

## Equity-Based Grant Administration at NTIA: A Case Study

The Internet powers education and the economy, supports our health and well-being, and connects us to our neighbors and those we love. **Americans without Internet miss out** on many of these benefits. The Bipartisan Infrastructure Law of 2021 provides **\$65 billion in funding** to connect everyone in America to affordable, reliable high-speed Internet. The goal of these programs is to achieve *Internet for All* and digital equity through improved access and intentional, inclusive planning that leads to effective, impactful outcomes. **Everyone in America should have access** to reliable and affordable high-speed Internet.

Four agencies are leading the historic effort to connect the entire nation and provide *Internet for All*. This case study captures insights from **the U.S. Department of Commerce’s National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA)**.

*“High-speed Internet is no longer a luxury – it is necessary for Americans to do their jobs, to participate equally in school, access health care, and to stay connected with family and friends.”*

President Joseph R. Biden

NTIA is principally responsible by law for advising the President on telecommunications and information policy issues, and acts as the driving force of the Biden-Harris Administration’s *Internet for All* initiative.

NTIA’s programs and policymaking focus largely on expanding broadband Internet access and adoption in America and ensuring that the Internet **remains an engine for continued innovation and economic growth**. One hallmark of this responsibility is **NTIA’s mission to bridge the digital divide** in access to and meaningful use of high-speed Internet service. The digital divide “is a barrier to the economic competitiveness of the United States and equitable distribution of essential public services, including health care and education”<sup>1</sup> that “disproportionately affects communities of color, lower-income areas, and rural areas, and the benefits of broadband should be broadly enjoyed by all.”<sup>2</sup>

NTIA knows that meaningfully connecting everyone in America requires more than Internet access alone. **All people and communities must also have the skills, technology, and capacity needed** to reap the full benefits of our digital economy, which cannot be achieved through a one-size-fits-all approach.

To accomplish this, NTIA is implementing programs funded by the Consolidated Appropriations Act (CAA) and the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA), both enacted in 2021. The CAA established the Office of Minority Broadband Initiatives (OMBI) and authorized the Connecting Minority Communities (CMC) Pilot Program.

**NTIA established OMBI to promote equitable high-speed Internet access and adoption** within minority communities across the United States. Its mission is to support and administer federal programs that expand access, adoption and use of high-speed Internet services and other digital opportunities equitably across the United States.

OMBI’s motivating vision, implemented in part through the CMC Pilot Program, is “to achieve digital equity for minority communities across the United States by supporting and building capacity in Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), Tribal Colleges and Universities (TCUs), and Minority Serving Institutions (MSIs) as catalysts for the expansion of broadband access.”<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> [Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act](#), Pub.L. 117-58.

<sup>2</sup> *Idem*.

<sup>3</sup> [Office of Minority Broadband Initiatives 2022 Report](#), BroadbandUSA (National Telecommunications & Information Administration), accessed December 11, 2023.

