Bridging the Digital Divide: Empowering Rural Students Through Digital Literacy & Online Education
Bangladesh
Gettysburg College
Pronob Sarker, Bangladesh, Gettysburg College ’26

Bangladesh, a country which got independence just a few decades ago after a devastating liberation war, has been struggling to fulfill basic needs such as access to quality education, healthcare, drinking water, employment, etc for its citizens. Almost 35 percent of the population in rural areas lives below the poverty line of US $2 per day. Poverty matters because it hinders economic growth, access to basic needs, education, health care, human development, etc. The best solution to poverty is education, as it can prevent the transmission of poverty between generations. But in Bangladesh, the disparity between urban and rural education, such as socio-economic conditions, access to qualified and experienced teachers, books, study materials, technology and digital resources, and lack of awareness about the importance of education, is huge, leading to high dropout rates in rural areas. According to a report on Access and Equity in Higher Education in Bangladesh, less than 5% of the total enrollment in higher education institutions is from the poorest families and villages, whereas more than 65% of the country’s population lives in villages. This disparity in access to higher education is a major contributor to the persistence of poverty in rural areas, as higher levels of education are strongly correlated with increased income and improved livelihoods.

As a student from a small city, I’ve experienced many of the issues firsthand. While many of my big city and wealthier friends had access to qualified teachers, books, and private tutors, a lot of my brilliant peers who could not afford those resources were less prepared for the college entrance exams. As a result, not being able to get a seat in the public university, they dropped out and started working in the garment factories as child laborers.

Although I was privileged enough to escape this situation, I could not ignore this obvious disparity. That is why this summer, with the help of the Davis Projects for Peace Fund, I want to remove the major barriers to education in rural areas that make rural students fall behind. By bridging the digital divide and connecting them to the resources they need to be prepared for college, my team and I aim to empower students to improve their educational outcomes, increase their employability and ultimately break the intergenerational cycle of poverty.

For this project, we have chosen a subdistrict (Sadullapur) of one of the poorest districts in Bangladesh—Gaibandha—with a high poverty rate and low human development indicators. Gaibandha is a neighboring district of Bogura where I am from, and this district used to be called a “Manga” (a Bengali term, meaning yearly cyclical phenomenon of poverty and hunger) district. The majority of the population in Gaibandha depends on agriculture for their livelihood. Because of the extreme cyclical poverty in this region, the college enrollment from this region is very low.

Partner Organizations:
To alleviate the suffering of underprivileged students and create equal access to education, I joined Academic and Admission Pathshala in 2019. Since its founding, AAP has helped more than a hundred thousand students by providing free academic tutoring (online live classes), online resources such as video lectures, e-books and study notes, college admission assistance, test preparation, and career counseling-related services to students in Bangladesh.

Filler Education is an organization led by experienced students studying abroad in different countries. Since 2020, they have assisted thousands of students online by sharing their experiences, tips, and advice for the abroad college application process, organizing workshops on standardized tests such as SAT and IELTS, and navigating the challenges of studying in a foreign country.


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Project Details:
The project is divided into three stages.

First Phase: In the first phase, we will buy computers to set up a computer lab with an internet connection at a high school in Sadullapur, Gaibandha. Afterward, we will organize an approximately two-week-long comprehensive training on building students' digital literacy skills. To design the training material, I will work with an experienced computer trainer from the Department of Government Social Welfare, Bogura. The training will include and is not limited to computer and device use basics, working with operating systems and applications, collaborating and accessing information online using different tools, and keeping yourself secured online. The main goal of this phase is to familiarize and make students comfortable with using digital tools like computers and the internet so that, with the help of these tools, they can access many different resources online.

Second Phase: In the second phase, notable trainers from Academic and Admission Pathshala (AAP), Filler Education and a guidance counselor from a renowned urban high school will join our team and begin a detailed another 15-day workshop program in which we will first discuss how a college education can help the students break the cycle of poverty. Following that, we will provide a general overview of different fields of study (e.g., medical, engineering, law, etc.), opportunities in those fields, and advice on preparing for the relevant admission tests to enroll in college. The Filler Education and the guidance counselor team will take over the workshop later in the second phase. Their experienced mentors will explain study-abroad opportunities for the students, fully funded scholarships, and the step-by-step procedure of creating different scholarship applications. Finally, all the students will be introduced to and given access to AAP’s resources (i.e., online library, virtual live classes, and mock tests to prepare for their academics and college admissions).

Third Phase: In the third phase, to inspire trainees, we will invite successful current college students and graduates from rural areas to share their journey—how they achieved their goals with perseverance and hard work despite financial constraints and not having access to many resources in their areas. Speakers who are studying abroad will join virtually when necessary. I believe this session will heavily inspire all the students to prepare themselves to enroll in a college. Finally, we will take questions from the students and, based on their type of interest in college, we will divide them into small messenger groups and assign an experienced mentor to each group. Students can contact their allocated mentor for suggestions and one-on-one support in addition to learning from the online library and resources we have provided them.

To keep students motivated and incentivized to attend training sessions regularly, we will provide a nutritious lunch for all on every training day. Moreover, to encourage them more, we will give small gifts like t-shirts and organize a small quiz at the end of each training phase where they will get the chance to win study materials such as calculators and pencil boxes, etc., as a gift. Research shows that if there are any kind of instant incentives, trainees tend to be more motivated and attentive during the training sessions.

Sustainability:
Our goal is to run the cycle of empowering students every summer. As we set up the labs collaborating with local organizations, we will bring the local teachers under the digital literacy training. We will also create a mentorship program where successful college students and graduates can continue to support and guide the students as they progress through their education. This will help to develop a sense of community and support among the students. Also, mentors will get volunteering and networking experience with certificates and any other benefits. For the funding, besides seeking funds from government agencies, foundations, and private donors, we will associate a subscription-based fee for using computers and provide need-based financial aid to the students for the subscription fees. Our research shows that if we can continue doing these
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things in Gaibandha for a few years, the college enrollment rate will increase, and the poverty in those areas will begin to decrease significantly.

Connection to Peace:
Access to quality education for all is crucial to creating a peaceful and equitable society. Education helps to reduce poverty and inequality, which are significant drivers of conflict. It is strongly believed that poverty and illiteracy are solid motivating factors behind domestic violence and crime. Poverty and illiteracy prompts people to join gangs in search of stability. An educated individual with good critical thinking skills will understand the impact of violence and crime and choose not to do it. Because the link between economic scarcity and injustice or violence is so high, by providing access to quality education for all, regardless of socio-economic background, race, gender, or religion, society can reduce discrimination, and the gap between different groups of people reduces conflict and promotes peace. Moreover, many of the activities in the training segments will require students to self-reflect and collaborate with different-minded people, promoting empathy and group work needed to build a peaceful society.

3 https://gsdrc.org/professional-dev/jobs-unemployment-and-violence/