



# Community Development: Washington D.C.

## School Impact Story: OneEconomy / Digital Connectors

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One Economy is a global nonprofit whose mission is to connect underserved communities with information that can improve their lives.

The organization brings broadband access and online resources to low-income households. It also immerses teenagers and young adults in technology through the Digital Connectors program, which was launched in the U.S. in 2001.

To date, more than 1,200 students, ages 14 to 21, have become “Digital Connectors,” and given more than 42,000 hours of service to their communities.

One Economy has accomplished this through strong public-private partnerships. One of these long-standing partnerships is with Cisco. This partnership is focused on bringing Internet access to subsidized housing, and building an award-winning information portal for low-income families.

Now Cisco and One Economy are working together to engage young people in schools across the United States through the Digital Connectors program and Cisco® Networking Academy.®

This endeavor focuses on improving socio-economic conditions by increasing access

to education and career opportunities. It is the perfect marriage of two missions.

Headquartered in Washington D.C., One Economy’s vice president of Social Innovations, Karla Ballard, says:

“[The integration of the Networking Academy curriculum is] a defining moment in our ability to involve young people in Digital Connectors. Cisco has taken the impact of our program to a whole new level. We can bring our program into the school setting and meet students where they are. We can help kids and young adults train for and find first-rate jobs utilizing technology in all kinds of fields.”

The scale of the collaboration matches the ambitions of One Economy's vision for global information accessibility for the isolated and underserved. During the first year of this program, One Economy estimates they will be able to set up 100 new Networking Academy programs in schools across the United States.

When the idea for this program was conceived back in 2009, the team from One Economy reached out to Robert Meyers, a Networking Academy instructor at the West Virginia University (WVU) Office of Information Technology. Bob is also assistant director for the Cisco Networking Academy Training Center, which provides regional academy instructor training and support. "We were impressed by the quality of the academy courses that Bob had developed at WVU," says Karla.

After months of planning, One Economy unveiled the new 130–170 hours of coursework covering several modules: a leadership development track, media literacy track, a financial literacy course, the Cisco IT Essentials course, and a final project that gives students many choices for exercising their creativity, knowledge and leadership skills.

IT Essentials covers the fundamentals of PC technology, networking and security. Digital Connectors students who take the course will learn to assemble a computer system,

install software, and troubleshoot systems. Hands-on labs will help students develop critical thinking and problem-solving skills.

**Teachers make the vision a reality.** Creating the leaders of tomorrow first requires creating a leadership training team. To open 100 academies meant that One Economy had to recruit, train, and certify over 100 instructors. Training and salaries are paid for as part of a grant from the Broadband Opportunity Coalition. The instructors come from all walks of life – engineers, community college and university teachers, and people with an interest in technology and teaching who were looking for part-time jobs.

Chris McInnis, manager of Technical Training for Digital Connectors, is in charge of the ambitious training program, which uses a blended learning environment that combines hands-on labs, webinars and online coursework. Chris says:

"For some of the instructors, this is a refresh opportunity. For others, this is their first intensive networking instruction. Many of the teachers in the program have already expressed an interest in additional courses and obtaining their Cisco CCNA® and Cisco CCNP® certifications. On the way to inspiring the students, our program is also inspiring teachers. That is an unexpected, exciting bonus."

Digital Connectors students from low-income areas will start taking courses in Summer 2011. The students receive a stipend while they are studying, and track their attendance with an electronic timesheet. Course completion, while a significant achievement for these young people, is not the only goal. The Connectors Club, a private social networking and information portal created by One Economy, is expanding to allow students to log course success and volunteer hours, write blogs, post resumes and portfolios, and upload community and journalism videos that they have created with the Flip™ video camcorders donated by Cisco.

"Through the Connectors Club portal, we envision that students will track their coursework and volunteer time in the community, and build a portfolio for future job searches," says Karla. "We will structure the portal so that prospective employers can post jobs for graduates, and review student resumes and portfolios. We hope to break new ground in the way students build multimedia portfolios even before they tackle a competitive job market.

Karla Ballard sums up the value this way: "We want to greatly enhance the workforce development impact of our program. Cisco Networking Academy allows us to take Digital Connectors students to that next level, by delivering education and training that prepares our students for high-paying, competitive jobs. It is the most exciting evolution of the Digital Connectors vision. This is going to change so many lives in such an extraordinary way."