TechVenture: Removing Barriers Through Outreach

Provided by Mount Vernon City Library (Wash.)

URBAN LIBRARIES COUNCIL

HOW WE STARTED

Concept

Programming to give low-income middle schoolers exposure to STEM concepts using hands-on learning and virtual reality activities.

Goals

- Reach rural, low-income students with STEM programming.
- Increase awareness and interest in STEM among local middle schoolers.
- Remove equity barriers to increase participation in STEM programming.

Locations

Two local middle schools.

Timeline

Weekly 90-minute sessions held during afterschool hours for a total of five weeks.

Partners

- Mount Vernon School District.
- The Kulshan Creek Neighborhood Station's afterschool program.
- The Boys & Girls Club of Skagit County.

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HOW WE STARTED ▸ **HOW IT WORKED** ▸ **WHAT WE LEARNED**

HOW IT WORKED

Locating Programs at Schools

- The library hosted their programming at local middle schools in order to make it more accessible, since the target population lacked safe transportation methods for getting to the library.

- School staff helped to facilitate the STEM programming.

- Virtual reality technology was set up at the schools during lunch and free periods to ensure opportunities for access.

Leveraging Partners to Recruit Participants

- The Mount Vernon School District recruited program participants from the Boys & Girls Club of Skagit County and the Kulshan Creek Neighborhood Station's afterschool program.

- These organizations were ideal partners for recruiting program participants since they serve low-income students in rural areas, are located near the participating middle schools and had existing connections to those schools.

Exciting and Engaging Learners

Program activities were:

- Led by the students; staff acted more as facilitators rather than teachers.

- Connected to the library's local community issues. The library took summer camp programming into the community to engage underserved tweens that were hard to reach previously.

- Focused on uncommon technology, like virtual reality.

- Centered around STEM career exploration.

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WHAT WE LEARNED

Evaluation Methods

The participants' experiences were evaluated with:

- Informal observation during programming.

- Open-ended questions that participants would respond to using Post-it Notes.

Lessons Learned

- Bringing materials from the library to the school required considerable time and staff capacity.

- Participants preferred more career-oriented programming over recreational programming.

- Many of the activities promoted organic student mentorship.

- TechVenture has helped the library staff learn how to better communicate with partners and build more sustainable partnerships. Having a specific partner who works directly with the underserved Latino community led to more success.

- By leveraging a partnership with a school representative, the library was able to easily communicate the grant's plan and goals.

Outcomes

- **High participation**: The library engaged a total of 130 participants in the program. If TechVenture activities had been held at the library instead of at schools, the library predicts that a maximum of 20-30 participants would have attended.

- **Sustained engagement:** The same group of tweens returned for multiple weeks of the program.

- **Long-term partnership**: The initial partnership based around STEM programming has allowed the library to open conversations for continued partnership for future programs.

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