting. Given these limitations, the case study represents a snapshot of a segment of views on the DELL program and its potential to influence similar types of programs in Baltimore and across the country to promote digital equity and justice.

## **Case Study Findings**

An analysis of the interviews with community leaders, national experts, and Deutsch Foundation staff reveals three broad themes that emerged from the qualitative data. Particularly in response to the DELL program as a community-leadership development program to promote digital equity and justice. These include the following,



1. *Bringing national policymakers and advocates together with community leaders is powerful and transformative.*
2. *Digital inequality is a social, not a technological problem.*
3. *Community leaders need access to a shared platform and to each other to create change.*

This section provides more detail in each of these three areas before moving on to a discussion and recommendations for researchers, practitioners, and policymakers.

### **Bringing National Policymakers and Advocates Together with Community Leaders Is Powerful and Transformative**

In response to questions about the role of community leaders in shaping the internet of the future for their city, almost all of the DELL participants talked about how much they were impacted by hearing the stories of former policymakers at the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) who participated in the Week 4 Session titled “Federal Advocacy: Why Local Voices Matter” with Gigi Sohn and former FCC Commissioner Mignon Clyburn. Community leaders repeatedly noted how this session and the program overall helped to demystify the internet policy process, empowering them to feel that it was possible for them to take action and get involved in shaping the internet to better serve their communities. As Rachel Brooks, Lead Organizer with Baltimoreans United in Leadership Development, explained,

We need to flip the hierarchy entirely. That’s what I think. So, whatever the head honcho sees should be held by the folks who are actually using [the internet], and then shaping policy to help people in their life, versus people who are selling it.

Several community leaders noted that after the DELL program they felt more equipped with the knowledge needed to “speak up” to ensure that internet policy is not created without them.

Other participants talked about how they believed DELL played an important role in engaging community leaders with the belief that they could help to inform policymakers and help them to get them elected to ensure that broadband access is not only available but designed and developed with their best interests in mind. Others noted that policymakers *need* community leaders to help them better understand where there are gaps in internet access. As Christopher Mitchell, Director of the Community Broadband Networks Initiative with the Institute for Local Self-Reliance, explained,



I think it's really important to have a local enthusiastic group of people that feel empowered to speak about this, because I think the people who are often empowered to speak about it are people who work in the area, often for profit companies, which I don't think is necessarily a bad thing, but they shouldn't be the only ones that feel like they're competent to to speak about these issues and how to resolve them. And so I think programs like DELL are essential to give people confidence to be able to engage in these discussions and to prioritize them on an agenda that has many different challenging items to deal with for any city.

The Deutsch Foundation staff who were interviewed for the study noticed that the DELL participants' language changed over the course of the program. Through the sessions, participants were better able to use vocabulary, identify the problems, and articulate comprehensive solutions on their own. Jane Brown, President and Executive Director of the Robert W. Deutsch Foundation noted that community leaders' power is "in their ability to inform policymakers and elected officials," and she noted that DELL helps show people they have that agency to affect change and contact policy officials as empowered citizens.

Several community leaders noted the importance of being educated about internet policy issues and having a greater awareness and understanding of how to advocate for and with their communities. In other words, community leaders felt they became more empowered to take action and to inspire others in their communities to join them after having heard the words of encouragement and support from national advocates and former FCC officials.

### **Digital Inequality Is A Social Not A Technological Problem**

The DELL program empowered community leaders to better engage internet policy and advocacy. The program also helped participants gain a deeper understanding of how the internet works, which in turn has helped them to better engage others in their communities. Several DELL participants mentioned that a critical part of internet advocacy is the ability to increase their knowledge around the "technical stuff" and its relationship to digital equity. Aaron Kaufman, Community Projects/Program Manager with the Central Baltimore Partnership, explained,

I think the fear of the Internet has to be something that we chip away because it's not going anywhere. If you want to be able to have economic mobility or social mobility or, to be able to access resources, to be able to apply for jobs, whatever it might be, the Internet is the tool of the present in the future. We need to really reduce this fear of the Internet, so that people can use it in a massive way.





Other participants mentioned that having the vocabulary and knowledge needed to engage in internet policy and advocacy can help them better articulate the issues they encounter both at the local level and with industry experts. Leon Pinkett, Director of the Baltimore Arts Realty Corporation, mentioned that with this knowledge people will be able to better organize others in their communities as well as inside companies to empower them to better advocate for and influence those within their organizations to create change.

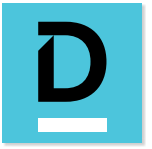
While some of the outside experts mentioned that connections between social inequalities and digital inequalities are often invisible to the general public, Next Century Cities Director Francella Ochillo added that the pandemic made digital (in)equity much more visible in ways it had previously not been for many Americans. Regardless of race or ability, Ochillo added, the digital divide is always associated with poverty. The uniquely American association of poverty being shameful adds additional barriers in addressing the digital divide.

All these perspectives are important reminders that digital inequality will not be solved by technology alone. Digital equity is a social issue that must acknowledge the historic oppression and systemic discrimination against BIPOC and/or poor communities to achieve digital justice.

### **Community Leaders Need Access to A Shared Platform and Each Other To Create Change**

Several participants recognized the critical role that the Amalia Deloney and the Deutsch Foundation played in bringing everyone together, providing the training and support for the DELL program, and being a champion to promote community leadership for digital equity and justice in Baltimore. As Leon Pinkett, explained, “It is such an asset to have a dynamo [like Amalia] who has a life of passion in this area to really push people to where they may never have been before.” However, some participants also mentioned that they wished this platform that the DELL program created could continue after the program with ongoing opportunities for community education, leadership development, and support.

