

CASE STUDY

EMPOWERING  
COMMUNITIES:  
The Case of  
Schaumburg Township  
District Library



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# Empowering Communities: Public Libraries, Inclusive Civic Engagement, and Artificial Intelligence

## The Case of Schaumburg Township District Library

### Authors

Aryamala Prasad  
Mila Gascó-Hernández  
Zong-Xian Huang  
J. Ramon Gil-Garcia  
Femi Adelokun  
Brooks Rainwater

### For More Information

Center for Technology in  
Government, University at  
Albany (CTG UAlbany)  
UAB 120  
1400 Washington Avenue  
Albany, NY 12222  
P: 518.442.3892  
F: 518.442.3886  
[ctginfo@albany.edu](mailto:ctginfo@albany.edu)  
[www.ctg.albany.edu](http://www.ctg.albany.edu)

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# Introduction

The Center for Technology in Government at the University at Albany, State University of New York (CTG UAlbany), partnered with the Urban Libraries Council to conduct this case study on the Schaumburg Township District Library (STDL). This research is part of the three-year project, *Empowering Communities: Public Libraries, Inclusive Civic Engagement, and Artificial Intelligence*, funded by the Institute of Museum and Library Services (grant no. LG-252719-OLS).

In today's digitized world, the use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) has become popular in various industries to assist, or even replace, human actions and decision-making. Despite its potential benefits, the pervasive use of AI systems has urged discussions on the many different types of risks that they entail, and particularly on the AI-related societal and ethical implications, which include human bias and therefore the risk of perpetuating structural inequalities and particularly harming marginalized communities.

Although scholars and practitioners prescribe public engagement in AI to better identify potential harms, improve the quality of datasets, and better address community needs, there are no clear strategies to engage communities in AI initiatives nor availability of spaces where this engagement may take place. Based on CTG UAlbany's previous research on the role of public libraries in improving open governments ecosystems and in developing smart communities, we argue that public libraries are trusted learning spaces and community partners that may lead initiatives on critical and inclusive civic engagement in AI.

In this context, this project aims to understand the role of public libraries in fostering critical and inclusive civic engagement in AI initiatives, including their design, implementation, governance, and evaluation. The project is guided by three key research questions: 1) What role may public libraries play in increasing knowledge about AI in the community? 2) How may public libraries foster inclusive civic engagement in AI initiatives? 3) What are the opportunities, threats, benefits, and challenges of public libraries leading inclusive civic engagement in AI initiatives? Project results will be shared as one comprehensive report of current practices, four case studies, and one Practitioners' Guide that will provide specific suggestions to public libraries on how to become active in helping their patrons to become more knowledgeable about AI and engage in AI initiatives.

In the first phase of the project, the CTG UAlbany team conducted an environmental scan of AI programs offered by public libraries in the United States. Based on the programs identified, the research team selected Schaumburg Township District Library (STDL) as one of the four cases because they have introduced several AI programs for community

members, including a recurring course on ChatGPT. For this case study, the CTG UAlbany team reviewed the library documents and interviewed library staff and external partners. The research for this case was conducted in September and October 2024. In total, the team interviewed 11 library staff members, and two external partners involved in providing AI programs in the library. The research team interviewed staff members from different departments in the library to get a comprehensive understanding of AI programs, with each interview lasting about one hour. The interviews focused on understanding the current and future AI programs, civic engagement in AI initiatives, as well as the benefits, costs and challenges associated with implementing AI programs in public libraries.

This report presents an overview of the past and current AI programs offered by the Schaumburg Township District Library, outlining their benefits to the community, associated costs, and challenges in implementation. It also describes some strategies they employed to address and overcome these barriers.



# Background

## Context of the Community

The Township of Schaumburg, located in Cook County, Illinois, lies approximately 30 miles northwest of downtown Chicago. Once a farming community, it has transformed into a key economic hub in Illinois. According to the U.S. Census Bureau<sup>1</sup>, Schaumburg is home to 134,809 residents across 50,429 households. The population is composed of 56.38% White, 23.57% Asian, 14.88% Hispanic or Latino, and 4.53% African American, along with individuals from various other backgrounds. Notably, 48.5% of residents speak a language other than English at home, making it a vibrant and diverse community. Schaumburg is also economically well off, with a median household income of \$91,534 with only 8.7% of people below poverty line. The median age of residents is 40.9 years, and 18.8% of the population is 65 years or older.

