

## Closing the digital divide for the Latino community

Written by

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Salvador Patino, a University of Minnesota apprentice for Centro in South Minneapolis, is extremely passionate about helping the Latino community learn more about technology and how it is important to every day life.

“Unfortunately, I would say that the Latinos are the ones that are more behind in computers than other groups, so I’m trying to make them understand how important it is,” he explains. Centro is a service agency aimed at providing aid to Latino and Chicano community members in the Twin Cities. Although this computer lab is housed at Centro, it is a division of the Broadband Access Project (BAP), an outreach program developed through the University of Minnesota’s Urban Outreach and Engagement Center (UROC).

The BAP updated and established 12 public computer centers aimed at increasing broadband access, awareness, and use in four federally designated poverty zones throughout the Twin Cities metro area. The project is open to all people but since this lab is housed in Centro, it caters mostly to Latinos. Each of the computer labs is outfitted with various numbers of up-to-date units and high-speed Internet capabilities, such as Microsoft office. The project is funded through a federal grant from the Broadband Technology Opportunities Program, as well as matching gifts from the University of Minnesota. In its final year of a three-year timeline, the project is looking to find funding in order to continue its services.

Leaders of the BAP understand that computer adeptness has become a key job skill; the development of computer literacy through education is an important aspect of the BAP. Group classes targeting all levels of proficiency are offered at the larger BAP computer labs. These classes cover topics regarding Microsoft Office, financial support, social media for business use, and even Internet programming and design. What also sets the BAP apart from other public computer centers is the presence of a trained apprentice at each location. This apprentice is employed by the University of Minnesota and is able to help users with any questions they might have.

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Patino embraces his role as apprentice at the Centro location. “The idea is to be training myself in computer technology and introducing people that don’t have any or helping those that have some knowledge to do different things with computers,” he explains. This means he will often help with building or revising resumes, point people towards good websites to search for jobs, help them use English learning tools, or guide them through the creation and use of an email account. “People with all levels of computer knowledge are welcome at Centro,” remarks Patino, “fortunately, we have people from all levels and ages and Centro has programs for senior citizens, for young children, for youth, and you know, a couple people who walk in and want to use the lab, so we have a variety of users.”

Patino is particularly happy about a particular program that is used at the lab to teach Spanish speakers English. Many of his users are unable to speak English, and this causes them immense difficulties when looking for jobs and other similar pursuits. “We have a kind of odd English class, which uses YouTube videos, watching songs that have the lyrics in English and Spanish. That’s a major success. People love it and they come very often to do it,” he describes. As it is not a structured class, it fits well into users’ busy lives, giving them access that they may otherwise not have time for. There is no time limit on BAP computers, which along with the emphasis on individual help, sets them apart from many other public computer labs.

Technology has become the way of the world but unfortunately, this means that those who are unable to afford it are falling behind. “As we know society is working completely with computers in every single aspect that we can mention and hopefully, this laboratory is not letting them [people without access to computers] by the side. People have been introduced to the technology of computers and also the use of Internet, which is running social life, so that is the importance of these labs,” says Patino. The Broadband Access Project is happy with the progress it has made, and looks forward to continuing to close the digital divide in the future. For more information or to find a computer lab near you, visit [www.bap.umn.edu](http://www.bap.umn.edu) .