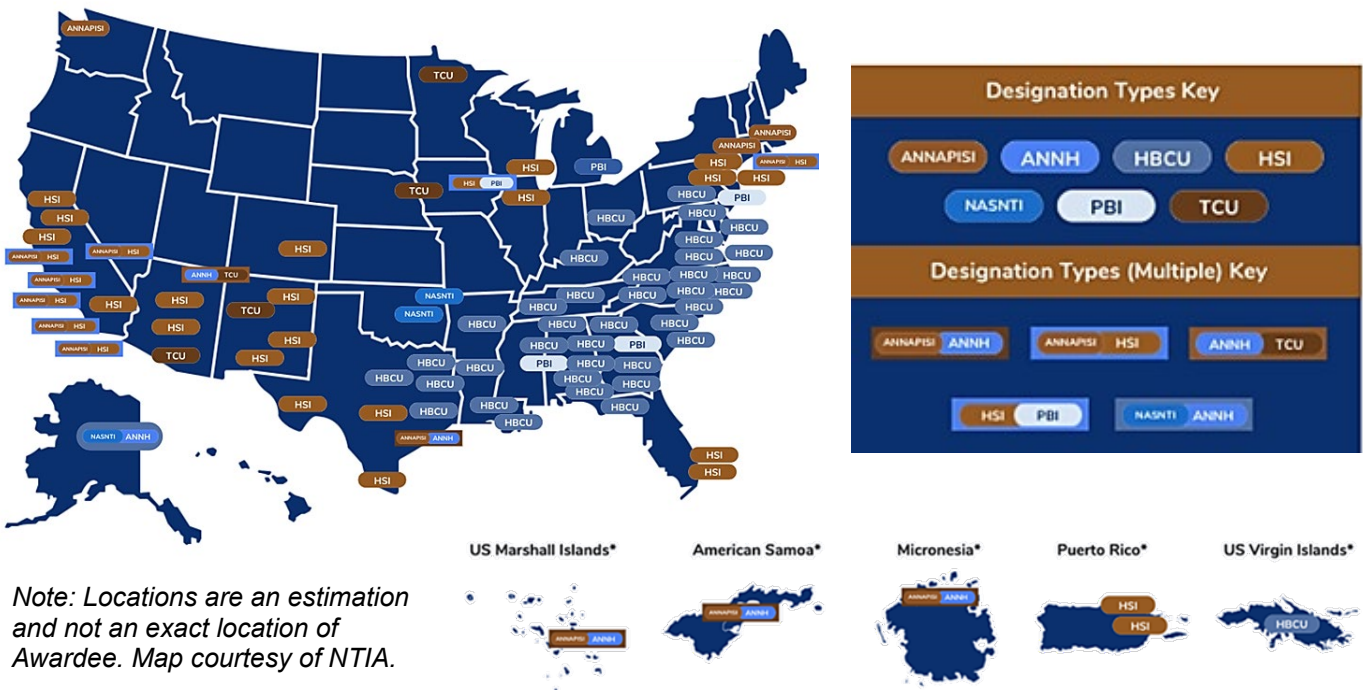
This vision is also evident in OMBI’s public outreach efforts, stakeholder engagements, and grant program administration focus on digital equity. OMBI is responsible for guiding a whole-of-government approach to achieve digital equity in unserved and underserved communities, directly addressing the lack of high-speed Internet access, connectivity, adoption, and equity across the nation. Building upon a longstanding commitment<sup>4</sup> to increase digital opportunities and connectivity in minority communities, OMBI is helping to achieve NTIA and the entire Biden-Harris Administration's goal of *Internet for All*.

## The Connecting Minority Communities Pilot Program

The CMC Pilot Program is a \$268 million grant program to expand access to high-speed Internet service and digital opportunities to Historically Black Colleges and universities (HBCUs), Tribal Colleges and Universities (TCUs), and Minority Serving Institutions (MSIs) and the anchor communities located near an HBCU, TCU, or MSI. This effort is achieved through:

- The purchase of high-speed Internet access service
- The distribution of eligible equipment
- The hiring and training of Internet technology personnel

Now in the post-award phase, the CMC Pilot Program awarded grants to 93 colleges and universities, including 43 HBCUs, 31 Hispanic Serving Institutions (HSIs), 21 MSIs, and five TCUs between August 1, 2022, and March 1, 2023. **Altogether, the grantees represent 36 States and Territories.**



*Note: Locations are an estimation and not an exact location of Awardee. Map courtesy of NTIA.*

<sup>4</sup> In 2019, NTIA started the Minority Broadband Initiative (MBI) to advance OIG's four interconnected goals. MBI worked with HBCUs to increase on-campus digital inclusion and create awareness of broadband grant opportunities. By partnering with federal, local, and private partners, MBI prepared HBCUs and their surrounding communities for future high-speed Internet expansion efforts.

## Catalyzing Change and Connecting Community Anchor Institutions

The CMC Pilot Program grant recipients have **close, trusted relationships and partnerships with organizations in their surrounding communities**. The CMC Pilot Program grant recipients are HBCUs, MSIs, and TCUs. The grant statute allows these colleges and universities to serve their anchor communities with programs to impact access to high-speed Internet service. An anchor community is considered any area that is not more than 15 miles from a historically Black College or University, a Tribal College or University, or a Minority-serving Institution; and has an estimated median annual household income (based on U.S. Census Bureau American Community Survey data) of not more than 250 percent of the poverty line, as that term is defined in section 673(2) of the Community Services Block Grant Act (42 U.S.C. 9902(2)).

With these colleges and universities working in anchor communities, they are able to leverage their economic power alongside their human and intellectual resources to improve the long-term health and social welfare of their communities. Through the CMC Pilot Program, the grantees use the program to support activities that improve high-speed Internet use and adoption, such as subsidizing high-speed Internet; conducting digital skills trainings; increasing access to equipment for remote learning, telehealth, and telemedicine access; facilitating cybersecurity training and opportunities; furnishing technology hubs; and fostering telework, entrepreneurship, and economic development.

**The colleges and universities already have a thorough understanding of the existing barriers** to economic and social opportunities, the specific needs within each community to access those opportunities, and how to effectively reach underserved populations. In short, **building grant administration around colleges and universities is efficient, productive, and equitable**.