## Schaumburg Township District Library

The Schaumburg Township District Library (STDL), founded in 1962, serves the residents in Schaumburg Township, which includes parts of Elk Grove Village, Hanover Park, Hoffman Estates, Schaumburg, and Streamwood. STDL is the second-largest public library in Illinois and employs more than 130 part-time and full-time staff. Its mission is to “spark curiosity and enrich [the] community by connecting services, resources, and people” (STDL, 2024). In addition to lending books, the library offers a range of community services, including literacy and citizenship classes, book discussions, story time for children, and computer and technology classes. According to the library, more than one million people visit STDL annually, with a yearly circulation of approximately two million books and digital materials.

The library plays a pivotal role in providing computer and technology services, offering resources, tools, and spaces to help community members prepare for the future. According to its strategic plan for 2022-2024, one of the library’s primary goals is to “provide access to knowledge, information, and entertainment through a variety of materials and services, both traditional and digital” (p. 9). In alignment with this goal, the Schaumburg Township District Library (STDL) focuses on user-centered technology to enhance services and promote learning opportunities.

A key initiative to achieve STDL goals is ensuring lifelong learning by equipping community members with essential 21<sup>st</sup>-century life and technology skills. To achieve this, the library

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<sup>1</sup>[https://data.census.gov/profile/Schaumburg\\_township,\\_Cook\\_County,\\_Illinois?g=060XX00US1703168016#housing](https://data.census.gov/profile/Schaumburg_township,_Cook_County,_Illinois?g=060XX00US1703168016#housing)



plans to expand one-on-one tech support, introduce more advanced tech classes, and continually assess its technology curriculum. Additionally, the Schaumburg community has access to a range of technological resources, including computers, laptops, printers, and a digital media collection. The library also has an Innovation Hub, which provides cutting-edge tools like 3D printers, laser cutters, and sewing machines, enabling users to explore and experiment with creative projects.



# AI Programs in the Library

STDL offers several AI programs designed to increase awareness and build competencies to meet its primary goal of equipping patrons with essential 21<sup>st</sup>-century skills. These initiatives began with the Teens Department organizing coding classes, robotics, and hackathons but expanded significantly due to the growing interest in AI sparked by the popularity of tools like ChatGPT. Recognizing the increasing relevance of AI, the library saw an opportunity to help patrons navigate these emerging technologies. Staff members have also received inquiries from patrons about AI safety and practical applications, reflecting both curiosity and a desire to use these tools. Currently, these programs are hosted at the Central Library, with the option to attend guest lectures via Zoom.

## Increasing Awareness

To introduce AI to patrons, the library hosts lectures and organizes interactive activities designed to raise awareness and understanding. Library staff noted a growing curiosity among patrons, who are eager to learn not only about the potential benefits of AI but also about the risks it may pose. Through these introductory programs, the library aims to foster informed opinions, providing patrons with the knowledge to navigate AI in their daily lives.

So far, the library has hosted a lecture on AI and a demonstration to showcase AI-based chatbot functions. One of the lectures organized in October 2023 was about “What is Artificial Intelligence and How Will AI Impact the Future?” The lecture focused on the basics of AI in terms of what it is and how it works. But it also discussed how it is going to impact society as well as some safe ways to use AI and some related tools. The lecture also demonstrated the use of ChatGPT and other generative AI models to create images. To make the class more useful and informative, patrons were asked to submit questions in advance to ensure the speaker and library staff were prepared to address any fears or discomfort with AI. The class was offered by an engineer who is an expert in AI and cybersecurity and collaborates with communities and businesses across Illinois to increase awareness of emerging technologies. The library focused on making the class accessible by offering the lecture in hybrid format so people could attend online and in-person.

In addition, the library organized a "Conversation with AI" demonstration during the opening of their new Tech Lab in September 2024. Computers were set up with AI tools, allowing patrons to select a character and start a conversation. They could try different prompts, such as asking a question or writing a poem using AI. The event was organized to spark interest and allow people experience AI in a fun and engaging way.



