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Compendium of Notable Articles

**Technology Inclusion: Can minority
and underserved populations
meaningfully participate in the
technology revolution?**

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Why We Should Train Students In Underserved Communities In AI

POST WRITTEN BY

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There is a discrepancy in the quality of education worldwide, and it shouldn't come as a surprise that artificial intelligence (AI) education isn't an exception. While some students enjoy small classrooms with fancy electronic whiteboards and qualified instructors, others don't even have electricity. The world is digitally and economically divided, especially in the case of AI education.

There are numerous barriers preventing students from acquiring AI skills besides a foundation in mathematics. Many underserved communities lack resources. AI training requires equipment such as computers, among other tools. Even if some underserved communities have these resources, they don't usually have equipment in adequate supply, and physical space is an additional obstacle. Moreover, there's a finite number of instructors qualified to teach AI, and the relative few are generally found at top universities and institutions that are able to offer attractive salaries. Instructors may leave underserved communities in search of better opportunities. Because of this, most underserved communities face critical challenges in educating local engineers in AI.

AI in education is expected to expand in regions that can afford it. According to Forbes, it's projected to increase by nearly 50% from 2017 to 2021. Job opportunities in AI are also growing exponentially, according to various reports. Without the right talent, these jobs will go unfilled. While many schools and universities are responding to the talent shortage by increasing classes and enrollment, it remains accessible to a few, resulting in lost potential for economic growth in many communities.

Training students from underserved communities in AI is powerful for various reasons, including the following:

Preparation For The Future Economy

The economy is set to go through an AI transformation that will likely come to dominate many industries. If students aren't upskilled in AI, some may find their skills obsolete for the next century. Though concern that automation will replace jobs is not unfounded, most are unaware of the jobs AI will create.

According to Gartner, AI will automate 1.8 million jobs and create 2.3 million — a 500,000 net increase. As AI expands, so will related job positions. These may include AI directors, product managers, data analysts and human-machine interaction manager, among others we can't yet foresee. We can be certain job opportunities will continue to expand to address growing consumer interest. Such future jobs in AI have the potential to uplift entire communities including underdeveloped and underserved communities.

Improving Agricultural And Economic Output

Agriculture is a critical source of income in many underserved communities. According to Future Farming, farmers can monitor the growth and health of crops using cognitive computing and computer vision. They can also identify which areas are ripe and which need water, a task that would take a lot longer manually. These AI systems allow farmers to get to market faster, increasing yield and annual income.

AI-enhanced agriculture has the potential to lift underserved communities from poverty and eliminate hunger. Educated local talent can help farmers build AI solutions.

Augmenting Local Knowledge Of Local Issues

Communities suffer from issues specific to them, such as drug abuse in some communities in Mexico or the rising sea levels surrounding the islands of Kiribati. The insight of a member of an underserved community bolsters the creation of an effective AI solution, such as monitoring drug use to prevent overdose.

Along these same lines, Nepali engineers were in a unique position to devise a method of delivering blood to rural regions using drones. Without “boots on the ground” knowledge, community problems may go unrecognized by those who are in a position to enable their solutions.

Underserved Community Members Are Eager For Opportunities

Many students from underserved communities are passionate about making changes and are eager for opportunities to do so. Education in AI enables them not only to find solutions for local problems, but it also allows them to build tools and products that can be sold around the world.

In addition, many of these students, if well trained, can fill the global AI talent demand. These students can work remotely and remain living in their community.

Bringing Opportunities To The Communities That Need Them

I believe educating students from underserved communities in AI will not only impact the students, but it will also transform the livelihoods of entire families and communities. AI educators walking the halls of world-renowned universities should make concerted efforts to bring high-quality AI education to underserved communities around the world.

We can bring AI education to these communities by providing them with a blended learning experience: high-quality online learning and local in-class training programs. Many teachers can be trained on how to teach AI, and this in-class instruction can be supplemented with resources such as online content, quizzes and assignments to help teachers provide a well-rounded learning experience.

