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# University–Community Partnerships for Advancing Digital Inclusion Among Justice-Involved Women in the US

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## Abstract

This article examines a university–community collaboration model designed to address persistent digital skills gaps among formerly and currently incarcerated women in the United States. Justice-involved women, marginalized at the intersections of race, gender, and socioeconomic status, often lack access to reentry programs that provide relevant technological competencies. Grounded in a community-engaged scholarship framework and using a qualitative case study approach, this research examines the structural and social factors that sustain these inequities and analyzes an interdisciplinary partnership that designed and implemented an evidence-based digital skills program tailored to justice-involved women's interests and career aspirations. The partnership brought together a university research team, community organizations, and formerly incarcerated women in the United States. Central to the analysis is how the program was iteratively refined through research and practice and sustained through community partnerships. Findings show that co-design principles, relational instruction by peer mentors with lived experience of incarceration, and evidence-based programming played important roles in building and sustaining the initiative. Overall, this study underscores the importance of engaging justice-involved women as active partners in developing educational programs that advance digital inclusion and support long-term reentry outcomes.

## Keywords

community partnerships; digital skills; justice-involved women; reentry program; United States

## 1. Introduction

Community-engaged scholarship (CES) has gained increasing prominence as a framework for aligning academic research with public needs through collaborative, reciprocal partnerships between universities and

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communities. Rather than positioning communities as passive subjects—recipients of interventions, sources of data to be extracted, or objects to be studied rather than partners to be engaged—CES emphasizes co-creation of knowledge, shared decision-making, and the production of research that is both socially relevant and actionable (Hubbard et al., 2025; Wallerstein et al., 2020). This shift is grounded in a continuing reassessment of traditional academic models, which have long been criticized for prioritizing disciplinary expertise and detached knowledge production, often at the expense of real-world impact (Boyer, 1990, 1996; Hubbard et al., 2025). Within communication and social science research, CES offers a particularly valuable lens for examining how knowledge, trust, and participation are negotiated across institutional and community contexts.

One area where CES holds significant promise is in addressing digital inequality among justice-involved populations—individuals with current or prior contact with the criminal legal system, including arrest, incarceration, probation, parole, or other forms of community supervision (Mishori & Kane, 2023). The transition from incarceration to community life is marked by numerous challenges, including securing employment, accessing services, and rebuilding social networks (Seo et al., 2022). These challenges are increasingly mediated by digital technologies, making digital literacy a foundational requirement for successful reentry. In this study, reentry is defined as the transition from incarceration to community living and the ongoing process of reintegration into society following release from jail or prison. However, formerly incarcerated individuals often face substantial digital skill gaps due to restricted access to technology during incarceration and the rapid pace of technological change (Badejo et al., 2024; Sanders, 2025; Seo et al., 2022). Research shows that the digital divide has evolved beyond issues of access to encompass disparities in skills, confidence, and meaningful engagement, all of which are critical for navigating contemporary social and economic life (Hartnett, 2019; Robinson, 2024).

These challenges are particularly pronounced for justice-involved women, whose experiences are shaped by intersecting structural inequalities. Rising incarceration rates among women, coupled with short-term jail stays and intensive community supervision, create fragmented opportunities for skill development (Council on Criminal Justice, 2025; Kajstura & Sawyer, 2024). Additionally, justice-involved women often face compounding barriers, including histories of trauma, mental health challenges, caregiving responsibilities, and housing instability, all of which limit their capacity to engage in digital learning (Kennedy et al., 2016; Skogseth et al., 2025). As prior research demonstrates, these overlapping constraints not only exacerbate digital exclusion but also hinder broader processes of social and economic reintegration (Blomberg et al., 2021; Reisdorf & Jewkes, 2016).

Despite these barriers, emerging scholarship highlights the potential of digital inclusion initiatives to support reentry outcomes. Digital skills training has been linked to improved employment prospects, increased confidence, and enhanced access to essential services (Reisdorf & DeCook, 2022; Sanders, 2025). Moreover, digital competencies enable individuals to maintain and rebuild social connections, which are critical for long-term reintegration and desistance (Järveläinen & Rantanen, 2020). However, existing research also suggests that effective digital inclusion efforts must go beyond technical training to address relational, structural, and contextual factors that shape engagement, particularly for marginalized populations.

Guided by a CES framework, the present study examines a university–community partnership designed to promote digital inclusion among justice-involved women in the US Midwest. Using a qualitative case study

approach, the study investigates how collaborations among researchers, community organizations, and participants shaped the design and implementation of digital skills training, as well as the processes that influence participant engagement and learning outcomes. By centering the perspectives of justice-involved women and integrating insights from multiple stakeholders, this study contributes to ongoing efforts to develop equitable, community-responsive approaches to digital inclusion. In doing so, it advances both theoretical and practical understandings of how CES can address complex social challenges at the intersection of technology, inequality, and reentry.

## 2. Literature Review

### *2.1. CES*

CES is broadly defined as a collaborative approach to knowledge production in which researchers, students, practitioners, and community members work together to identify problems, shape research questions, interpret findings, and apply results to public life (Boyer, 1990; Wade & Demb, 2009; Wallerstein et al., 2020). Rather than treating communities as sites of data extraction, this work frames them as co-creators of knowledge and action. Across fields, scholars consistently emphasize reciprocity, relevance, and shared decision-making as defining features of engaged work (Pruitt et al., 2019; Hubbard et al., 2025). In this sense, CES is not only a method but also a normative orientation toward research: It seeks to align academic inquiry with community-defined needs, public accountability, and social change.