## Building Competencies

The recurring program at STDL includes an AI course about ChatGPT, which is offered as part of the technology learning series. It is an introductory class on ChatGPT that begins with a lecture on what ChatGPT is, how it is used, and the challenges related to AI. Then the instructor demonstrates the use of the AI tool while getting feedback from the participants. The instructor makes the class interactive by asking the participants to suggest prompts to try with ChatGPT. Following the hands-on experience, the instructor and the participants discuss the risks and benefits of AI as well as future implications of it. Some topics that are discussed include the copyright legal issues behind the content generated by AI or the reliability of the information. This ChatGPT and AI course is offered once a month only in the Central Library location. AI is also taught as part of other tech classes such as iPhone/iPad where the patrons learn to use voice assistants like Siri.

In June 2024, the Schaumburg Township District Library also organized the "LinkedIn Profile with ChatGPT and Canva" lecture to help participants improve their LinkedIn profile. This session guided participants on using Canva for designing professional LinkedIn banners and ChatGPT for crafting impactful profile descriptions. This hands-on class aimed to enhance digital skills, specifically for job seekers and professionals looking to strengthen their online profiles by improving their profile headlines, summaries, and job descriptions. This initiative is part of the library's broader effort to support community career development and digital literacy.



## Future Plans to Improve the Offer of AI-Related Programs and Services

The library is actively exploring new ways to expand its AI programs and generate interest in this technology as the recent creation of an AI taskforce aimed at helping with the programming strategy shows.

To raise awareness, the Programs Department is exploring creative activities to make learning about AI both fun and accessible, such as using ChatGPT to write poems and stories. This creative method also aims to spark interest in the new technology among patrons who might be hesitant to use AI because of its risks. The Technology Learning Department is considering smaller, hands-on classes tailored to specific AI tools, providing patrons with a focused 30-minute session to explore and understand these technologies. Additionally, as AI is integrated into various software applications, the library plans to introduce tools like CoPilot in its Windows classes and Apple Intelligence features on the iPhone. This approach would help patrons identify and navigate AI features embedded within these programs, empowering them to decide whether to use or disable such tools based on their preferences.

The new Innovation Hub is also at the early stages of thinking about integrating AI programs as part of creative tools available to patrons. For example, the library is planning to use AI as part of Canva and Adobe Creative Cloud to help with design tasks. In addition, there is a photo editing program called Pebbely that can be helpful for people planning to start a small business or a side business. Furthermore, there are programs, such as Arduino, which can be used for various projects. While some of these tools require coding skills, emerging AI tools are helping users write code, making it more accessible for beginners. The library is also exploring Computer Aided Design programs, such as Autodesk, which can be of help to create 3D models.

In addition, staff members had a few suggestions that they would like to explore in the future. One idea is to have a scholar-in-residence or invite an AI expert to deliver talks on various topics, such as the practical use of AI, ethical considerations, and its impact on local civic issues. Additionally, the expert could address subjects like deepfakes, including how they are created and ways to identify them. Another idea involves hosting drop-in pop-up sessions where patrons can explore AI through different prompts, adding an element of fun and entertainment to the learning experience. Staff also recommended expanding AI courses to other branch locations and offering them in Spanish to better serve non-English-speaking patrons as well as expanding options for hybrid courses. These initiatives aim to make AI education more engaging, inclusive, and widely accessible.

Finally, the library is also taking steps to ensure programming on the topic of civic awareness. In this respect, they have partnered with the League of Women Voters to develop a program on Artificial Intelligence and its Effects on Politics, which would promote inclusive civic engagement.



# Benefits of Introducing AI Programs

According to the library staff, the AI programs offered have benefits to the community members as well as the library. The following sections briefly explain these benefits.

## Benefits to Community Members

The AI courses have greatly benefited community members by enhancing their awareness of AI and introducing them to various AI tools, allowing participants to gain valuable new skills. These AI programs have also reinforced the library's role as a welcoming space for learning and open dialogue. Through lectures and introductory classes, the library expects to have also helped alleviate the fear and uncertainty some people feel toward AI, as the goal of these programs is to empower people by teaching them how to use these tools effectively. Even for those who are familiar with AI but unsure of the benefits, the classes help in providing a foundation, enabling them to explore and apply AI independently. Patrons, particularly older adults, can now view the library as a safe space for lifelong learning and open dialogue about AI.