FACT SHEET: Biden-Harris Administration’s “Internet for All” Initiative: Bringing Affordable, Reliable High-Speed Internet to Everyone in America

Friday, May 13, 2022 Office of Public Affairs

President Biden’s Bipartisan Infrastructure Law brought together Republicans, Democrats, and Independents to better connect the American people through roads, bridges, airports, and the internet. The law included a \$65 billion investment to ensure all Americans can access affordable, reliable, and high-speed internet – Internet for All. Reliable, high-speed internet is vital to work, learn, and compete in a 21st-century economy, which is why the Biden-Harris Administration, through the U.S. Department of Commerce’s National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA), is launching the Internet for All initiative that includes three programs funded by the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law. NTIA has been tasked to lead this effort by working with states, localities, the private sector, nonprofits, and the American people to build the backbone of America’s high-speed internet infrastructure.

The pandemic shed light on what many Americans already knew: access to the internet is a necessity for everyday life. The Internet for All effort will meaningfully address fundamental economic, educational, social and health-related inequities in our country by connecting Americans and closing the digital divide.

NTIA’s Internet for All initiatives will provide a bottom-up, middle-out investment that will create an economy where Americans can participate from anywhere and compete everywhere.

Today, NTIA is launching three Internet for All funding opportunities:

- Broadband Equity, Access, and Deployment (BEAD) Program (\$42.5 billion)
- Enabling Middle Mile Broadband Infrastructure Program (\$1 billion)
- State Digital Equity Act programs (\$1.5 billion)

Along with other federal investments, these programs will:

Connect All Americans to High-Speed Internet. Internet access is essential to thrive in the modern digital economy. For far too long, too many Americans have been left out or left behind because they don't have access to reliable, affordable high-speed internet.

The *BEAD Program* will disperse \$42.5 billion in grants to states, territories, the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico. This historic investment will lay critical groundwork for the infrastructure needed to connect everyone, from big cities to small towns and everything in between.

The *Enabling Middle Mile Broadband Infrastructure Program* will fund projects that increase local competition and innovation and create a more reliable connection for underserved communities across the country.

Close the Digital Divide. Beyond lacking access, many people in communities across the nation can't afford Internet service, or they don't have the skills necessary to effectively use the Internet or a connected device.

That's why the *BEAD Program* will support planning, mapping, equity, and adoption projects. States and other eligible participants in the program will be required to submit a five-year action plan detailing their plan to connect all of their residents. These plans must be developed in collaboration with local and regional entities, so that everyone in America is included.

Additionally, the launch of the *State Digital Equity Planning Grant Program* kicks off a series of *Digital Equity Act* steps that will invest \$1.5 billion to heighten adoption and use, like digital literacy training, for those who need it most, including communities of color, rural communities, and older Americans.

Make the Internet More Affordable. Internet access is essential to participate in today's economy. For far too long, too many Americans have been left out or left behind because they don't have access to reliable, affordable high-speed Internet.

Connection and reliability don't matter if Americans can't afford the service. The FCC's *Affordable Connectivity Program* provides \$30 per month, and \$75 per month on Tribal lands, for qualifying households to purchase internet access. However, that funding may not cover the cost of service in many areas. That's why the Administration has engaged with service providers to ensure that low-cost options provide reliable service for \$30

per month or less, so those who are most in need can access the internet and join the economy.

The Bipartisan Infrastructure Law also added an additional \$2 billion to the *Tribal Broadband Connectivity Program* to connect more homes in tribal communities to high-speed Internet services and increase access to programs such as telehealth, distance learning, and affordability services. NTIA has already started to fund these projects.

Ensure that Children have Access to the Education they Deserve. During the pandemic, parents and children were asked to work and learn alongside one another at home – but far too many homes didn't have internet access at the speeds and cost necessary to participate.

This created impossible situations, with some parents choosing which child could participate in school on any given day or choosing between their job responsibilities and their children's education. The *BEAD Program* will ensure that every child in America has access to a reliable internet connection at the speeds needed to participate in modern educational programs.