CES emerged in part as a response to conventional academic research models that prioritize expert authority, disciplinary silos, and outputs often disconnected from everyday life (Boyer, 1990, 1996; Hubbard et al., 2025). CES frameworks instead position engagement as a legitimate and rigorous form of scholarship, integrating teaching, research, and service in ways that address public problems (Hubbard et al., 2025; Wade & Demb, 2009). Within this broader orientation, approaches such as community-engaged research, community-based participatory research, action research, and service learning represent related traditions that challenge top-down knowledge production by emphasizing collaboration, co-learning, and public relevance (Elliott, 2017; Power & Sistare, 2019; Wallerstein et al., 2020). Although terminology varies across disciplines, the literature converges around the idea that scholarly value should be measured not only by academic publication but also by the quality of partnerships, usefulness of findings, and potential for long-term social benefit.

The evolution of CES is also marked by increasing conceptual refinement. Earlier work largely established engagement as an extension of the public mission of higher education, while more recent scholarship offers clearer frameworks for how engaged work should be designed and assessed. Pruitt et al. (2019) propose the "Four Rs" of relevance, reciprocity, research, and resilience as core dimensions of effective CES, highlighting the need for projects that address community priorities, generate evidence, sustain partnerships, and distribute benefits fairly. Similarly, Wade and Demb (2009) identify institutional, professional, and personal factors that shape faculty participation in engaged work, suggesting that CES depends not only on individual commitment but also on supportive organizational structures. These frameworks show that CES has matured from a broad ideal into a more systematic scholarly approach with identifiable principles, practices, and evaluative criteria.

Trust emerges as one of the most important mechanisms through which CES operates. Drawing on three university–community case studies, Hubbard et al. (2025) show that durable partnerships depend on reliability, transparent communication, mutual respect, and shared purpose. Trust is not treated as a byproduct but as infrastructure for collaboration, especially when projects involve long timelines, uneven resources, or histories of institutional exclusion. This concern also appears in Showstack et al.'s work (2021), where coalition-building with Spanish-speaking Kansans enabled community members to define healthcare barriers and push for language-access reforms. When co-producing technology to support desistance, Morris and Johns (2024) highlighted trust and respect as critical to working effectively with justice-involved populations. In particular, respecting and harnessing the voices and perspectives of "experts-by-experience"—those with lived experiences with justice settings—is essential in developing technology programs to support those transitioning from incarceration (Johns et al., 2022; Morris & Haider, 2022). Taken together, these studies indicate that CES is sustained not by goodwill alone, but by repeated communicative practices that center trust, respect, and the perspectives of those with lived experiences.

The literature further shows that CES is closely tied to questions of equity, representation, and social justice. Many authors argue that engaged work is especially valuable when traditional institutions have ignored, marginalized, or misrepresented particular communities. Showstack et al. (2021) demonstrate how a community-engaged approach can elevate the testimonies of Spanish-speaking patients and translate those voices into concrete policy attention. Bosman et al. (2023) extend this equity-centered perspective into pedagogy, showing how community-engaged scholarship and online international learning can support cultural preservation, decolonial learning, and reciprocal exchange. Across these cases, CES is defined not simply by collaboration, but by whose knowledge counts and whether engagement redistributes communicative power.

Recent scholarship suggests that CES is continuing to adapt to new technological and methodological contexts. For example, Bosman et al. (2023) demonstrate how online international collaboration can extend community-engaged learning across geographic boundaries while maintaining commitments to reciprocity and local knowledge. Building on this shift, El-Bassel et al. (2025) propose the PRISM-capabilities model to guide the ethical integration of artificial intelligence (AI) in community-engaged implementation research, emphasizing that digital tools should augment, rather than replace, human judgment and community voice. This topic is particularly timely, as the growing adoption of AI risks reinforcing or exacerbating structural inequalities, particularly the marginalization of people of color, through biased algorithms and unrepresentative training data (Benjamin, 2019; Buolamwini & Gebru, 2018). These contributions underscore that CES is not static but evolving alongside changing media systems, digital infrastructures, and complex public problems.

Overall, the literature positions CES as an increasingly sophisticated, equity-oriented, and technologically responsive approach to research. It is characterized by reciprocal partnerships, co-produced knowledge, and a sustained commitment to public relevance. Over time, CES has developed from a broad civic ideal into a set of theoretically grounded frameworks and practices attentive to power, trust, sustainability, and impact (Pruitt et al., 2019; Wallerstein et al., 2020). As such, CES provides a strong foundation for research that is not only about communities but also accountable to them. The present study adopts a CES framework to guide its collaboration with justice-involved women, particularly in supporting their digital skills development for successful reentry.

### 2.2. Digital Skills Among Justice-Involved Populations

The reentry process of transitioning from incarceration back into the community is marked by significant structural and social challenges, including securing housing, obtaining employment, accessing social services, and rebuilding social networks (Baines et al., 2026; Seo et al., 2022). Increasingly, these challenges are compounded by digital exclusion. Since most correctional facilities restrict access to the internet and contemporary technologies, many incarcerated individuals have limited opportunities to develop digital competencies, returning to a society where everyday life is deeply mediated by digital systems (Badejo et al., 2024; Sanders, 2025). As digital literacy has become a foundational life skill shaping access to economic, social, and civic participation, gaps in digital skills represent a critical but often underexamined barrier to successful reentry (Robinson, 2024; Seo, 2026).