From its beginning, the CMC Pilot Program focused on educational institutions (HBCUs, MSIs, and TCUs) embedded within communities where NTIA previously found evidence of “persistent disparities in digital access and adoption based on race and ethnicity.”<sup>5</sup> **CMC Pilot Program grant recipients are uniquely established as the bedrock of their communities** and can quickly implement projects to meet the unique needs of their surrounding area.

**With the deep understanding of the larger impact of community anchor institutions, OMBI has been able to reach more minority communities and better address the barriers to connectivity.**

## Technical Assistance and Knowledge Sharing: Additional Considerations for Affecting Change

The OMBI Broadband Program Specialists that lead and staff the CMC Pilot Program as Federal Program Officers (FPO) bring their deep experience in equity in grantmaking to shape the design and implementation of the program. These insights align in large part with practices found in the grantmaking field that may accelerate equitable grantmaking.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Idem.

<sup>6</sup> [Five Accelerators of Equitable Grantmaking and How to Harness Them](#), Stanford Social Innovation Review, accessed December 15, 2023.

The CMC Pilot Program design implemented within the statutes enabled the grantees to meet **the unique needs of the communities the program serves**. A CMC Pilot Program FPO describes it this way:

*“What I think is very unique about CMC is [we] really focused on turning [our approach to program design] around. Rather we went to the communities and asked the communities what they need to fix the barriers and challenges to broadband. We wanted the colleges and universities to focus on their needs and what the community needs to be successful. That's why we have 93 different grantees approaching the same problem in 93 different ways. The awardees are adapting and tailoring the projects to the needs that they see in their community. And so instead of a big organization coming down and saying this is how we want you to do it because we know better. Instead, we flipped that around and said what do you need to be successful, and we started with asking them to tell us what they need to achieve broadband access.”*

**Dr. Juan Sanchez, OMBI Federal Program Officer, December 12, 2023**

OMBI engages two practices to inform strategies for equity in grantmaking: ensuring adequate technical assistance is available to potential applicants and sharing lessons on doing so with other agencies for success.

First, as with the CMC Pilot Program and other *Internet for All* programs, **it is essential for the agency to provide technical assistance to support the preparation of the grant proposals**. Knowledge sharing has been crucial for the CMC Pilot Program; as part of these efforts, the team provided a series of eight webinars and technical assistance sessions, and related materials, and uploaded these to the website.<sup>7</sup> The site also included a series of Frequently Ask Questions documents to assist proposal teams.

The CMC Pilot Program team also provided extensive technical assistance to **help the colleges and university grant proposal teams use key data to inform their proposals**. For CMC Pilot Program proposals, the proposal team was required to identify anchor communities that are within a 15-mile radius of each eligible HBCU, TCU, or MSI and that meet the estimated median annual household income of not more than 250 percent of the poverty level. The details of NTIA's method to determine this were published in the Connecting Minority Communities Pilot Program Notice of Funding Opportunity Announcement (August 3, 2021).

The CMC Pilot Program team focused on **empowering community members to use publicly available data from the federal government**. The CMC Pilot Program proposal teams often struggled with telling the story of the needs of their communities with data from federal sources, such as the U.S. Census Bureau or the various broadband data sets from NTIA and the Federal Communications Commission. As a result, the CMC Pilot Program team provided the Anchor Community Eligibility Dashboard as an additional tool to support proposal development.<sup>8</sup> This dashboard is a GIS-based platform that made it easy for proposal teams to retrieve federal data to describe details about the anchor communities. Further, the team provided an additional series of webinars that included technical **assistance to show communities how to use data about their community to make their own plans**.

<sup>7</sup> [Connecting Minority Communities Program Webinar and Assistance Sessions Archive](#), BroadbandUSA (National Telecommunications & Information Administration), accessed December 15, 2023.

<sup>8</sup> [Connecting Minority Communities – Anchor Community Eligibility Dashboard](#), ArcGIS (National Telecommunications & Information Administration), accessed December 20, 2023.



## Success at Oklahoma State University Institute of Technology

Oklahoma State University Institute of Technology (OSUIT), located in Okmulgee, OK, was **one of the first awards made in the CMC Pilot Program** in 2022. OSUIT's project, "Investing in Student Success and Increasing Minority Workforce Participation Program," began on August 1, 2022, and is scheduled to end on July 31, 2024. Now past the halfway point in their period of performance, the \$755,000 project has made a real impact in the lives of OSUIT students and anchor community members.

