PROJECT PROPOSAL - Advancing Digital Literacy in Barton County and Central Kansas

Executive Summary

Barton Community College (BCC) has been educating students in rural Kansas for over 50 years. Barton's service area includes seven counties: Barton, Ellsworth, Pawnee, Rice, Rush, Russell, and Stafford. Barton offers certificate and degree options in Computer Information Systems, Computer Science, Networking Specialist, and Network Security Specialist, in addition to customized training for the community.

Barton County residents are living in an "economically distressed" county, and many possess a significant lack of digital literacy skills. The remaining six counties in Barton's service area are also designated as "economically distressed." The "Advancing Digital Literacy in Barton County and Central Kansas" project will allow area residents and justice-involved individuals to receive training in digital literacy skills and proficiency in dealing with online privacy and cybersecurity issues.

BCC will work with the Great Bend Economic Development office, Chamber of Commerce, and workforce center (Kansas WorkforceOne) to identify the current digital literacy of Barton County residents in the first year, with a plan to expand access to the remaining counties in the second year. This project will serve 1,500 community members and justice-involved individuals over two years, and 75% will successfully complete their training. Expenses include purchasing computer devices, hiring a coordinator and training facilitator, purchasing digital literacy curriculum and site licenses, and securing classroom space. Barton is providing an applicant match of $12,500 and requests a one-time grant of $237,500 from the Kansas Office of Broadband Development.

Description of location

During the first year of the grant period, Barton Community College will offer county-wide digital literacy training in easily accessible locations in Great Bend. Surrounding community residents, including Ellinwood and Hoisington, will also be included. Collaboration with the Great Bend Economic Development office, Kansas WorkforceOne, and the Chamber of Commerce will allow opportunities to access training at venues such as the local library, senior center, churches, and Barton's downtown office space to provide flexibility for participants.

Computer devices will be accessible to each participant during class and available for "check out" to take home for assignment completion and exam preparation until the next class period.

Through such options as rudimentary computer training and Microsoft Office certifications at all skill levels provided by Certiport's IC3 Digital Literacy Certification program, the local community will increase its knowledge of computers and technology, including online safety skills.

During the second grant year, additional outreach to the seven-county service area will provide training opportunities for more people, expanding the impact of digital literacy. Counties impacted are Barton, Russell, Rush, Pawnee, Ellsworth, Rice, and Stafford.

Goals of the project

Barton County faces many challenges, with a poverty percentage higher than the state average. According to the U.S. Census Bureau (https://www.census.gov), 14% of Barton County's residents live in poverty. Many cannot buy a home computer or afford the cost of internet service. Elderly citizens, who comprise 21% of Barton County, may be intimidated by devices such as desktop computers and laptops; they may have acquired basic iPhone or Android phone skills out of necessity but want to feel comfortable using a home computer or other device. Recently, BCC hosted a Microsoft Excel training for the local community. A review of the post-training evaluations revealed a surprising request – several people shared that they needed and would gladly pay for basic Microsoft Word training!

Other demographic groups are affected as well. A surprising number of high school students and young adults may feel comfortable with a computer and keyboard but lack word processing and other basic skills. The Hispanic population, which comprises nearly 25% of Great Bend's population, has similar needs in every age bracket.

This lack of basic computer skills places substantial roadblocks to success in the way of each subgroup, causing difficulty obtaining education, employment, or advancing in their current careers. Two central problems can be attributed to the lack of funding to purchase technology and a lack of digital literacy skills. The goals of our digital literacy project are to:

- Increase physical navigation and operation of digital tools, structures, and conventions.
- Increase knowledge and skills in using digital tools safely, effectively, and appropriately while advocating safety and well-being online. Staying safe online, personal wellbeing, protecting digital systems and devices.
- Create employment opportunities by enhancing individual digital literacy and skills.
- Increase the number of individuals in Barton County and the surrounding area with Certiport IC3 certifications in Microsoft Office (Level 1, 2, 3). Certiport trainings are also available in Spanish to accommodate Spanish-speaking participants.

Barton's digital literacy project will provide training opportunities for 1,000 community members plus 500 justice-involved individuals during the grant period. The following methods will successfully complete our project:

- Collaborating with the Great Bend Chamber of Commerce, Economic Development office, and Kansas WorkforceOne to identify the current digital literacy of Barton County residents
- Hiring a trainer/facilitator to oversee training sessions and assist participants
- Creating classroom content specific to each type of training offered
- Purchasing a supply of laptops and Chromebooks for classroom and individual use
- Securing an interpreter to assist Spanish-speaking participants in the classroom
- Offering daytime, weekend, and evening classes in:
  - Phone safety and use
  - Computer safety and cybersecurity, including staying safe online, supporting personal well-being, and protecting digital systems and devices

Short and long-term benefits to the community
The "Advancing Digital Literacy in Barton County and Central Kansas" project will allow a minimum of 1,500 area residents and justice-involved individuals to receive training in digital literacy skills. 75% (1,125) will receive a 70% or higher test score.

The project will also increase awareness and proficiency in online privacy and cybersecurity issues. 75% (1,125) of participants will receive a test score of 70% or higher.

The attainment of Digital Literacy Skills at all levels will enable participants to engage in technology confidently, obtain skills that will make them more competitive in the workplace, and begin a journey into higher education if that is their goal. Our community partners are confident that the demand will surpass our estimate, and the project will have a much more significant and longer-lasting impact on the area than we initially anticipated.

Community engagement strategies and public awareness
Barton Community College will collaborate with the Great Bend Economic Development office, WorkforceOne Center, and the Chamber of Commerce to distribute surveys community-wide to assess the specific types of training needed. The following resources will be used to raise awareness:

- BCC Promotion, including digital, print, and radio ads created by the communications department
- Great Bend Economic Development office, Kansas WorkforceOne, and Chamber of Commerce promotion
- Public speaking engagements by all partners to spread awareness, including meetings with area business and industry partners

**Concise summary of applicant's organization, detailing its history, mission, and primary
objectives**

Barton's History: Barton Community College opened its doors in 1969 and has been educating students in rural KS for over 50 years. BCC is located four miles from Great Bend, and its service area includes seven rural counties, including Barton, Ellsworth, Pawnee, Rice, Rush, Russell, and Stafford. Educational offerings include Career Technical Education certificates, degrees, and Academic transfer degrees.

Barton's Mission Statement: "Barton offers exceptional and affordable learning opportunities supporting student, community, and employee needs. " Our goals and aspirations align with the **primary objectives** of this project, as it will provide opportunities for the community to:

- engage in technology with confidence
- obtain skills that will make them more competitive in the workplace
- begin a journey into higher education.

Organization's experience in providing digital literacy and skills training to individuals and/or communities

Barton Community College has provided students and the community with decades of digital literacy and skills training. BCC's Computer Concepts course is one example. It is available to all enrolled students and provides a thorough overview of Microsoft applications. Barton also offers certificate and degree options in Computer Information Systems, Computer Science, Networking Specialist, and Network Security Specialist.

Barton's Workforce Training and Community Education division provides training to the community through customized training that can be tailored to fit the needs of an individual or group of employers. Training courses are also crafted and marketed to the community and are offered in the evenings and weekends to provide flexibility for those who work during the day. Attendees are surveyed to assess additional future training needs.