

Making the Case for Digital Equity

Download the Slide Deck:

<https://nysden.link/scm-digital-equity-slides>



Download the Handouts:

<https://nysden.link/scm-digital-equity-handouts>



Workshop Handout: Building Your Brief Case Statement

February 3, 2026 | Net Inclusion: Chicago, IL

- Barry Fried; Managing Director, Digital Equity & STEM Education Programs; The STEM Alliance
- Meg Käufer; Chief Visionary Officer; The STEM Alliance
- Alex Paute Martinez; Senior Associate, Digital Equity Programs; The STEM Alliance
- Don Matteson; Facilitator; WNY Digital Equity Coalition

The Persuasive Arc: Your Framework for Today

Today you'll build a brief digital equity case statement using seven of Dr. Tiffany Manuel's ten Strategic Casemaking principles. We've organized them into three acts:

- **ACT 1: THE VISION** — Connect to Aspirations + Story of Us
- **ACT 2: THE OBSTACLES** — Navigate Narratives + Systems as Villain + Loss Aversion
- **ACT 3: THE BREAKTHROUGH** — Anchor Solutions + Value Proposition

You'll practice each act separately, then combine them into your complete case statement.

Note: Principles are numbered according to their presentation in Dr. Tiffany Manuel's book, not in the order they're presented. This might be a little confusing, but it'll make it easier for you to round out your case with the other three principles if you refer to Dr. T's book.

Learn More

Book: *Case Made! Strategic Casemaking: Field Guide for Building Public and Political Will* by Dr. Tiffany Manuel

Website: www.thecasemade.com



List of VALUES

Accountability	Ethics	Kindness	Self-respect
Achievement	Excellence	Knowledge	Serenity
Adaptability	Fairness	Leadership	Service
Adventure	Faith	Learning	Simplicity
Altruism	Family	Legacy	Spirituality
Ambition	Financial stability	Leisure	Sportsmanship
Authenticity	Forgiveness	Love	Stewardship
Balance	Freedom	Loyalty	Success
Beauty	Friendship	Making a difference	Teamwork
Being the best	Fun	Nature	Thrift
Belonging	Future generations	Openness	Time
Career	Generosity	Optimism	Tradition
Caring	Giving back	Order	Travel
Collaboration	Grace	Parenting	Trust
Commitment	Gratitude	Patience	Truth
Community	Growth	Patriotism	Understanding
Compassion	Harmony	Peace	Uniqueness
Competence	Health	Perseverance	Usefulness
Confidence	Home	Personal fulfillment	Vision
Connection	Honesty	Power	Vulnerability
Contentment	Hope	Pride	Wealth
Contribution	Humility	Recognition	Well-being
Cooperation	Humor	Reliability	Wholeheartedness
Courage	Inclusion	Resourcefulness	Wisdom
Creativity	Independence	Respect	
Curiosity	Initiative	Responsibility	
Dignity	Integrity	Risk-taking	
Diversity	Intuition	Safety	
Environment	Job security	Security	
Efficiency	Joy	Self-discipline	
Equality	Justice	Self-expression	

Write your own:

PRACTICE MOMENT #1: Craft THE VISION (45 seconds)

Strategic Casemaking Principles:

- **Principle #1: Connect to Aspirations** — Lead with shared values, not problems
- **Principle #7: Tell the "Story of Us"** — Show how everyone's futures are interconnected

Your target audience/stakeholder (name/role): _____

What you're asking them to do: _____

Individual Work (4 minutes)

Write one core value driving YOUR digital equity work that will ALSO resonate with your stakeholder:

Write one aspirational outcome for your community:

Write out how digital equity gets us to this aspirational outcome:

Pairs Work (~4 minutes) — Each person gets ~2 minutes

When you're the SPEAKER:

- Share your value and aspiration (30 seconds)
- Listen as your partner mirrors back what they heard
- Respond to their probing questions.
- Refine your language based on feedback

When you're the LISTENER:

- Mirror back: "What I hear is you value..."
- Ask 1-2 probing questions:
 - "Why does that value matter to you?"
 - "When have you seen it come alive in your work?"
 - "Who else shares that value?"
 - "Is that the deepest word for what you mean?"