The *Enabling Middle Mile Broadband Infrastructure Program* will enhance competition, drive down prices and create a more reliable connection for underserved communities across the country. An expanded middle-mile infrastructure reduces the cost of bringing service to households and community anchor institutions, such as schools, libraries, and hospitals.

Expand Telehealth and Connect Vital Public Safety Services. For Americans who live in communities with slow or unreliable Internet connections, the COVID-19 pandemic posed an extraordinary challenge. Communities with limited or no access were left out and left behind without access to life-changing or life-saving technologies for education and telehealth.

The Internet for All programs funded by the *Digital Equity Act* will provide digital skills training and education to low-income populations, improve online accessibility of social services for individuals with disabilities and empower rural communities to measure their own broadband needs.

Create Good-Paying American Jobs. A highly trained, diverse workforce that can safely do their jobs will be essential to connecting everyone in America to high-speed internet. The Internet for All programs will create thousands of good-paying jobs, and NTIA will work with states, territories, and other partners to ensure that those jobs are accessible to a workforce that looks like America.

Black-Owned Pot Businesses Remain Rare Despite Diversity Efforts

January 15, 2021 By: [Sophie Quinton](#)

Worker Renee Cox, center, completes a sale at Pure Oasis recreational marijuana shop, a Black-owned business in Boston. States and cities are trying to help low-income, minority and formerly incarcerated people start marijuana businesses. Steven

Los Angeles has set aside effectively all its new marijuana dispensary licenses for people like Ryan Brown. He's Black. He's from a poor neighborhood. And he's gone to prison for selling pot. But Brown, 47, didn't get past the first stage of applying for one of the city's 100 first-come, first-served retail store licenses. He's frustrated by reports that some applicants who made it through were wealthy or lived in gentrifying ZIP codes such as East Hollywood.

Left-leaning state and city leaders nationwide have embraced social equity marijuana licensing programs, which aim to make amends for decades of aggressive policing of low-income, minority people and help them thrive in the multibillion-dollar legal pot industry.

So far, though, efforts to help disadvantaged people launch legal marijuana businesses have floundered. "We don't have one successful social equity [licensing] program yet," said Bonita Money, founder and executive director of the National Diversity & Inclusion Cannabis Alliance, a Los Angeles-based nonprofit that advises and advocates for social equity entrepreneurs.

Marijuana legalization advocates often group three policies under the term social equity: priority licensing, removing past marijuana-related offenses from criminal records and using cannabis tax revenue to fund community-development programs in hard-hit neighborhoods. Social equity provisions were central to Illinois' 2019 law legalizing recreational pot sales. They're key to ongoing legalization debates in New York and New Jersey. And they're increasingly common in legalization ballot measures, such as those approved in Arizona and Michigan.

In December the Democratic-controlled U.S. House of Representatives passed a legalization bill packed with social equity provisions, including a grant program to

help states and cities develop “equitable cannabis licensing programs.” But the systems aren’t working as expected. Programs in Los Angeles and around the country have been plagued by delays, lawsuits, computer glitches and corruption allegations. Despite policymakers’ best efforts, some potential licensees have struggled to access the money and expertise they need to get licensed and launch a business.

Money, of Los Angeles’ cannabis alliance, reviewed the list of applicants Los Angeles regulators initially approved for the first 100 retail store licenses, and estimated that only 11 Black people made the cut. The city Department of Cannabis Regulation declined *Stateline*’s requests for data on licensees and to make department head Cat Packer available for an interview.

“A lot of times we’re people who grew up basically on the streets. A lot of us don’t have college educations. We’re not contract-savvy, we don’t have a team of lawyers.” Ryan Brown, aspiring cannabis business owner

In Massachusetts, only 27 of the 122 applicants initially given “economic empowerment priority” by regulators in 2018 ended up applying for licenses, *Politico* reported last year, and only eight received them. The state Cannabis Control Commission did not respond to requests for updated numbers or comment by publication time. Yet social equity licensing remains popular among policymakers.