Several DELL participants from Baltimore mentioned they wished they had more opportunities to spend time with each other in a social way outside of the DELL program, particularly since the DELL workshops were offered online due to the pandemic. This observation is not as much of a critique of the DELL program as it is a strong indicator of the need and desire for community leaders in Baltimore to have more access to each other during and after the program ends. In response to a related question about whether participants believed there is an ideal pathway for local leaders to develop internet advocacy and leadership skills one participant who wished to remain anonymous



mentioned that are three things that are necessary to create a shared infrastructure to promote digital equity in Baltimore: (1) a digital equity officer within the city who can lead initiatives at the city level; (2) more local groups focusing on digital equity would be helpful to begin acting as “tentacles throughout the city;” and (3) more fellowships to support the work.

Lillian Trotman, a community liaison and core member of the Mount Sinai Baptist Church of Baltimore City and the Re-Build Johnston Square Community Organization, mentioned that beyond time, money, training, and awareness of the internet policy and advocacy issues, people need access to a shared platform in order to get involved in digital equity work. As she explained,

In the community where I participate, we have, and I would call it a *strong* community organization. Because of the work that is going on in our community, we have a ten-year master plan, and people are starting to see the results. And, because they are seeing the results, more and more are coming to the meetings. This last month we had just as many people on Zoom as we had in the room. They are starting to see that we are serious about what it is that we want. So I think when you are serious and people start seeing results, they want to become a part of it.

Ms. Trotman also mentioned that everybody can contribute to digital equity work in some way. Therefore, a shared platform where other people in the community see people working together and achieving shared goals would encourage both individual and collective participation. This identification of the need for a shared platform to continue the work also indicates that participants in the DELL spring 2021 cohort expressed a desire to use the knowledge they acquired through the program to take action to create real change in their communities.



## RECOMMENDATIONS

Findings from this case study of the spring 2021 Digital Equity Leadership Lab program reveal several key ideas and action steps to advance digital equity community leadership development.

### Recommendation #1

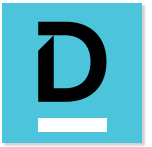
- Capacity building and train-the-trainer models are important for community leadership development, but without access to policymakers and advocates on a national level, community leaders may lack a holistic view and understanding of the problems and community-developed solutions to these problems.

The qualitative data gathered from community leaders, outside experts, and Deutsch Foundation staff emphasize the important role that community leaders play in leading digital equity and justice work. However, without a broader understanding of how the internet works, as well as how this knowledge can be used to advocate for policy changes, community leaders may not have the necessary language, framing, tools, and capacity needed to push for change on a national scale.

### Recommendation #2

- Community leadership development programs to promote digital equity and justice must provide support systems for community leaders to come together through a shared infrastructure, including both platforms to share ideas and spaces to convene, to continue the work after the training is over.

Findings from the study support the idea that “digital equity ecosystems”<sup>8</sup> matter for community leaders working to create change in their communities. This is because digital equity ecosystems recognize the importance of “interactions between individuals, populations, communities, and their larger sociotechnical environments that all play a role in shaping the digital inclusion work in local communities to promote more equitable access to technology and social and racial justice.” These interactions, or relationships, need to be cultivated and sustained over time. Identifying organizations, resources, and support within these ecosystems is vital to the success of the work.



### Recommendation #3

- Digital inclusion work is vital to help those without access to computers and the internet. However, this work must be rooted in an understanding of how power, privilege, and oppression shape digital inequality, as well as how this knowledge can be used to address systemic barriers to social and racial justice.

The qualitative data from this case study indicate participants' desire to use the knowledge gained in the DELL program to promote what I believe Wolfson, Crowell, Reyes, & Bach (2017) refer to as “emancipatory broadband adoption.”<sup>9</sup> By this, the authors mean the following,

Programs aiming to bridge the digital divide must address some of the other reasons that marginalized communities do not adopt broadband. To this end, we contend in this article that a community's relationship to communication technology—and their ability to see it as a political and cultural tool that can be utilized not just instrumentally, but more broadly as a way to fight oppression and build collective political power—is a substantial factor leading to what we call emancipatory adoption.<sup>10</sup>

This conceptualization of digital inclusion programs as having emancipatory goals can help researchers, practitioners, and policymakers to understand the importance of rooting the work within a justice framework. The idea of digital equity ecosystems offers a way to move from digital equity to digital justice, which also builds upon the Detroit Digital Justice Coalition's principles of “access, participation, common ownership, and healthy communities.”<sup>11</sup>

**8** Digital Equity Ecosystems,” *Community Informatics Lab*, accessed October 1, 2021  
<https://comminformatics.net/digital-equity-ecosystems/ert>

**9** Todd Wolfson, Jessica Crowell, Camille Reyes, and Amy Bach, “Emancipatory Broadband Adoption: Toward a Critical Theory of Digital Inequality in the Urban United States,” *Communication, Culture and Critique* 10, no. 3(2017): 441-459.

**10** *Ibid.*, p. 442.

**11** “Principles,” *Detroit Digital Justice Coalition*, accessed October 1, 2021  
<http://detroitdjc.org/principles>



## CONCLUSION

In this report, the Digital Equity Leadership Lab was presented as a case study of community leadership development to promote digital equity and justice. Community leaders, outside experts, and RWD Foundation staff provided their insights and expertise to help answer the following overarching research question: ***How might DELL serve as a community-based leadership training model to develop the next wave of digital equity leaders?***

Recommendations were provided to help advance future work and research in digital equity community leadership development. The report showed how community leaders can benefit from seeing their work within a digital equity ecosystems framework, which calls attention to the importance of embracing the interactions and growing the relationships that exist between and among individuals, populations, communities, and their broader environments that help shape this work. Lastly, the report recommends that community leaders working to advance digital equity and justice must continue to uncover the systemic discrimination of poor communities and communities of color that experience digital inequality today.