Small Group Work (9 minutes)

Groups of 3-4: Craft your 45-second opening together

WE & WHY statement (15 seconds):

Story of Us connection (15 seconds):

Digital equity bridge (15 seconds):

Digital Equity Derailers

Financial/Economic Objections

- Other things have a better ROI/Other issues deserve funding priority
- How do you know it works?
- Markets should solve this problem
- Rural communities can't afford to do broadband/equipment/digital skills projects
- We don't have the budget or resources at the state/local level to invest in this work
- It costs too much to overhaul existing infrastructure/networks
- Protected territories of Rural Local Exchange Carriers (RLECs) are being infringed upon

Political/Policy Objections

- Stop being “woke.” (Terms "equity" and "inclusion" trigger political resistance due to association with DEI initiatives)
- It's just not a high priority (Lack of political will to allocate budget)
- We spend plenty on broadband. (Insufficient awareness of digital equity as distinct from broadband access; Assumption that broadband infrastructure alone will solve the Digital Divide)
- I don't think digital inequity has anything to do with poverty/racism/health access/etc. (other social inequities)

Advocacy

- This other issue is more important (Other issues have stronger advocacy movements and political momentum)
- Insufficient local advocacy infrastructure
- Difficulty building broad coalitions
- Limited time/resources for community engagement and advocacy

Social/Cultural Objections

- "People should just work harder to afford what they need" (individualism narrative)
- Digital technology can have negative effects:
 - Device addiction/disconnection from real world
 - Online echo chambers and polarization
 - Exposure to bad actors and misinformation

- Potential influence on violent/criminal behavior
 - Digital technology favors dominant cultures/languages and may harm smaller cultural groups
- Communities should have the right to reject digital adoption

Systemic/Structural Barriers

- I have no idea what you're talking about (Digital inequity can be invisible — "out of sight, out of mind")
- Digital equity not recognized as an educational issue or utility

Implementation Challenges

- Lack of universal standards for digital inclusion
- Rural areas face unique challenges in implementation
- People can access what they need on their phones (Mobile-only access insufficient for full digital participation)
- Sustainability concerns ("Is internet in every home feasible and sustainable?")
- Limited capacity of existing service providers
- Difficulty coordinating across multiple stakeholders

Messaging/Communication Challenges

- What does digital equity/inclusion even mean? (Terms create confusion and/or resistance.)
- Doesn't affect me. What's the problem? (Difficulty communicating impact to those who already have access.)
- What's in it for me? (Challenge of demonstrating immediate benefits to skeptical stakeholders.)
- Lack of clear, compelling narrative that resonates across political spectrum
- Need for rebranding to focus on practical benefits rather than equity framework

PRACTICE MOMENT #2: Clarify THE OBSTACLES (60 seconds)

Strategic Casemaking Principles:

- **Principle #4: Navigate Dominant Narratives** — Name common myths and refute them with data
- **Principle #6: Make Systems the Villain** — Target broken systems, not people or organizations
- **Principle #3: Trigger Loss Aversion** — Paint two distinct futures (humans respond 2-3x more strongly to loss than gain)

Individual Work (5 minutes)

What's a MYTH you think your stakeholder believes? (Choose or write your own)

How do you dispel that myth?

Reframe your challenge: What SYSTEM is broken? (Not people lacking)

What do we LOSE if we don't fix this? (Name 3 concrete losses)

1.

2.

3.

Pairs Work (5 minutes) — Each person gets 2.5 minutes

When you're the SPEAKER:

- Share your myth, broken system, and losses (60 seconds)
- Listen to your partner's probing questions
- Refine your framing based on feedback

When you're the LISTENER:

- Ask 2-3 probing questions:
 - "Is that really the SYSTEM, or is it still about people?"
 - "What's the catchiest way to name that myth?"
 - "What loss hits closest to home for your audience?"
 - "Can you make the 'if we don't act' even more concrete?"