The "digital divide" has evolved from a focus on unequal access to technology to a more nuanced understanding of disparities in digital skills, usage, and meaningful engagement (Hartnett, 2019; Robinson, 2024). This progression—from access divide to usage and skills divides—highlights that mere availability of technology does not ensure effective participation (Blomberg et al., 2021; Sanders, 2025). For justice-involved populations, this divide is particularly acute. Individuals often enter prison with limited digital experience and are released into rapidly changing technological environments characterized by smartphones, online platforms, and digitized services (Hwang et al., 2024). Even relatively short periods of incarceration can result in substantial digital skill loss due to the pace of technological change (Seo, 2026).

As a result, many formerly incarcerated persons (FIPs) have limited experience with contemporary digital technologies and must develop foundational skills after release rather than building on prior familiarity (Blomberg et al., 2021). This gap has tangible consequences: Without basic digital competencies, individuals face difficulties performing routine tasks such as job searching, accessing healthcare, or maintaining social connections (Hwang et al., 2024). In labor markets where approximately 92% of jobs require moderate to high digital skills (Sanders, 2025), digital exclusion significantly constrains economic opportunities. International research—from Australia, Finland, the United Kingdom, and Indonesia—consistently identifies justice-involved populations as among the most digitally marginalized groups (Hopkins, 2022; Hwang et al., 2024; Robinson, 2024).

Employment is a central determinant of successful reentry and reduced recidivism, and digital literacy is now integral to labor market participation (Badejo et al., 2024). Core employment activities, including job searches, resume preparation, applications, and workplace communication, are predominantly conducted online (Seo et al., 2026). FIPs frequently encounter barriers navigating these processes, including difficulty completing online forms, interpreting digital interfaces, and managing disclosure of criminal records in digital contexts (Sanders, 2025). The increasing digitization of public and private services further underscores the importance of digital skills for reentry.

The digital divide among justice-involved populations is shaped by intersecting factors, including age, sentence length, socioeconomic background, and institutional policies (Järveläinen & Rantanen, 2020; Sanders, 2025). For example, older individuals face particularly acute barriers due to lower baseline digital familiarity (Hwang et al., 2024). National contexts further influence how digital inequalities are addressed. In the United States, digital exclusion intersects with broader structural inequalities, including racial disparities and concerns about

surveillance, which shape how FIPs engage with technology (Sanders, 2025). In contrast, Nordic countries such as Finland adopt a "principle of normality," integrating controlled digital access within prisons to better prepare individuals for release (Järveläinen & Rantanen, 2020). While promising, these approaches may still reproduce gendered limitations on digital autonomy.

Across contexts, previous studies identify digital inequality as a significant and persistent barrier to successful reentry. This inequality extends beyond access to encompass disparities in skills, confidence, and the ability to derive meaningful benefits from technology (Järveläinen & Rantanen, 2020; Sanders, 2025). For justice-involved populations, these gaps compound existing structural disadvantages, limiting opportunities for employment, social connection, and access to essential services. As such, digital skills training is not ancillary but central to contemporary reentry support, requiring integrated, context-sensitive approaches that address both technical competencies and broader forms of digital inclusion.

### *2.3. Gendered Dimensions of the Digital Divide Among Justice-Involved Women*

Justice-involved women in the United States encounter a distinct and widening digital divide shaped by structural, institutional, and social inequalities (Seo et al., 2022). Although limited access to technology affects many incarcerated individuals, women are disproportionately impacted due to rapidly rising incarceration and arrest rates, which have nearly doubled in recent years (Council on Criminal Justice, 2025; Sawyer, 2018). Their experiences are further shaped by the prevalence of short-term stays in local jails, where frequent turnover and pretrial detention interrupt employment, caregiving, and housing stability more abruptly than longer prison sentences (Kajstura & Sawyer, 2024). Additionally, a large proportion of justice-involved women are placed under community supervision following release, with probation serving as a dominant form of correctional control (Budd et al., 2025). These conditions impose strict schedules, financial burdens, and heightened surveillance, all of which constrain opportunities to access and develop digital competencies (Belisle et al., 2023; Crawford et al., 2024).

Beyond institutional barriers, justice-involved women face intersecting personal and social challenges that further hinder digital skill acquisition. Histories of trauma and victimization are widespread among this population, with high proportions reporting exposure to violence, abuse, and life-threatening experiences (Kennedy et al., 2016; Seo, 2026; Tripodi et al., 2022). These experiences are closely associated with elevated rates of mental health disorders, including anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder, which occur at significantly higher rates among incarcerated women than men (Council on Criminal Justice, 2025; Seo et al., 2022). Substance use disorders are also highly prevalent and frequently co-occur with mental health conditions, compounding cognitive, emotional, and financial barriers to engaging with digital learning (Skogseth et al., 2025). Together, these overlapping challenges reduce both the capacity and readiness of justice-involved women to adopt and sustain new technological skills.