Policies that could increase diversity in the legal marijuana industry are worth a try, said Colorado state Rep. Leslie Herod, chair of the state Black Democratic Legislative Caucus. Colorado lawmakers passed a bill last year that expanded social equity licensing efforts. “Some things work, and some things don’t work,” Herod said. “So we’re going to continue to iterate, until we have parity in the marketplace.”

In Los Angeles, meanwhile, regulators haven’t yet given final approval to any social equity licensees though it’s been more than three years since the city created rules for legal cannabis businesses. Brown says people he knows are souring on the program. “Most people have given up,” he said. “Their attitude was, ‘I knew it was too good to be true.’”

A Flood of Litigation

States and cities with social equity programs also often limit the overall number of licenses or licenses in certain neighborhoods. That creates a feeding frenzy over

licenses in hot markets and puts pressure on regulators to ensure licensees have spotless qualifications.

The Los Angeles City Council, for instance, initially capped pot shop licenses at 1 per 10,000 residents, or about 400 citywide, and banned pot shops within 700 feet of schools, parks and other dispensaries. Regulators awarded 184 licenses to existing medical marijuana dispensaries that had been operating in a legal gray area. City regulators now are licensing the next phase: social equity applicants. They'll hit the city dispensary limit before non-social equity applicants get a chance to apply, said Hilary Bricken, an L.A.-based attorney who specializes in cannabis law.

“Social equity is now the only vehicle in the City of Los Angeles—outside of [mergers and acquisitions] with those original dispensaries—to get a dispensary,” she said. Policymakers can't explicitly favor certain racial groups under U.S. law. So in Los Angeles and elsewhere, lawmakers and regulators have crafted social equity criteria using a mix of residency requirements, income limits and criminal history.

The Los Angeles City Council, for instance, in 2017 defined a “Tier 1” social equity applicant as someone who earned up to 80% of the city's median income and either had a cannabis offense on their record or had lived for at least five years in an area the city considered disproportionately impacted by the war on drugs. People who had lived in such an area for 10 years could qualify as “Tier 2” applicants.

The program ran into problems almost immediately. A technical glitch that allowed some candidates to submit their retail store applications early led to lawsuits from rejected applicants and a citywide audit, which paused retail store licensing for months. Money and other advocates for minority entrepreneurs accused the city of licensing applicants who weren't really low-income. And it turned out some licensees had unwittingly signed predatory contracts with investors, which shut them out of majority ownership of their business or made them vulnerable to a buyout.

In response, the city council last summer tightened income and residency criteria and required applicants to own a majority equity share in their proposed business. But the council also created a new problem, when it announced a plan to award cannabis delivery licenses exclusively to social equity applicants until 2025. Established cannabis companies opposed the move. “They changed the law and prevented a very large portion of us from getting a license for another five years, which is just untenable,” Zachary Pitts, CEO of delivery service Ganja Goddess Delivers and a

plaintiff in a lawsuit against the city, told *Cannabis Business Times*. “There's no way that we can survive.”

City leaders have also added 100 new retail store licenses for social equity candidates, which won't be subject to the city cap, Bricken said. She estimated that about 534 retailers will be licensed in the city overall. The rollout of Illinois' social equity program has been similarly messy. Last year regulators received more than 2,500 applications for the first 75 dispensary licenses available. Applicants who met certain social equity criteria (such as businesses owned by someone convicted of a marijuana-related crime) got extra points on their applications and could qualify for grants and technical assistance.

Potential licensees said that the state hadn't let them amend rejected applications and criticized its scoring process. Some sued, alleging regulators were favoring politically connected companies. Meanwhile, even some successful applicants sued over state efforts to give rejected applicants a second chance. State lawmakers reportedly are now considering doubling the number of available licenses and tweaking licensing criteria to make it easier for low-income, minority and formerly arrested or incarcerated entrepreneurs to qualify, the *Chicago Tribune* reported.