Small Group Work (12 minutes)

Reconvene your groups of 3-4: Draft your 60-second Obstacles section

Counter one myth (15 seconds):

Name the system that needs changing (15 seconds):

Paint two futures — loss and gain (30 seconds):

If we act: _____

If we don't act: _____

PRACTICE MOMENT #3: Present THE BREAKTHROUGH (30 seconds)

Strategic Casemaking Principles:

- **Principle #5: Anchor & Credential Solutions** — Lead with proven solutions using social math, proof points, and anchoring language
- **Principle #9: Reimagine Your Value Proposition** — Position yourself as partner, not just advocate

Individual Work (3 minutes)

What proof point can you use? (Where is this working?)

What do YOU/WE bring to solving this? (Skills, relationships, resources, credibility)

Pairs Work (3 minutes) — Each person gets 1.5 minutes

When you're the SPEAKER:

- Share your proof point and what you bring (30 seconds)
- Listen to your partner's probing questions
- Refine your examples based on feedback

When you're the LISTENER:

- Ask 1-2 probing questions:
 - "Is that proof point specific enough—where exactly is this working?"
 - "What's your most compelling asset?"
 - "Can you make the 'we're ready' statement stronger?"
 - "Who needs to hear that you bring [X]?"

One-on-One Speed Pitches (16 minutes)

Find a NEW partner from a different table. Take turns delivering your complete 2-minute case statement.

Deliver Your Case Statement

- **The Vision** (~45 sec): WE & WHY + Story of Us + Digital equity bridge
- **The Obstacles** (~60 sec): Counter myth + Name system + Two futures
- **The Breakthrough** (~30 sec): Proof point + Value proposition

Feedback You Received

Round One

What landed strongest?

What could be sharper or clearer?

What would you change based on this feedback?

Round Two

What landed strongest?

What could be sharper or clearer?

What would you change based on this feedback?

YOUR COMPLETE BRIEF CASE STATEMENT

THE VISION (45 seconds)

WE & WHY (15 sec):

Story of Us (15 sec):

Digital Equity Bridge (15 sec):

THE OBSTACLES (60 seconds)

Counter myth (15 sec):

Name broken system (15 sec):

Two futures (30 sec):

If we act: _____

If we don't: _____

THE BREAKTHROUGH (30 seconds)

Proof point (15 sec):

Value proposition (15 sec):

QUICK REFERENCE: Seven Strategic Casemaking Principles

(Principles are numbered according to their presentation in Dr. Tiffany Manuel's book.)

Principle #1: Connect to Aspirations

Tool: Lead with WE & WHY

- Start with shared values, not problems
- People listen when they believe you share their values
- Example: "We are a community that believes everyone deserves opportunity to thrive"

Principle #7: Tell the "Story of Us"

Tool: Show How Everyone's Futures Are Connected

- Move from "helping them" to "we're all in this together"
- Expands your coalition—everyone sees their stake
- Example: Show how residents, businesses, healthcare, schools are all interconnected

Principle #4: Navigate Dominant Narratives

Tool: Name the Myth, Then Reframe with Facts

- Don't ignore dominant narratives—address them directly
- Use data and lived experience to counter myths
- Example: "Everyone has internet now" → "22% lack broadband, smartphone-only can't support work/learning"

The Strategic Pivot (Tactical Extension): When someone objects in live conversation:

1. Acknowledge the underlying concern
2. DON'T repeat their framing
3. Redirect to your strategic case

Example: "I hear fiscal responsibility concern" → "That's why this investment pays returns through reduced ER visits..."

Principle #6: Make Systems the Villain

Tool: Reframe from People to Systems

- Target broken systems, not people or organizations
- Centers equity and justice
- Example: Not "low-income families can't afford service" → "Our subsidy systems are fragmented and inaccessible"

Principle #3: Trigger Loss Aversion

Tool: Paint Two Distinct Futures

- Humans respond 2-3x more strongly to loss than gain
- Show concrete consequences of inaction
- Example: "If we act: families have stability" vs. "If we don't: digital divide widens"