Gendered employment disparity, caregiving responsibilities, and housing instability further intensify the digital divide experienced by justice-involved women. Women with criminal justice histories encounter greater employment barriers than men with similar backgrounds, creating a cycle of disadvantage in which limited access to the Internet and digital technologies constrains opportunities to improve their economic circumstances and social mobility (Seo et al., 2022). In addition, a majority of incarcerated women are mothers, and many served as primary caregivers prior to incarceration, often within single-parent

households (Skogseth et al., 2025). Disruptions to family structures during incarceration create ongoing responsibilities upon reentry, limiting time and resources available for education and skill-building. At the same time, formerly incarcerated women face a heightened risk of homelessness, with rates far exceeding those of the general population (Couloute, 2018). The absence of stable housing restricts access to essential digital infrastructure, including reliable internet connections, safe device storage, and consistent contact information (Sawyer et al., 2025). These conditions collectively undermine the ability to participate in digital environments that are increasingly necessary for everyday functioning.

The broader concept of the digital divide helps contextualize these disparities. While information and communication technologies have become deeply embedded in economic, social, and civic life, access and effective use remain unevenly distributed (Carlson & Isaacs, 2018). Structural inequalities related to income, education, race, and gender continue to shape who benefits from digital advancements (Goedhart et al., 2019). For justice-involved women, these inequalities are magnified by incarceration-related exclusion from technology and limited opportunities to build digital skills (Reisdorf & Jewkes, 2016). In addition, racial and socioeconomic inequities permeate all stages of the US criminal justice system, including arrest, trial, sentencing, and reentry (Budd et al., 2025; Seo et al., 2022). Individuals who are incarcerated are disproportionately poor and Black; in 2023, Black women experienced an imprisonment rate that was 1.7 times higher than that of White women (Budd et al., 2025).

Despite these barriers, digital literacy remains a critical pathway for successful reentry and social reintegration. Limited exposure to technology during incarceration contributes to difficulties in securing employment, accessing education, and navigating essential online services upon release (Craigie & Grawert, 2021). This digital disconnect can deepen social isolation and hinder economic stability (Baines et al., 2026). However, research indicates that targeted digital skills training can significantly improve reentry outcomes by increasing confidence, employability, and access to resources (Reisdorf & DeCook, 2022). For justice-involved women, addressing the digital divide is not only a matter of technological access but also a necessary component of broader efforts to support recovery, family reunification, and long-term stability.

### *2.4. Research Questions*

As discussed above, digital skills training can mitigate reentry barriers. However, digital reintegration is uneven and shaped by institutional and social constraints. In particular, justice-involved women face multidimensional barriers to digital access and skill development. Examining this topic through the lens of CES provides an important opportunity to better understand how these barriers may be addressed through participatory approaches that center and respect justice-involved women's lived experiences. The following research questions guide the current study:

> RQ1: How do collaborations between a university research team, community organizations, and justice-involved women shape the design and implementation of digital skills training programs?
>
> RQ2: What processes and mechanisms influence participant engagement and learning outcomes within digital skills training for currently and formerly incarcerated women?

## 3. Method

### 3.1. Overview of Case Study Research

This study uses a qualitative case study design to examine a university–community partnership that sought to promote digital inclusion among justice-involved populations in the US Midwest. Case studies are commonly employed in social science research to examine complex, contemporary issues in their real-life settings, especially when context and phenomenon are closely intertwined (Baxter & Jack, 2008; Bunkar et al., 2024; Yin, 2018). Rather than isolating variables, this approach prioritizes depth and contextual understanding, making it well suited for studying digital inclusion initiatives shaped by institutional, technological, and community factors.

The use of case study research offers several advantages for social science inquiry. It enables in-depth analysis of complex and context-dependent phenomena, generating rich, detailed insights that are often inaccessible through large-scale quantitative methods (Bunkar et al., 2024; Flyvbjerg, 2006). Specifically, case study research typically draws on multiple forms of evidence, such as interviews, observations, documents, and digital materials, which are triangulated to strengthen credibility (Baxter & Jack, 2008; Bunkar et al., 2024; Yin, 2018). This allows for a comprehensive view of social processes, incorporating diverse perspectives and tracking developments over time. Though case studies have limited generalizability and may be subject to researcher bias, scholars emphasize their strength in analytical generalization, providing transferable insights into broader processes rather than aiming for statistical representation (Flyvbjerg, 2006; Yin, 2018).

The flexibility of the case study method allows for the integration of diverse data sources and iterative data collection (Yin, 2018), making it particularly useful for examining dynamic and evolving practices such as digital inclusion initiatives. Case study approaches also align with community-engaged research, which prioritizes collaboration, local knowledge, and multiple stakeholder perspectives—an alignment that is critical in digital inclusion work for centering marginalized experiences and understanding how access, skills, and participation are negotiated in practice.

### 3.2. Data Collection and Analysis

In this study, the case consists of a university–community partnership situated within a defined institutional and community context. The research employs an explanatory design to identify the underlying processes and mechanisms that shape observed outcomes. Specifically, this study adopts a case study research approach to examine how a university-based research team collaborated with community organizations and justice-involved women to design and deliver digital skills training for currently and formerly incarcerated women in the US Midwest. It analyzes how collaborations among a university research team, community organizations, and justice-involved women shaped the design and implementation of digital skills training programs, as well as the processes and mechanisms that influence participant engagement and learning outcomes for currently and formerly incarcerated women.

