

Internet-in-a-Box for the Henderson Academy for Workforce and Community Development

BUILD RELATIONSHIPS WITH COMMUNITY PARTNERS

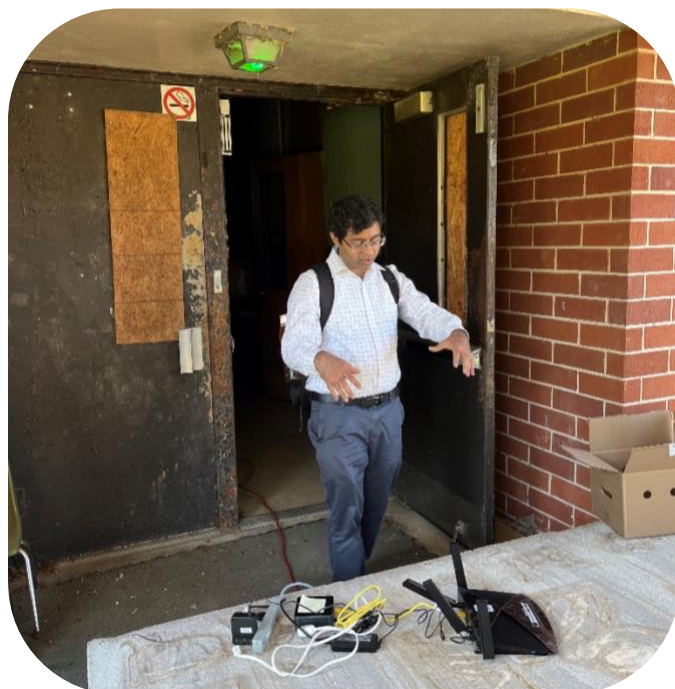
This case study focuses on the establishment of a partnership between Georgia Tech's faculty and the Henderson School Alumni Association and Trust (HSAAT) to implement an "internet-in-a-box" solution at the Henderson Academy Community and Workforce Development Center, aiming to enhance educational opportunities and community engagement in Jackson, Georgia.

Contributed by:

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GT Computer Science faculty member Ashutosh Dhekne collaborated with SCoRE through its Faculty Fellows Program to establish a relationship with the leadership of HSAAT (Henderson School Alumni Association and Trust). HSAAT is a nonprofit based in Jackson, Georgia, with the mission of transforming a historic – now vacant – school property into a community hub: the Henderson Academy Community and Workforce Development Center.

The history of the Henderson School is essential context. The Henderson School was founded in 1938 as Jackson Negro High School, the first public high school for African Americans in the county. In the 1950s the Board of Education purchased 25 acres at the current site for a new building, the Henderson Elementary and High School, a segregated school for Black students. Henderson was one of many "equalization" schools across the South, built in an effort to avoid desegregation through demonstrating that "equal education" was available in segregated settings. In the 1970s, Butts County complied with desegregation orders, and Henderson reopened as an integrated junior high.



Ashutosh Dhekne, GT faculty in Computer Science, demonstrates internet-in-a-box for HSAAT Board Members at the Henderson School property in Jackson, Georgia.
Credit: Ruthie Yow

After a final incarnation as North Mulberry Academy, the school was closed in 2010 and has been vacant since. HSAAT aims to redevelop the property as a hub focused on STEAM education, workforce development, multi-generational recreation, community health, and entrepreneurship.

HSAAT's leadership – a group of Black community elders, many of whom are alums of the Henderson School – are seeking ways to activate the site of the school (a twenty-acre parcel with 75,000 square feet of indoor space) while they raise funds to redevelop the property. Some community events already are sited there – such as annual Juneteenth celebrations – and the group would like to begin to offer more programming concurrent with the renovation and reopening of the gymnasium-auditorium in 2025.

Having reliable, low-cost internet at the site would be a boon to the group and expand the range of potential offerings to the community. Dhekne recognized a possible match with his own research in wireless communication, along the lines of an "internet-in-a-

box”, when reading about the group’s work. Internet-in-a-box is a local solution for facilities and communities that need low-cost internet and on-site connectivity but do not need the entirety of the world wide web at their fingertips at all times. It allows groups to use pre-identified data sources (such as Wikipedia) for educational programming and can - by preventing access to distracting or dangerous content - be instrumental in educational settings and superior to conventional wi-fi.