Through their CMC Pilot Program grant, **OSUIT aims to address two critical issues faced by Oklahoma's low-income, rural communities:** 1) the availability of broadband services, and 2) a lack of skilled workers and training programs for fiber technicians. Since 2010, Oklahoma has made great strides in increasing broadband availability services.<sup>9</sup>

**However, there are still communities where access is limited.**

Additionally, the lack of a skilled workforce and broadband access has negatively impacted the local labor markets and business in low-income, rural areas. The project serves the student population and anchor communities in the 15-mile radius surrounding OSUIT, an area facing considerable financial challenges: 37 percent of OSUIT students were Pell Grant-eligible during the 2020-2021 school year, and in the anchor communities, the median income is less than 250 percent of the federal poverty line.<sup>10</sup>

One way that OSUIT is addressing these issues is through the implementation of an on-campus fiber technician training program that teaches students to install fiber using equipment purchased with grant funds. The training program consists of four courses over eight weeks, and students receive a certification after completing the training program. Phashad Williams, 23, completed the program and shared how it has impacted his life and plans for his future.

Phashad had his grandfather, Harold Cottrell, in mind when he enrolled in the training program. Harold was the first Black line supervisor for an electric company in Oklahoma and was also one of the first Black Journeyman in the state. Phashad grew up hearing his grandfather's stories of climbing the poles. After participating in the two-month fiber technician course, **Phashad went from knowing nothing about fiber to impressing companies with his insights.** "There's so many different avenues you can take – you can stay in the field, or you can go into the network side of things. You can take so many different paths," Phashad said.<sup>11</sup>



*Phashad is one of more than 75 students who have benefited from OSUIT's fiber technician training program. The courses are designed to provide quality training to individuals for in-demand, high-wage job placements with the goal of creating a pipeline of skilled workers for the growing fiber industry. Photo courtesy of Phashad Williams.*

<sup>9</sup> Connecting Minority Communities Pilot Program Grant Application Project Narrative, Oklahoma State University Institute of Technology, submitted November 19, 2021, accessed December 11, 2023.

<sup>10</sup> Idem.

<sup>11</sup> [ConnectingUS: A modern take on the family tradition](#), InternetForAll.gov (National Telecommunications & Information Administration), accessed December 11, 2023.

OSUIT’s fiber technician training program has welcomed **more than 75 students** since the start of its CMC Pilot Program project. OSUIT reported that some students who have completed the course have been placed into fiber industry jobs, and others have decided to pursue a degree. The course has given students the confidence to pursue rewarding careers. **Approximately 30 students have completed the course and received their fiber technician certification.**

OSUIT has also **deployed 92 hotspots to low-income, in-need students and community members** as a part of their CMC Pilot Program project. One beneficiary of the hotspot deployments is Victoria Wilson.

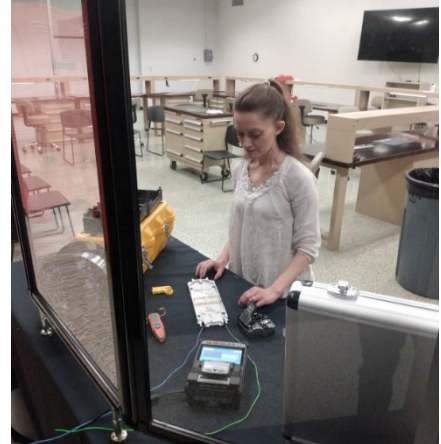
Victoria is a 35-year-old single mom who lives in rural Okmulgee, and **while there’s finally an option for Internet service in her area, she can’t afford it.** For Victoria, Internet access meant earning her degree, starting a new career, and finding a new way to help others.

Before the OSUIT wireless hotspot lending program began, Victoria relied on a free wireless Internet hotspot to help her attend online classes and do her homework at OSUIT. Victoria would borrow hotspots from the library for two weeks at a time. **But that came with challenges** – she doesn’t have a car, she had to rely on public transit to get to the library, and there were times when the library didn’t have any hotspots to lend.

Thanks to OSUIT’s wireless hotspot lending program, **Victoria graduated with an associate degree in April 2023.** Her next goal: finding a job with a workforce development program.

“I want to help people find their way, help people find jobs, and find out what they want to do, Victoria said. “I can show them how I came to find out what I want to do. I want to help people find themselves.”

She added, **“Having access to the Internet is important for everybody.** You can do more of your schooling, you can look for jobs, you can find things you wouldn’t be able to find without the Internet. **Who doesn’t need the Internet?”**<sup>12</sup>



*NTIA’s CMC Pilot Program award to OSUIT helped pay for the equipment used by former fiber technician training program student Tonya Felsinger. Photo courtesy of OSUIT.*



*“Being able to utilize the NTIA hotspot as a full-time student has helped me a lot. It helps me to fulfill all my duties I need to do my homework. It’s helping me to graduate.” Photo courtesy of Victoria Wilson.*

<sup>12</sup> [ConnectingUS: A hotspot puts graduation in reach](#), InternetForAll.gov (National Telecommunications & Information Administration), accessed December 17, 2023.