

Closing in on the

Digital Divide

Not everyone has access to the web. Some students and universities are trying to change that.

By Genevieve Robertson

Most of us rely on the Internet for everything from movie times and phone numbers to the weather. But some of the country doesn't even have access to basic Internet technology.

There are still many elementary and secondary schools that don't have computer labs for students to use the web—or even classes on basic software. There is an ever-growing gap between the technology haves and have nots, dubbed the digital divide.

Falling Through the Net

A study by the Commerce Department, entitled "Falling Through the Net" (ntia.doc.gov/ntiahome/digitaldivide), states that "urban households earning incomes over \$75,000 are 20 times more likely to have home Internet access than rural households." The study also shows that this gap widened an additional 29% from 1997 to 1998.

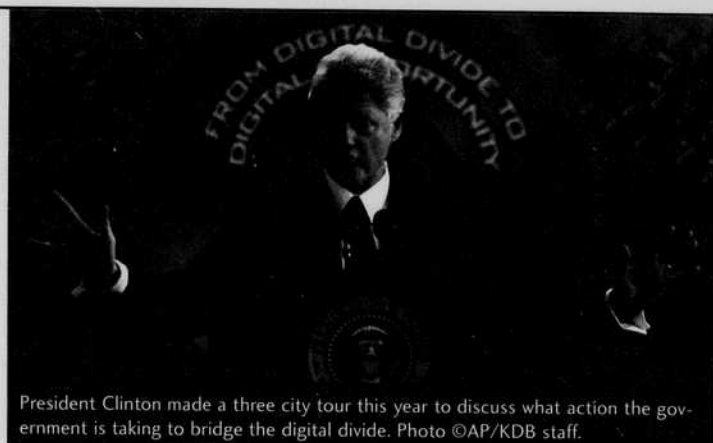
While lack of Internet access has a detrimental effect on student, the digital divide also affects issues like health care, family finances, job hunting and politics.

Bridging the Gap

Software and computer companies like Microsoft are working to bridge the gap, but college students are also getting involved. At Penn, students volunteer for a program called Puente ("bridges") working to close the divide in Third World nations. Rohan Amin, one volunteer, traveled to Ecuador to help children learn how to use the Internet. "It kind of gave me a new outlook," he said, "I understand the digital divide more because I actually experienced it first hand. At first [the children] can't even begin to understand or use [the Internet]. It was like opening a door for them. It was really cool."

In the U.S., colleges and universities are also funding programs to create computer centers in low-income neighborhoods. Last spring, Brown University partnered with WorldCom to give grants to 20 underserved communities to "improve learning through technology by teaching students to learn and thrive in today's technology-rich environment," said Jonathan B. Sallet, WorldCom's chief policy council. The Department of Education also approved \$6 million in funding to eight community colleges, to help make Internet technology available to low-income residents across the nation.

Some lower income families that have Internet access cannot find relevant content. This is most obvious when examining the lack of web content directed at minorities. Many new sites, specializing in minority targeted information, are popping up to address this problem.



President Clinton made a three city tour this year to discuss what action the government is taking to bridge the digital divide. Photo ©AP/KDB staff.

College students all over the U.S. are volunteering their time to help close the digital divide—be one of them. To get involved, visit the following links:

General Info

digitaldividenetwork.org

Information on what the issue is and how people are working to change it.

digitaldivide.org

Seattle based organization called Digital Partners working to close the gap.

digitaldivide.gov

Government information on what the Clinton Administration is doing about the issue.

Community Resources

ctcnet.org

Resources and information about and for community centers.

playing2win.org

New York-based organization linking people and institutions to work together to provide Internet access.

Minority Web sites

blackgeeks.com

Some of the best Internet sites providing black oriented content, as well as discussions and links to pertinent issues and tech support.

onenetnow.com

Web portal that provides content, chat rooms, message boards, search engines, email, web hosting and tech support for minority users.

dvstreet.com

Multicultural web portal that allows users to personalize their own start page with channels, chat rooms, job information and more.

Digital Divide stats

Hispanic households are reported to be half as likely to own a computer and 2.5 times less likely to use the Internet than white households are.

The gap between white and black households with Internet access grew by 37.7% from 1997 to 1998.