The more hands-on classes on AI tools also develop competencies of patrons. Through the classes, they learn how to use these tools in their daily lives. In particular, the classes on ChatGPT introduce patrons to the conversational nature of chatbots, being able to interact with them and ask a question. These skills can be useful to ask for a recipe or to upload an image and ask for an answer. These skills are becoming more important as chatbots and voice assistants, such as the Google Gemini or Microsoft Co-Pilot, become popular. In the case of Schaumburg, this is particularly useful considering a lot of people participating in these programs are older adults. Similarly, the lecture on the use of AI for LinkedIn allowed patrons to learn about the AI tools built into LinkedIn and Canva. According to the instructor, at least 75 percent of the participants did not know that LinkedIn had AI capabilities.

## Benefits to the Library

From the library point of view, the key benefits have been to demonstrate that the library is still a relevant space for 21<sup>st</sup> century learning. The introduction of AI programs assures patrons that the library is evolving to accommodate the technological changes and encourages them to explore library services. By doing so, the library provides a space for patrons to learn about a technology that is important to them and helps them connect with other members of the local community to discuss the topic in depth. From this standpoint,

the library can maintain its mission of ensuring learning opportunities for patrons, but also make sure that they are happy with the library.

In addition, these AI programs have helped the library internally to integrate AI tools. First, as part of offering the AI programs, the staff are also learning about this technology and the development of AI tools. This use of AI has increased their knowledge of AI and expanded their own thinking about it. It has also helped some staff members to think about AI guidelines and policies to govern internal usage of AI tools. A better understanding of AI helps in identifying important aspects of policies.

Lastly, at STDL, AI programs have also brought them media exposure. For example, a local news channel WGN did a news segment on artificial intelligence, and they reached out to the library to interview the AI expert and the library initiatives. The news network attended the lecture to film the content and used the event as part of the piece they were doing on artificial intelligence.



## Costs of Introducing AI-related programs

At STDL, the costs of offering AI programs have been minimal, as the library effectively uses its existing resources to provide these services. The programs include technology-focused classes and lectures that align with the library's ongoing services. For the AI course, the library leverages free AI tools like ChatGPT and AI software integrated into existing packages from providers like Apple, Microsoft, and Google. This approach eliminates the need for additional investments in hardware or software. If the library chooses to adopt subscription-based AI tools in the future, additional costs might arise. STDL has also recently invested in technology infrastructure as part of a broader renovation project, which included new tech labs and innovation hub, which has helped in making more technological resources available, thereby reducing the cost of AI programs.

The primary expense for AI programs has been the honorarium for invited speakers. Even so, these costs are not significant as most speakers contribute without requesting payment. For example, of the two recent AI-focused events, only one included an honorarium. The other event was led by an AI expert who volunteered their time to share knowledge with the community. By relying on existing classrooms and the library's Zoom account for virtual events, the library avoids incurring in additional operational expenses for program delivery.

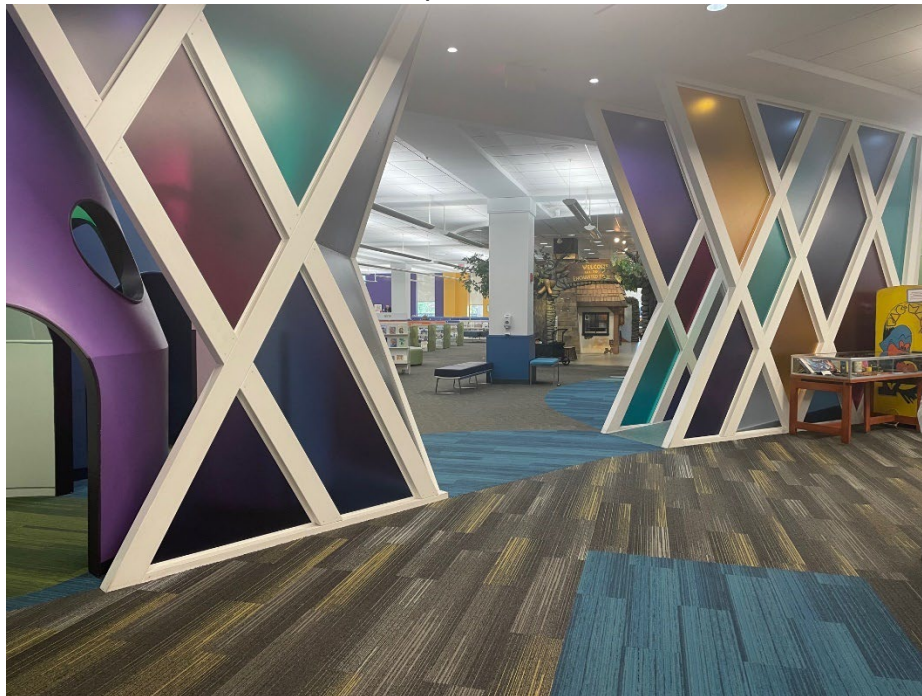
## Challenges of Introducing AI-Related Programs