Data were collected through (a) semi-structured interviews with project team members, community partners, and program participants; (b) analysis of project documents and digital artifacts; and (c) observation of

project-related activities. Triangulation across these sources provides a comprehensive account, contributing to communication scholarship by detailing how community-engaged digital inclusion initiatives are developed and implemented (Bunkar et al., 2024; Yin, 2018). Specifically, interview data were compared across stakeholder groups to identify convergent and divergent perspectives, while documentary materials and digital artifacts were used to verify and contextualize participants' accounts of program development and implementation. Observational data further provided insight into how program activities unfolded in practice, enabling the researchers to compare reported experiences with observed behaviors and interactions.

All 75 interviews for this study were conducted between Fall 2025 and Spring 2026. This included interviews with 10 project team members: six digital navigators (former program participants who now serve as peer mentors), three university students, and one staff member. In addition, the study draws on 50 interviews with program participants and 15 interviews with representatives from community partner organizations that have collaborated with the university research team. Program participants and representatives from community organizations were recruited via email invitations that described an overview of the study, including its purpose and process. Table 1 summarizes the demographic characteristics of the interviewees.

All interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed, and systematically coded using a multi-stage thematic analysis approach informed by grounded theory principles (Strauss & Corbin, 1994). The analysis began with open coding to identify recurring concepts and patterns across stakeholder groups, followed by axial coding to group related codes into broader categories reflecting key processes, mechanisms, and experiences. Finally, selective coding was used to refine and integrate themes in relation to the study's research questions. Particular attention was paid to similarities and differences across participant groups, allowing for a comparative understanding of how collaboration, engagement, and learning outcomes were experienced and interpreted.

**Table 1.** Summary of the demographic characteristics of interviewees.

| Variable | Value | Count | Percent |
|---|---|---|---|
| Age | 18–25 | 5 | 6.7% |
| | 25–34 | 19 | 25.3% |
| | 35–44 | 16 | 21.3% |
| | 45–54 | 15 | 20.0% |
| | 55–64 | 11 | 14.7% |
| | 65 or older | 9 | 12.0% |
| | *Total* | 75 | 100% |
| Race/ethnicity | White/Caucasian | 48 | 64.0% |
| | Black | 12 | 16.0% |
| | Hispanic/Latino | 7 | 9.3% |
| | American Indian or Alaska Native | 3 | 4.0% |
| | Asian | 2 | 2.7% |
| | Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander | 1 | 1.3% |
| | Other | 2 | 2.7% |
| | *Total* | 75 | 100% |

**Table 1.** (Cont.) Summary of the demographic characteristics of interviewees.

| Variable | Value | Count | Percent |
|---|---|---|---|
| Education | Nursery school to 8th grade | 1 | 1.3% |
| | Some high school | 9 | 12.0% |
| | High school completed | 19 | 25.3% |
| | Some college | 13 | 17.3% |
| | Vocational training | 9 | 12.0% |
| | Associate degree | 5 | 6.7% |
| | Bachelor's degree | 12 | 16.0% |
| | Master's degree | 4 | 5.3% |
| | Doctoral degree | 3 | 4.0% |
| | *Total* | 75 | 100% |

Document analysis (Yin, 2018) focused on project-related materials, including curriculum content, training materials, meeting notes, program reports, and digital learning artifacts. These documents were identified through project records maintained by the research team and were created throughout the program's implementation to support curriculum development, participant learning, partnership coordination, and ongoing evaluation activities. These materials were analyzed to understand the evolution of the program, the structure of partnerships, and the alignment between program design and participant needs. Documents were coded using the same thematic framework developed from interview analysis, enabling integration across data sources. This process helped trace how co-design decisions were made, how feedback was incorporated over time, and how evidence-informed practices shaped program development.

Observational data were collected between Fall 2025 and Spring 2026 from in-person instructional sessions at four correctional facilities serving currently incarcerated participants, as well as from online learning activities involving formerly incarcerated individuals. Field notes were recorded during and immediately after observations, capturing instructional practices, participant interactions, and the overall learning environment. These notes were coded thematically, with attention to relational dynamics, instructional strategies, and patterns of engagement. Observations provided critical contextual insight into how program components operated in practice, complementing self-reported data from interviews.

## 4. Results

### *4.1. Digital Inclusion Program Context and Rationale*

A project team at a US public research university initiated partnerships with community organizations in 2021 to address a widening gap in digital access and skills among women transitioning from incarceration across two bordering states in the US Midwest. At that time, many correctional education programs had been paused or discontinued in the wake of Covid-19, leaving women reentering society without the technological competencies necessary for employment, communication, and daily life. Recognizing that the period immediately before and after release is especially critical for successful reintegration, the project focuses on delivering timely, relevant technology education during this transition. Its overarching goal is to equip currently and formerly incarcerated women with practical digital skills while reducing barriers to employment

and lowering the likelihood of recidivism. As of spring 2026, the project offers in-person technology sessions for women currently incarcerated in four correctional facilities, as well as hybrid sessions for women who have been released. Approximately 100 justice-involved women participate in the program each month.

### *4.2. Co-Designing Digital Skills Training: The Role of Academic-Community Partnerships and Justice-Involved Women (RQ1)*

Drawing on document analysis, program observations, and interviews, three interrelated components emerged as central to the success of the university–community partnership: (a) trust-centered partnerships; (b) participatory co-design; and (c) a relational and respectful instructional model. Each theme is discussed in detail below, with supporting evidence from interviews and documents to demonstrate its significance within the study context.