Principle #5: Anchor & Credential Solutions

Tool: Lead with Proven Approaches

- **Social Math:** Compare abstract numbers to something relatable
 - Example: "Chattanooga provides 1GB fiber for \$67/month—if a city of 180,000 can do it, why can't we?"
- **Proof Points:** Show where solutions already work
 - Example: "Syracuse Surge Link connected 2,000 households at \$10/month"
- **Anchoring Language:** Frame with agency and possibility
 - Example: "We built the internet, we can make it accessible"

Principle #9: Reimagine Your Value Proposition

Tool: Position Yourself as Partner, Not Just Advocate

- Identify what YOU/WE bring (skills, relationships, resources, credibility)
 - Show you're rolling up your sleeves, not just pointing at problems
 - Example: "Our coalition connects ISPs, schools, libraries, and 30 community organizations. We're ready to implement."
-

Three More Principles (Not Covered Today)

- **Principle #2: Name the Power of the Moment** — Why is this the pivotal time to engage?
- **Principle #8: Foster Collective Ownership** — Everyone has a role; you have more power than you think
- **Principle #10: Sharing Roadmap & Metrics** — Create clear pathways with measurable milestones

The Bridge of Understanding

A Framework for Audience Empathy

Before adapting your case for a specific stakeholder, use these four questions to understand what motivates them:

1. **Aspirations:** What does this person hope for? What are their goals?
2. **Impediments:** What obstacles stand in their way?
3. **Connections:** How does our issue connect to what they care about?
4. **Loss:** What do they stand to lose if they don't act?

This framework helps you see the issue from their perspective and adapt your case accordingly.

Remember: Your core case statement provides the foundation. This tool helps you adapt it for maximum persuasive power with each specific decision-maker.

Supplement: STAKEHOLDER ANALYSIS TOOL

Adapting Your Case to Specific Decision-Makers

Use this framework after developing your core case statement to tailor your pitch to specific stakeholders.

STEP 1: Identify Your Stakeholder

Who is the decision-maker you need to influence?

Name/Title: _____

What specific action do you need them to take?

- ☐ Vote for/approve a policy or budget
- ☐ Fund a program or initiative
- ☐ Partner with your organization
- ☐ Advocate publicly for digital equity
- ☐ Other: _____

STEP 2: Understand What Motivates Them

Their Aspirations

What does this stakeholder care about? What are their stated goals or values?

Examples: Economic development, fiscal responsibility, education outcomes, constituent service, equity, innovation

Their Impediments

What obstacles or concerns might prevent them from acting?

Examples: Budget constraints, political risk, competing priorities, lack of information, constituency opposition

Their Connections

How does digital equity connect to what they already care about?

Examples: If they care about workforce development, show how digital access enables job training; if they care about healthcare costs, show how telehealth reduces ER visits

Their Potential Losses

What does this stakeholder stand to lose if they don't act on digital equity?

Examples: Economic competitiveness, constituent satisfaction, ability to deliver services, reputation as an innovator

STEP 3: Adapt Your Case Statement

Adjust Your WE & WHY (Principle #1: Connect to Aspirations)

Which shared value will resonate most with this stakeholder?

Original: _____

Adapted for this stakeholder: _____

Adjust Your Story of Us (Principle #2)

Which interconnections will matter most to them?

Example: For a mayor, emphasize how digital equity affects multiple city departments and constituent services

Adjust Your Two Futures (Principle #5: Trigger Loss Aversion)

What specific losses will motivate THIS stakeholder?

If we act: _____

If we don't: _____

Adjust Your Value Proposition (Principle #7)

What assets or partnerships would be most credible to this stakeholder?

Example: For a funder, emphasize proven outcomes and community partnerships; for a legislator, emphasize constituent support and policy expertise

STEP 4: Practice and Refine

Test your adapted pitch:

- Does it connect to what THEY care about (not just what you care about)?
- Does it address their likely concerns or impediments?
- Does it show what they stand to lose without action?
- Does it position you as the right partner to help them achieve their goals?

After delivering your pitch, reflect:

- What resonated most?
- What questions or objections did they raise?
- How can you sharpen your approach for the next conversation?

MY ACTION COMMITMENT

I will deliver my digital equity case statement:

When: _____

Where: _____

With whom: _____

Accountability partner: _____

(Exchange contact info and check in one month from today)