### Main Challenges

One of the main challenges of introducing AI-related programs has been promoting them effectively. Although the classes and lectures held so far have attracted good participation, library staff believe that reaching out to a wider audience could further increase attendance. Currently, the library promotes AI programs primarily through its website. However, word of mouth has proven to be the most effective method for driving interest in classes such as ChatGPT and AI. When patrons seek assistance at the technology section's service desk, staff often mention these classes, and attendees frequently spread the word to others. Still, awareness about the classes does not always lead to registrations. Therefore, staff find incentivizing participation for these classes also a challenge. Despite these difficulties, the monthly ChatGPT and AI class, with up to 50 seats, sees at least 35 people in attendance and 40 registered participants.

Other challenges in encouraging participation includes the fact that the library services an older community that sometimes finds technology intimidating. This population is often hesitant to trust or engage with technology. In addition, the technology classes are offered in person, and some patrons might not be able to attend because of mobility barriers or the specific times at which the classes are offered. To encourage participation, the lectures on AI are offered in a hybrid format which makes it easier for people to attend online; however, this is not possible with the hands-on technology classes.

The staff also faces challenges in designing or implementing the program. When thinking about organizing lectures, the Programs Department has to be familiar with the different types of AI to think about the possible events they can organize. Staff who were not familiar with the wide range of AI technologies could limit themselves to only popular AI tools. Similarly, when designing the technology course, the library had one staff member who did the research to develop the AI curriculum and coordinate with other staff to



finalize it. In this process, the staff member was also learning new AI tools but the pace at which these tools were developing made it difficult to keep up with it. Therefore, offering these AI classes becomes challenging for the library staff and it takes time for them to learn the tools, develop curriculum, and teach patrons.

Relatedly, the library staff members also think they have the responsibility to make sure the classes are offered in a responsible way so that the patrons have access to the best information possible. This is a challenge because not all library staff members have the same knowledge about AI. There are a few members who are well informed and qualified to teach but others are not aware of it. Therefore, the library has the challenge of enhancing AI knowledge among its staff.

## Current Strategies to Address the Challenges

The STDL library has already initiated measures to tackle the challenges related to informing local communities. To boost participation in technology-focused classes, the library's technology learning team has concentrated efforts on enhancing the visibility and outreach of these programs. Initially, when new classes on topics such as ChatGPT and AI were introduced, the library's marketing efforts were limited to one-time announcements posted on their website. However, recognizing the need for ongoing promotion, the Technology Department has now reached out to the marketing team to provide regular updates about these recurring technology classes. Additionally, the information about classes were only available on the library website and program guides. But now the patrons can obtain information at the service desk and the adult information desk, where there are physical copies of program information that can be handed over to patrons.

In addition, the library also ensures that the classes and lectures are offered in a responsible way by bringing external experts. Due to the lack of in-house AI specialists, the library carefully vets invited lecturers to confirm they will deliver accurate and unbiased information. Additionally, the library collaborates with other libraries to gather recommendations for reputable AI experts, further ensuring the quality and reliability of the presenters. For example, the expert who offered the LinkedIn with AI lecture was recommended to STDL by another library in the region.

## Lessons Learned

This section reflects on the STDL experience of implementing AI programs to share insights, including success and challenges to highlight key takeaways and actionable recommendations.