#### 4.2.1. Trust-Centered University--Community Partnerships

A defining feature of the project is its emphasis on trust-centered partnerships as the foundation for program design and implementation. The university research team collaborates closely with formerly incarcerated women, public libraries, workforce centers, nonprofit organizations, and departments of corrections to ensure the program reflects community-identified needs. These partnerships extend beyond symbolic engagement, involving shared responsibility, joint planning, and collective decision-making.

By integrating academic expertise with the lived experience of program participants and practical knowledge of community partners, the project produces programming that is both evidence-based and contextually grounded. This collaborative approach also strengthens local capacity, positioning community organizations to sustain and expand technology education initiatives over time. Project team members noted that their meetings with community organizations include informal discussions during lunchtime to strengthen personal connections, enhance networking opportunities, and discuss ideas in a more relaxed and informal environment. Emphasizing the importance of relationship-building, one project team member noted: "We have learned over time that building trust through regular meetings and informal conversations is the key to our program's success."

Specifically, the project is organized around three interconnected components: a technology education program, a Train-the-Trainer initiative, and a comprehensive research agenda. The education program develops digital literacy and computational thinking skills relevant to employment and everyday life. The Train-the-Trainer initiative prepares peer mentors—women with lived experience of incarceration who have completed advanced training—to deliver instruction and support participants. The research component evaluates program effectiveness, partnership dynamics, and long-term outcomes such as employment, self-efficacy, and recidivism. Together, these elements form a feedback loop in which research informs practice and practice refines research.

#### 4.2.2. Participatory Co-Design and Responsive Program Delivery

A second key component is the project's participatory co-design approach, which actively engages participants in shaping both curriculum and program structure. This goal is to develop a shared vision for the

technology education program and enhance mutual understanding and respect among all parties involved. Participants' interests and digital learning needs are continuously assessed through interviews and surveys and integrated into the curriculum through co-design sessions, along with iterative formative and evaluative research processes. During the co-design sessions, justice-involved women contributed to the curriculum development by identifying priority topics, providing feedback on proposed activities and materials, and recommending strategies to enhance the program's relevance, feasibility, and acceptability. The co-design workshops also enable public library and workforce center partners and other community organizations to identify potential challenges and opportunities they see in being part of the program.

Through early-stage workshops, formerly incarcerated women collaborate with researchers and community partners to identify priority topics, learning preferences, and potential barriers. This process ensures alignment with participants' goals—particularly their interest in employment-related skills—while fostering ownership and sustained engagement. Reflecting on the participatory nature of the program, one participant stated: "The project team is intentional about including our voices. They always emphasize that we build the program together, and I appreciate that they value our experiences, ideas, and suggestions."

Program implementation spans both correctional facilities and community settings, creating a continuum of support across the reentry process. Engagement begins up to six months prior to release, with educational sessions delivered within correctional facilities using project-provided technology. Following release, participants transition to a hybrid learning model that combines online modules with in-person sessions at public libraries.

This flexible structure accommodates the complexities of reentry, including housing instability and parole requirements, while ensuring continued access to devices, internet connectivity, and instructional support. Public libraries serve as critical community hubs, offering accessible, trusted, and resource-rich environments for ongoing learning.

#### 4.2.3. Relational Instruction and Community Capacity Building

Instruction is delivered through collaborative teams composed of university researchers and peer mentors. The inclusion of peer mentors is central to fostering trust, relatability, and participant motivation. Underscoring the value of peer mentorship, one participant explained: "Seeing a successful woman who has had experiences similar to mine is inspiring and reminds me that I, too, can achieve similar success."

These instructional teams are supported through the Train-the-Trainer program, which integrates technical content with pedagogical preparation and emphasizes inclusive, learner-centered practices. By cultivating both instructional and technical expertise within the community, the project establishes a sustainable model in which knowledge, leadership, and capacity are continuously developed and shared.

Project team members emphasized that demonstrating respect for both community organizations and program participants is fundamental to building and sustaining trust. All core team members are required to complete training on engaging with community partners, which includes components on active listening, empathy, compassion, and patience.

#### 4.2.4. Evidence-Based Approach and Pathways to Sustainability

The project places strong emphasis on ongoing research, evaluation, and sustainability. Data are collected across all stages of implementation to assess learning outcomes, instructional effectiveness, and the impact of partnership structures. For example, the project team conducts interviews and surveys with participants before, during, and after their participation in the program to gather additional feedback on the program and continue to improve the program. As part of our bi-annual meetings with community organizations, they conduct focus groups and surveys to collect their input in a systematic manner. These findings are used to iteratively refine the program while also contributing to broader knowledge about effective informal technology education for underserved populations.

Sustainability is achieved through intentional capacity building: Trained practitioners and peer mentors continue program delivery, community organizations expand their offerings, and resources are disseminated widely. Emphasizing the importance of community awareness, one project team member stated, "We believe that when the broader community is better informed about the challenges and opportunities facing justice-involved populations, digital inclusion efforts can have a more lasting and meaningful impact." In this way, the project advances a scalable, community-driven model for technology education that extends beyond its initial implementation and supports long-term impact.

### *4.3. Processes and Mechanisms Influencing Participant Learning Outcomes (RQ2)*

Analysis of interviews with program participants and digital navigators identified four interrelated themes that explain the processes and mechanisms influencing engagement and learning outcomes in digital skills training for currently and formerly incarcerated women: (a) supportive, humanizing learning environments; (b) access to technology as a condition of participation; (c) development of digital confidence and independence; and (d) digital literacy as a pathway to opportunity and reintegration. Collectively, these themes illustrate how engagement is shaped by the interaction of relational, structural, and instructional factors, which in turn produce meaningful learning and reentry outcomes.

