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Digital Inclusion: From classroom to pop-up

PATRICK DUNN | WEDNESDAY, JANUARY 28, 2015



JACK BIDLACK AT THE DIGITAL INCLUSION STOREROOM AT EMU - DOUG COOMBE

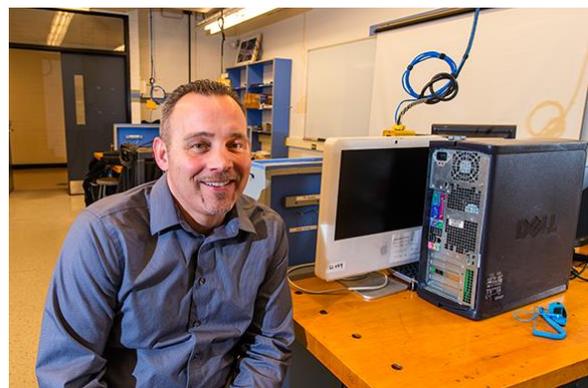
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Eastern Michigan University's Digital Inclusion pop-up store didn't quite break even when it opened this past December, but it came awfully close. And more importantly, it was a huge step forward for the youth-driven computer education program behind its creation.



[The store](#) offers a computer repair class aimed at Digital Inclusion (DI) students, who then apply their new-found skills to rehabilitating old computers for sale in DI's on-campus store –or, this past holiday

season, at the pop-up location at 10 N. Washington in Ypsilanti. Jack Bidlack is the director of the [B. Side](#), the EMU youth entrepreneurship program responsible for DI and several other initiatives.

"There were some very good signs [at the pop-up]," Bidlack says. "We were pretty close to the break-even mark. And to me that's impressive, if you're only open for 30 days. Most businesses, it takes them two years to get to the break-even mark."

DI has come a long way since its 2008 launch. Originally funded by a grant from the Ann Arbor Area Community Foundation, the program became self-sustaining through computer sales and occasional grant funding in 2012. Although Bidlack oversees DI and the B. Side's other entrepreneurship programs, DI regularly employs two to three student staffers to teach DI classes and operate DI's on-campus store at Sill Hall.

"It was a way to say, 'Yup, we're teaching you entrepreneurship, but we can also show you an entrepreneurial venture,'" Bidlack says. "It also opened up the classroom opportunity from the standpoint of we can show you how we're actually operating it as a social enterprise on a day-to-day basis, and how you can do something similar with very little to no money."

The DI class, which takes about 40-45 hours over the course of two afterschool sessions per week, emphasizes hands-on training. Students work with actual computers, spending about half the class learning their way around computer hardware and then moving on to software issues. Those who complete the program also receive credit for a computer from the DI store, where systems usually carry a price tag between \$50 and \$350.

"[Students] actually kind of get a feel for the parts themselves, instead of just learning out of the textbook," says DI instructor and EMU computer science major Ryan Dixon.



Bidlack says the program aims to steer students towards a career in IT, "where there is decades of growth and potential." DI alum Howard Williams seems to be on that very path. The 17-year-old Belleville resident took the DI course three years ago, and is currently enrolled in college classes at EMU through the [Early College Alliance program](#) while wrapping up his senior year of high school. He also continues to work with the B. Side on web design projects. Williams plans to major in computer science and hopes to pursue a career as a video game designer. He says DI gave him an early crash course in his prospective field.

"We didn't learn specifically how to make a video game, but I did learn how to take down a computer," Williams says. "So I kind of know the ins and outs of it."

Students and staff have refurbished over 550 computers since DI got started, and the program is considering ways to continue stepping up its game. In addition to the December pop-up store experiment, DI recently expanded its efforts to sell as an [Amazon retailer](#). Bidlack says the program consistently has inventory to turn, and he's considering new ways to do so. He and his colleagues are currently mulling options for another, likely permanent, storefront operation.

"We know that when we open a storefront in the community, it'll most likely also become our training facility," he says. "So we're looking at facilities that can provide both those services."

Patrick Dunn is an Ann Arbor-based freelance writer and a senior writer at Concentrate and Metromode.

All photos by [Doug Coombe](#).