## Recognizing the Importance of AI

Successful implementation of AI programs requires support of library leadership and staff. STDL was able to implement AI programs because the leadership team as well as different departments recognized AI as an important technology for advancing library services. They view AI in various capacities, from a tool capable of creating deepfakes to a resource to help individuals develop their skills for professional career and creativity. As a result, the departments were able to develop and implement programs in the library without challenges.



## Leveraging Existing Resources

Libraries can design cost-effective AI programs based on available resources. For instance, STDL has successfully implemented AI programs with minimal costs because they relied on existing infrastructure and staff to design and implement AI programs. The Technology Department also explored free AI software as well as relied on AI tools integrated with software packages already subscribed by the library, leading to the reduced need for new purchases. For instance, some of the classes being considered are related to using Microsoft CoPilot, Adobe Photoshop, etc. which are already subscribed by the library. In addition, although the Programs Department planned for AI programs based on their current budget, they found an expert who volunteers to give lectures on AI. By learning from STDL's approach, other libraries can also assess available resources to strategically plan for AI programs.



## Actively Promoting Programs to Ensure Participation

One of the challenges faced by the STDL was limited participation in their recurring AI course, suggesting the need for libraries to actively promote AI programs. Although the classes at STDL can accommodate up to 50 participants, attendance typically ranges from 30 to 35. Additionally, some who register failed to attend, possibly due to mobility issues or inconvenient class timings. One of the ways to addressing this challenge is to offer classes online or in hybrid format. Even the STDL has seen high participation in lectures offered in hybrid format, but it is difficult to follow the same for hands-on classes such as ChatGPT and AI. As other libraries start planning for AI programs, they should consider the accessibility of programs to the broader community and include online options, if possible.

## Need for Collaboration

The STDL's experience in implementing AI program highlights the need for libraries to explore collaborations with other organizations to bring additional expertise. A significant challenge the STDL faced was the limited expertise of staff in AI technologies. While staff members were familiar with AI tools, keeping up with new versions and the latest developments required substantial time and effort, potentially restricting the range of programs the library could offer. To address this, libraries should consider partnering with organizations that specialize in AI.



## Final remarks

The STDL started focusing on AI programs by offering a ChatGPT and AI course. It has since expanded its programs to include a range of AI tools that help patrons to increase their knowledge of AI and build technological skills necessary to make meaningful use of AI. By doing so, the library is fulfilling its mission to sustain lifelong learning for the community while ensuring the library remains relevant to learn 21<sup>st</sup> century skills. As a result, the library is exploring various other ways to enhance AI knowledge among patrons including fun and creative methods to spark interest in the technology as some people are worried about the potential risks of AI.

Based on the AI programs offered so far, patrons have not only gained knowledge about AI but also developed skills to incorporate AI tools into their daily lives. For instance, lectures on using AI to enhance LinkedIn profiles and presentations introducing AI have helped participants learn how to use AI safely. Similarly, the ChatGPT and AI course assist participants in utilizing tools like chatbots to access relevant information. Despite these benefits, the library faces challenges in increasing participation in its technology courses. Although the exact reasons for limited attendance are unclear, factors such as mobility barriers and hesitation toward AI may contribute to stagnant numbers. To address this, the library is planning to improve its marketing efforts to reach a larger audience.

Finally, reflecting on the purpose of this case study, while the library is exploring new ways to expand its AI programs to address patrons' concerns and reach a broader audience, the integration of civic engagement into AI programming remains an area yet to be developed. Interviews with library staff suggest that they find the idea of incorporating civic engagement into AI programs beneficial, however, there does not seem to exist any current or planned initiatives in this area. That said, the library does actively facilitate civic engagement on topics like elections and voting. According to the library leadership, the absence of civic engagement in AI-related efforts is partly due to the lack of a dedicated department to lead such initiatives. Additionally, past experiences suggest that the library typically organizes discussions in response to the community's demands, and so far, there has been little indication of interest in civic engagement related to AI.



**For more information, please contact**

**CTG UAlbany  
University at Albany  
UAB 120 | 1400 Washington Avenue  
Albany, NY 12222  
P: 518.442.3892 | F: 518.442.3886  
ctginfo@albany.edu | www.ctg.albany.edu**