In Colorado, some existing cannabis business owners are critical of proposed social equity programs in Denver and Aurora. Amy Sharp, CEO and founder of a Colorado-based cannabis courier service, was ready to fight the Aurora City Council's decision to give delivery licenses only to social equity companies for three years. She changed her mind when she realized her company could qualify as a social equity business. (She declined to explain how.) Sharp predicted that both cities will face litigation. “It's definitely not constitutional, what they're doing,” she said.

Vanderbilt Law School professor Robert Mikos, who specializes in cannabis law, said it shouldn't be hard for cities and states to defend their licensing policies so long as they don't explicitly favor applicants based on their race. For instance, an Ohio county judge in 2018 struck down a law that would have set aside 15% of medical marijuana licenses for Black, Native American, Hispanic and Asian people. “It used an explicit race-based classification system,” Mikos said of the Ohio law. “And that's about as difficult a thing to defend under the equal protection clause and the case law—that's about as hard to defend as anything.”

The Cost of Doing Business

Low-income, Black and Hispanic, and formerly incarcerated entrepreneurs also face a more fundamental problem. Cannabis businesses are uniquely expensive and difficult to operate. They must navigate a thicket of state and federal regulations, from installing special ventilation systems to following certain security protocols. Compliance can require hiring experts. And because selling marijuana is illegal under federal law, it's nearly impossible to get a business loan.

Laura Herrera, a cannabis consultant who advises social equity entrepreneurs in Oakland, said the application process in the city is akin to getting planning permission for a housing development. And that's just the beginning, she said. "Nobody's really prepared, except for big firms, for the bureaucracy and then the compliance requirements, and all the operational requirements," she said. "It's a huge lift."

While Brown told *Stateline* he thought it would cost about \$100,000 to rent and renovate a cannabis store space in Los Angeles, industry experts said the cost would likely be much, much higher. To establish a dispensary in an industrial neighborhood in Los Angeles within a year would likely cost \$1 million, Bricken said. "That's cheap." She said starting a dispensary in a neighboring city like West Hollywood could cost twice as much.

Starting a delivery business costs less but can still mean tens of thousands of dollars in licensing fees, application fees and upfront investment, depending on the jurisdiction, industry experts say. City and state leaders are increasingly adding financial and technical assistance to their social equity licensing programs.

California regulators last year announced a \$30 million grant program for cannabis entrepreneurs, including \$23 million for low-interest loans for social equity applicants. Colorado Gov. Jared Polis, a Democrat, has proposed setting aside \$5.6 million for grants and loans for social equity businesses. Illinois' loan fund places no limit on loan sizes, though regulators expect loans to stay below \$500,000. Applicants also need a strong team, Herrera said. She gave the example of a mom who lives in public housing and has never run a business before. "They need an incubator, or a partner, because they're not businesspeople," she said.

States such as Colorado and cities such as Oakland and Los Angeles have created incentives for established marijuana businesses to give social equity applicants capital, rent-free space or help with compliance as they grow their businesses. But those programs can create new problems, as some entities partnering with social

equity applicants don't have good intentions—such as the predatory investors in Los Angeles.

Brown said he hasn't signed any bad contracts himself. He's been working with Money, whose organization receives state funds to help Los Angeles social equity applicants. She's helped him apply for licenses, find investors and review contracts. Others haven't been so lucky, Brown said. "A lot of times we're people who grew up basically on the streets," he said. "A lot of us don't have college educations. We're not contract-savvy, we don't have a team of lawyers."

State regulators who haven't established social equity programs and taken a more hands-off approach to licensing in general may, ironically, be doing a better job licensing a diverse set of entrepreneurs, said Tamar Todd, legal director of New Approach PAC, a committee that supports cannabis ballot initiatives.

Take Oklahoma's medical marijuana program. "It's unlimited licenses, very low barriers to entry and very affordable licenses," Todd said. Well-financed, wealthy entrepreneurs will still have an advantage in the market, she said, but at least lower-income entrepreneurs can get a foot in the door.

Applicants like Brown, meanwhile, are still waiting. "It's been very stressful, because I mean, every morning I wake up and check my email and hope to get the email saying hey, let's go to the next step," he said. "I'm pretty much sitting here waiting and hoping."