

Conclusion:

Lessons for All

The projects described in this report are successful in part because they all sprang from grass-roots efforts by people throughout rural America to improve their own lives and shape their own futures. But in the process, they have accomplished much more: they have generated a rich body of experience that offers lessons to people not only in rural areas, but in urban and suburban parts of the country as well.

The Navajo people, for instance, have demonstrated that with hard work, imagination, and flexibility, even the most difficult barriers to getting connected can be bridged. As the Navajos have shown, communications technology is changing so rapidly that problems that seemed intractable yesterday almost certainly will become manageable tomorrow. Mayville State University (MSU), meanwhile, is showing that areas in danger of being left behind can participate in the new information economy — and that major institutions, especially universities, play a crucial role in assuring that they do. Like MSU, universities and other institutions can demonstrate the value of information technology, train a workforce and populace to take advantage of it, and help aggregate sufficient demand to attract modern communications services to out-of-the-way places.

The Sevier River Water Users Association and the Coastal Economic Development Corporation demonstrate that information itself is a key community asset. In Utah, the collection and distribution of timely information about the supply and flow of water through an entire river basin is enabling farmers to stretch a precious but limited resource farther than ever seemed possible. And in Maine, the careful collection and distribution of information about an even more precious community asset — people — is enabling agencies to improve their services and greatly increase the chances that social programs will produce lasting benefits for clients and society as a whole.

The Regional Medical Center at Lubec and the University of Vermont's Fletcher Allen Health Care hospital represent important chapters in a growing encyclopedia of knowledge about telemedicine. But in a field already dominated by technology, one of the most valuable lessons they offer is decidedly non-technical. In both projects, the key to success in telemedicine is the successful cultivation of human relationships — in this case, relationships among doctors and other care providers who must overcome fears and learn new ways to cooperate. Indeed, officials in tiny and isolated Lubec have become statewide leaders in telemedicine. They owe their growing stature in large part to their emphasis on building trust, their assiduous encouragement of openness and sharing, and their willingness to eschew any efforts at self-aggrandizement.

Marshall University and North Dakota State University offer another kind of insight. Like other projects described in this report, they are demonstrating that technology can help institutions improve how they serve the public — Marshall by offering teachers a new way to relate to students, and NDSU by giving extension agents a chance to improve themselves and better help their communities. But they also demonstrate that institutions must change themselves in order to realize their newfound potential. Others eager to use technology should pay close attention to the challenges these universities face, and to the ideas they produce for producing institutional change.

Finally, Virtual Chautauqua and Dance Partners, besides exploring how to make the arts more accessible in rural areas, offer insights into how to plan and manage new technology projects. Virtual Chautauqua demonstrates that a project sometimes succeeds not by perpetuating itself, but by learning from its experience and selflessly applying those lessons in the future. Dance Partners, for its part, reflects the kind of creativity, commitment, flexibility, and imagination required to take a seemingly outlandish idea and make it happen. Like dance itself, these qualities make experimentation with information technology continuously exciting and uplifting.