PUBLIC LIBRARY INTERNET SERVICES:
IMPACTS ON THE DIGITAL DIVIDE*
ABSTRACT

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March 28, 2001

INTRODUCTION

This study investigates the impact on the digital divide of the introduction of the Internet in public libraries and the role of federal funding in that effort. The term "digital divide" distinguishes between those who have access to and can effectively use new information technologies and those who do not. A goal of those seeking to reduce the digital divide is that every person has access to these new technologies when and where they need them and has understanding of how to use these tools effectively. An interim step is to equip community institutions with Internet access and trained staff. This research centers on one such community institution, the public library; one information technology, the Internet; and, a key funding source, the federal government, in particular E-rate grants and the Library Services and Technology Act (LSTA) awards.

This research focuses on the following areas related to the impact on the digital divide of public library Internet introduction and the role of federal funding in that effort:

- **Impact on the public library**: Did public library introduction of the Internet improve institutional capacity to reduce the digital divide? Does institutional use reflect a contribution to a reduction of the digital divide? What next steps do public library managers plan to take to reduce the digital divide, with what rationale, what measurable outcomes, and with what need for funding?
- **Impact on the community**: Did public library Internet introduction reduce the digital divide in their communities? How? What are needed next steps?
- **Use of funding**: How, when, from whom, and for what purpose were funds sought, allocated, and spent to introduce the Internet in public libraries? Is there a link between funding source and library resource, service, outcome or impact across the public libraries studied? What problems arose when obtaining or administering the funds that might be corrected in the future? What are present and future needs for funding to reduce the digital divide?
- **Role of the state library**: To what degree did the state library assist public libraries in introducing the Internet? Did public library introduction of the Internet, or funding for it, change state library institutional capacity, use or impact related to reducing the digital divide?
- **Evaluation and measurement**: How can the impact on the digital divide of the introduction of the Internet in public libraries be better measured? What is necessary to better monitor the administration of federal funding in this area and evaluate their outcomes and impacts that meets the need of the public library managers and lobbyists, state and federal funders and policy makers?
- **Policy**: How do public librarians, state library officials, and others assess the effectiveness of various federal programs such as the E-rate and LSTA in this area? What policy recommendations can be offered to enhance the Federal role regarding these and related funding programs?

This research will deepen understanding of the impact on the digital divide of public library Internet introduction, the role of key stakeholders, funding sources, and next steps. This study's approach is exploratory, its results will be suggestive rather than predictive.

STUDY APPROACH

The general approach employed by the study team is an iterative learning strategy. The researchers sequence individual data collection events and their analysis such that findings from one activity can be incorporated into subsequent data collection and analysis events. Data will be collected from four principal sources:

- **State library administrators**: The study team will visit four state libraries, meet with knowledgeable staff and collect appropriate documentary evidence. State library administrators will assist in selecting two public libraries for site visits and conducting a focus group with knowledgeable public library administrators.
- **Public library managers**: The study team will visit eight public libraries, two per state. The researchers will interview appropriate library personnel and collect documentary evidence. Each library will assist the study team by recruiting relevant community leaders and members to participate for interviews.
- **Library users & community leaders**: The study team will interview community leaders and members at the eight public libraries visited on the topic: "The present and future role of the public library in reducing the digital divide in the community."
- **Federal funders, policymakers and library lobbyists**: The study team will interview administrators in charge of LSTA and E-rate funding, appropriate federal policymakers and lobbyists knowledgeable about federal library funding, policymaking and public library efforts to reduce the digital divide. The researchers will continue the collection and examination of documentary evidence and funding data as they are deemed useful.

The study team will share periodic summaries of study findings and analysis with study participants to cross check factual accuracy, completeness, agreement on interpretation and to elicit further comment. This iterative learning approach allows the researchers to modify, adapt, and refine its data collection and analysis activities as the study team learns.

PROJECT SCHEDULE AND KEY ACTIVITIES

The study began March, 2001 and will be completed by the end of 2001. Project activities include review of existing literature and policy, assessment of the Universal Service Administrative Company's Schools and Libraries Division data and other sources, site visits to four states, and a national survey. Project documents, including the final report, will be available on the Florida State University, School of Information Studies, Information Use Management and Policy web site <http://www.ii.fsu.edu/divide/index.html>.