Dhekne went on a day-long site visit to Jackson to meet with HSAAT leadership, tour the school, and demonstrate how internet-in-a-box would work at the site, using a setup put together by Anirudh Sharma, a graduate student at the School of Computer Science. He and HSAAT leaders engaged in fruitful dialogue about the opportunities and limitations of the technology, the cost, and the possibility of a pilot project using one of [Georgia Tech’s Sustainability Next seed grants](#). Dhekne applied for – and is awaiting a decision on – that grant, which includes funding for the participation of HSAAT’s board chair, Reverend Chuck Barlow, Sr. In the meantime, he has continued to stay abreast of the work of the group. If his project is funded, he will create a collaboration plan for Fall 2024 in conjunction with Barlow and his own graduate students that focuses on developing internet-in-a-box for use at the school and tailoring the prototype to suit the desires of the group. If this specific funding is not secured, Dhekne will stay engaged with HSAAT through SCoRE and seek other opportunities to collaborate with the group, get necessary funding, and support the Henderson Academy with internet-in-a-box.

LESSON LEARNED

“Long-term relationships built on trust are essential– and there are no shortcuts. Community partners cannot and should not be expected to engage with individual faculty who have no track record with the organization or in the community without doing the work of building rapport and shared goals first. However, it is possible - in some cases - for faculty members to execute research partnerships on a shorter timeline if there is a time-tested trustworthy liaison, such as SCoRE, to be present and active in the partnership, ensuring that the interest and vision of the partner remain centered, and that the basics of strong relationships – such as good communication, clearly articulated expectations, and maturing shared interests – are protected and advanced.”



HSAAT Leaders Rev. Chuck Barlow Sr., Mr. Jesse Duffey, and Deacon Charles McElhaney with SCoRE Staff Anna Tinoco-Santiago and Nicole Kennard and Faculty Fellows Ashutosh Dhekne (College of Computing) and Danielle Willkens (College of Design) in front of the Henderson School property in Jackson, Georgia. Photo by Ruthie Yow

Principles in Action

- » **C1 - Trust:** Build long-term, mutually respectful relationships with community partners; show up for each other to build trust, meet people, and see where things lead. Be an octopus: grow your tentacles.
- » **C2 - Learning Mindset:** Work with community partners, not for them; be humble and learn from partners as experts and innovators.

HSAAT is a longtime partner of SCoRE’s, and Dhekne knew that SCoRE staff were trusted collaborators in the estimation of HSAAT leadership. Dhekne met Mr. Barlow at the holiday gathering SCoRE hosted for faculty and partners and learned about HSAAT’s mission. Later in the semester, he took time to visit the site and talk with the organization’s leadership – spending the day in Jackson. After these two in-person interactions, he proposed a collaboration via the research funding opportunity described. The story offers one lens on how faculty with very little experience in community-engaged research and no prior relationship can jump-start a collaboration on a 6-9 month timeline. By leaning on the trust built over years between HSAAT and SCoRE, he could present to HSAAT, and get buy-in on, a research project in short order. In a case like this, SCoRE works to support a new partnership – vouching for each party to the other and taking a hands-on role in communicating with and supporting the sharing of expectations for each.

Dhekne approached HSAAT with genuine interest in the mission and with a commitment to understand how his own research might support HSAAT’s short- and long-term goals. When he realized that the full redevelopment of the site would be at least two years off, he listened to

HSAAT leadership to determine how – if at all – the internet-in-a-box technology could be useful to them in the interim. Respecting the timeline and the vision of the partners meant figuring out how to make the technology he is researching useful for the group at this point in time- meeting them where they are - while a fully functional Center is still years away. It also helped him get a finer-grained sense of how adroitly and creatively the organization was already utilizing its assets; the site is host to a variety of community activities including Easter Egg Hunts, a haunted house every October, and

plans to get the athletic field and gymnasium back in use while awaiting redevelopment of the main buildings. With an ear for gaining sense of HSAAT's existing assets, he was able to, in concert with Barlow, determine how internet-in-a-box could potentially support shorter-term programming goals and HSAAT's plans (such as programming in the gymnasium - used for free by local associations and nonprofit groups and for fee by for-profit groups) for keeping Jackson residents engaged and excited about the transformed school site, even on a long redevelopment timeline.

Related Resources:

- [Community Innovation Incubator](#)
- [When Technical Experts Set Out to "Do Good": Deficit-Based Constructions of "the Public" and the Moral Imperative for New Visions of Engagement](#)
- [Towards Creating the Truly Engaged, Responsive University: Penn's Partnership with the West Philadelphia Community as an Experiment in Progress](#)