#### 4.3.1. Supportive, Humanizing Learning Environments as a Driver of Engagement

A central mechanism influencing engagement was the presence of supportive, nonjudgmental relationships with instructors and digital navigators. Participants consistently described project team members as approachable and genuinely caring, which fostered trust and sustained participation. For example, a program participant noted: "They're really supportive and helpful—just genuinely caring. It's actually something I look forward to."

This relational approach was especially impactful in light of participants' prior experiences of stigma and marginalization. Being treated with dignity challenged internalized labels associated with incarceration and strengthened motivation to persist. As another program participant explained: "Once you've been incarcerated, it feels like you're stuck with that label and there's no way out. But this program changes that—it gives you hope and shows you that people actually care."

Participants emphasized that the program's flexible, adult-centered approach further supported engagement by reducing pressure and judgment: "When you've got a lot going on as an adult, it's really nice to do something like this without feeling judged or talked down to." Support also extended to peer relationships, with participants describing collaborative learning environments: "People start helping each other out, and it really builds strong relationships and a sense of community in the class."

These findings suggest that trust-based, humanizing pedagogy is a key mechanism sustaining engagement, shifting the learning environment from one centered on evaluation to one grounded in belonging.

#### 4.3.2. Access to Technology and Navigation Support as Structural Mechanisms

Material access to devices and internet connectivity emerged as a foundational condition for participation. Limited or unreliable access, particularly reliance on smartphones, created barriers to engagement, while access to laptops and stable internet enabled consistent participation. One participant noted: "Having access to technology isn't just a nice extra—it's essential for getting back on your feet." Participants also emphasized the broader value of device access beyond coursework: "I've been able to help others apply for things online, like Social Security and rental assistance, so it's been really useful."

The project team initially provided refurbished computers through grant funding. After those funds were exhausted, they connected participants with organizations offering free computers to eligible individuals and shared information about computer loan programs available through public libraries and nonprofit organizations.

In addition to access, participants' ability to navigate digital platforms shaped their engagement. Early confusion with the learning management system used in the program created barriers to participation. One participant said: "At one point I thought I was messaging the instructor, but it turned out I was just leaving notes for myself." Participants noted that instructor guidance and troubleshooting support were essential for overcoming these barriers.

Moreover, participants reinforced that access alone is insufficient without support. For example, one participant said: "It's not just about having a device; you also need to know how to use it. Those digital skills are what let you apply for jobs, find housing, access services, and stay connected." She added: "Without both the tools and the know-how, it's really hard to move forward."

These results highlight that engagement depends on both material access and guided navigation, positioning infrastructure and support as key enabling mechanisms.

#### 4.3.3. Development of Digital Confidence and Independence

A core learning process shaping outcomes was the development of digital confidence alongside technical skills. Many participants entered the program with anxiety and low self-efficacy. One participant said: "My biggest issue is my confidence with computers. I feel embarrassed asking for help." Through incremental skill-building and supportive instruction, participants reported increased confidence and autonomy. One participant shared: "I became more comfortable using computers…and troubleshooting basic issues on

my own." Another expressed a similar shift, noting: "I do not avoid tasks anymore just because they are online...I feel more capable of working through them on my own."

Participants described digital literacy as essential for navigating everyday life. One participant said: "I would rate how important tech skills are as a 10 out of 10. Everything I need is online now." Another participant noted: "Even going to the doctor, you end up doing everything on an iPad these days."

This shift reflects not only skill acquisition but a transformation in self-perception, where participants moved from avoidance to active engagement. These findings suggest that confidence-building is a key mechanism linking participation to sustained learning outcomes.

#### 4.3.4. Digital Literacy as a Pathway to Opportunity, Relationships, and Reintegration

Participants consistently described digital skills as enabling access to employment, education, and broader reentry opportunities. Digital literacy was widely viewed as a baseline requirement for the modern workforce. A participant said: "Every job I've had expects you to know your way around technology. It's just a basic requirement now." She added: "Whether it's applying online, using email, or handling systems at work, you really need those digital skills to even get your foot in the door, let alone move up."

Participants described increased job readiness and new career aspirations, explaining that the skills they gained helped them feel more prepared to handle workplace tasks that rely on technology. Some also began to envision different types of employment, including remote work, with one participant noting an interest in pursuing opportunities "working from home…doing data or coding."

Beyond employment, digital literacy also supported social reintegration by strengthening family and community relationships. Participants described using their skills to stay connected and support others, including keeping up with their children's needs and experiences such as "trying to catch up with the new generation…especially with my kids." Others highlighted how these changes reshaped important relationships, sharing that being able to support a child "has really strengthened our bond…and made her proud."

These outcomes suggest that digital skills extend well beyond technical competence. They enable participants to access and sustain employment, rebuild and strengthen personal relationships, and reimagine their roles within their families and communities. In this way, digital literacy operates not only as a workforce skill but also as a catalyst for confidence, connection, and a renewed sense of identity and possibility during reentry.

