TOPS and STAT: Two PT3 Bridges for the Digital Divide

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Aligning Credentialing with Technology Training (ACTT Now) is a Preparing Tomorrow’s Teachers to Use Technology (PT3) project partnering Brunswick County Public Schools, a k-12 district in rural Southside Virginia, with Old Dominion University’s Darden College of Education. It is intended to counter the effects of the digital divide felt so profoundly in this region. ACTT Now consists of five major components:

1. An internship program for Old Dominion’s pre-service teachers
2. A field-based masters degree program for Brunswick’s uncertified and provisionally certified teachers
3. Technology Opportunities for Parents and Students (TOPS): An evening technology-training program for Brunswick County community members
4. Student Technology Assistance Teams (STAT) and
5. Technology Training for Old Dominion’s Methods Faculty

Despite the dismal statistics of its community, including one of the highest illiteracy rates in Virginia, Brunswick County Public Schools has emerged as a leader in technology. Through the innovative leadership of the technology department, Brunswick County has acquired technology resources parallel to those in the rich districts surrounding the nation’s capital. Four instructional technology specialists and the director of technology work to help teachers integrate these new tools into their classrooms and curricula. Now in partnership with Old Dominion University, Brunswick has improved resources with which to accomplish this mission.

Old Dominion University’s Darden College of Education has been a technology leader for the past decade. Its Teletechnet program brings 4-year degree program to students in remote areas throughout Virginia and the nation. Previously focused on the development of the urban area of Hampton Roads, the Darden College of Education now has an opportunity to expand its reach into the surrounding rural communities that are greatly in need of educational and economic resources.

This paper will focus on two ACTT Now initiatives aimed specifically at increasing the technological proficiency of Brunswick’s population: TOPS and STAT. Technology Opportunities for Parents and Students (TOPS) offers free technology classes for adult community members in Brunswick County and entices them to participate with free dinner, child care and nightly raffles prizes. While parents and grandparents are learning basic computer skills, their children are engaged in crafts, games and technology activities of their own. What makes TOPS truly a learning experience at all levels is the instructors. Brunswick teachers participating in ODU’s field-based masters program serve as the adult and student instructors in the TOPS programs, helping the teachers to reinforce their own technology skills and building a stronger bond between the community and the schools. Providing a needed service to their community, Brunswick teachers take pride in their efforts and contribute to the emergence of a technology culture in the county.

Student Technology Assistance Teams (STAT) likewise focus on helping different populations simultaneously. Many good teachers are reluctant to use technology in their classrooms. STAT provides in-classroom support to teachers when and where they need it. At the same time, STAT students learn responsibility and earn respect from their teachers and peers as the take on new roles as technology helpers. STAT encourages Brunswick’s students to explore information technology jobs and programs, a field where undoubtedly, a significant proportion of future jobs will lie. Working as part of STAT, students gain valuable and marketable experience that will give them a head start toward a future career.

Through the efforts of the ACTT Now project staff, STAT and TOPS are working to bridge the digital gap in Brunswick County. As works in progress, these two initiatives are experiencing successes and setbacks. The paper will explore both. Data collected by the project manager and ACTT Now’s external evaluator will be presented to analyze the effects of these two initiatives on the technology literacy and the self-efficacy of Brunswick’s population.