Across themes, these findings demonstrate that participant engagement and learning outcomes are shaped by the interplay of relational, structural, and instructional mechanisms. Supportive, humanizing relationships foster trust and belonging, while access to devices and guided navigation enable consistent participation and skill development. These conditions facilitate the growth of digital confidence and independence, allowing participants to move from avoidance to active engagement with technology. Ultimately, digital literacy emerges not only as a technical competency but as a critical pathway to employment, strengthened relationships, and a renewed sense of agency during reentry.

## 5. Discussion

This study contributes to the growing body of research on CES by demonstrating how CES principles can be operationalized in the design and implementation of digital inclusion initiatives for justice-involved women. Consistent with prior literature, the findings highlight the centrality of trust, reciprocity, and shared decision-making in sustaining effective partnerships (Hubbard et al., 2025; Pruitt et al., 2019). The emphasis on trust-centered collaboration observed in this case aligns with earlier studies showing that durable university–community partnerships depend on ongoing communication, mutual respect, and the recognition of community expertise (Showstack et al., 2021; Wallerstein et al., 2020). Importantly, this study extends existing research by illustrating how trust functions not only as a relational outcome but also as a structural condition shaping program design, participation, and long-term sustainability.

The findings also reinforce and deepen existing understandings of participatory co-design within CES. Prior research emphasizes the importance of involving community members in shaping research agendas and interventions (Elliott, 2017; Power & Sistare, 2019). This study provides empirical evidence of how such involvement translates into more relevant and responsive programming, particularly in the context of digital skills training. By incorporating participants' lived experiences and evolving needs into curriculum development, the program achieved alignment with employment goals and reentry challenges. This supports the argument that CES enhances not only the ethical dimensions of research but also its practical effectiveness by producing interventions that are contextually grounded and user-informed.

In relation to digital inequality, the study's findings are consistent with prior work demonstrating that access alone is insufficient to address the digital divide (Robinson, 2024; Sanders, 2025). Participants' experiences underscore the importance of combining material access with guided support and skill development. The challenges associated with navigating digital platforms and learning management systems echo previous research highlighting the complexity of digital engagement for justice-involved populations (Hwang et al., 2024). By identifying access and navigation support as interconnected mechanisms, this study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of digital inclusion as a multi-layered process involving infrastructure, instruction, and ongoing assistance.

A key contribution of this study lies in its identification of supportive, humanizing learning environments as a central mechanism driving engagement. While prior research has acknowledged the role of social support in reentry (Pettus-Davis, 2021), this study demonstrates how relational pedagogy directly influences digital learning outcomes. The emphasis on dignity, nonjudgment, and peer support reflects broader CES commitments to equity and respect (Bosman et al., 2023). These findings suggest that digital inclusion initiatives must attend not only to technical skills but also to the emotional and social dimensions of learning, particularly for populations with histories of marginalization and stigma.

The development of digital confidence and independence observed among participants further supports existing research linking digital literacy to self-efficacy and empowerment (Reisdorf & DeCook, 2022). Participants' transition from avoidance to active engagement with technology highlights the transformative potential of skill-building programs when delivered in supportive contexts. This aligns with broader theories of digital inclusion that emphasize meaningful engagement and capability development rather than mere access (Hartnett, 2019). The study extends this literature by showing how confidence-building operates as a mediating mechanism connecting instructional practices to broader reentry outcomes.

From a scholarly perspective, this study advances communication research by integrating CES with digital inequality and reentry scholarship. It demonstrates how communication processes—such as trust-building, collaborative design, and instructional interaction—shape both program implementation and participant outcomes. By adopting a case study approach (Yin, 2018), the research offers analytical insights that can inform future studies of community-engaged digital inclusion initiatives. Additionally, the findings contribute to ongoing discussions about the role of communication in addressing structural inequalities, highlighting the importance of participatory and relational approaches in marginalized contexts.

From a practical and policy perspective, the findings have several important implications. First, digital inclusion programs for justice-involved populations should adopt holistic models that integrate access, skills training, and relational support. Policies that focus solely on providing devices or internet access are unlikely to achieve meaningful outcomes without accompanying instructional and social support structures. Second, the success of peer mentor models suggests that programs should invest in training individuals with lived experience to serve as instructors and navigators, thereby enhancing trust and sustainability. Third, partnerships with community institutions such as public libraries and workforce centers are critical for providing accessible and continuous support across the reentry process. Finally, policymakers should consider expanding digital access within correctional settings, drawing on international models that integrate technology into rehabilitation while addressing concerns about security and equity (Järveläinen & Rantanen, 2020).

Since this research is limited to a single case study, readers should be mindful of the context-specific nature of the findings and avoid assuming that they are directly transferable to other digital inclusion initiatives, populations, or geographic settings. In addition, the experiences and perspectives documented in this study reflect the specific organizational partnerships, program design, and participant characteristics of the case examined and may not fully represent the diversity of justice-involved women's experiences in other contexts.

## 6. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that community-engaged approaches to digital inclusion can play a transformative role in supporting justice-involved women during reentry. By centering collaboration, trust, and participant voice, the program not only facilitated skill development but also fostered confidence, connection, and new possibilities for participants' futures. These findings underscore the importance of viewing digital literacy as both a technical and social process, embedded within broader systems of inequality and opportunity. As digital technologies increasingly shape access to resources and participation in society, university–community partnerships grounded in the CES framework offer a powerful approach for designing inclusive, equitable interventions that respond to the needs of marginalized communities.

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### Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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