

President's Information Technology Advisory Committee

February 2, 2000

The President of the United States
The White House

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Dear Mr. President:

PITAC is enthusiastic about the way this nation, both public and private sectors, has begun to develop the necessary strategies to resolve the Digital Divide. In our report to you last February, *Information Technology Research: Investing in Our Future*, we called for policy decisions and research to help our nation better understand the impact of information technology on the society. Part of this effort includes the access issue, which is at the heart of the Digital Divide discussion. Clearly, if the nation is to realize the vision of a transformed American society that we articulated in our report, it is essential to ensure that all Americans have access to the information infrastructure, along with the relevant tools and skills necessary to fully participate in the information age.

On October 19, 1999, the PITAC held a conference to explore this issue. *Resolving the Digital Divide: Information, Access, and Opportunity*, hosted in association with the Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies and the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, focused on information technology access for racial and ethnic groups in the U.S.. The conference report and a brief summary of the major findings are attached. We are planning two additional conferences in the coming year on the issues of geographic disparities and small university access to information tools.

One of the major conclusions of our October conference is that a national initiative is required to close the gap between the information haves and have-nots. Thus, we were very encouraged by your December 9 Executive Memorandum, *Narrowing the "Digital Divide:" Creating Opportunities for All Americans in the Information Age*, directing various cabinet agencies to develop strategies and strengthen programs to make information infrastructure accessible to the information "have-nots." We believe that attention to Digital Divide issues is a national imperative, and this type of leadership provides a much needed catalyst to better understand them and develop meaningful strategies to address the issues.

PITAC would like to work with you to foster the efforts of government, industry, academia and non-profit sectors to ensure that partnerships and properly coordinated activities will help to resolve the digital divide in the near-term. We hope that the findings of our October conference and those planned for later in 2000 will help guide the development of a more comprehensive national agenda for advancing opportunity among individuals and institutions in the digital society. We look forward to continuing to advise you on these important issues.

Sincerely,

Raj Reddy
Co-chair

Irving Wladawsky-Berger
Co-chair

Resolving the Digital Divide: Information, Access, and Opportunity Summary of Recommendations

Resolving the Digital Divide Demands A National Initiative

A national strategy will help to ensure coordinated efforts and widely dispersed benefits. While many distinct efforts are presently under way, panelists cautioned that piecemeal efforts would do little to alleviate this complex problem.

Community Relevance and Community Involvement is Essential for Solving the Divide

Panelists strongly recommend that communities be involved in strategies to increase use of information technology tools and that the tools be used to solve existing community problems. It is imperative that solutions are culturally relevant and acceptable to the community involved.

Rethink Educational Approaches

A constructivist approach to teaching and learning is recommended. Using technology to educate is much more important than educating students about technology. Also, curricula must be made culturally relevant. Content is extremely important to communities—content should be relevant, culturally acceptable and of interest to the community. In higher education, there should be a major initiative to increase access in engineering and computer and information technology fields.

Continue and Expand Government Programs and Provide Additional Funding to Resolve the Digital Divide

Panelists recommended the continuation of government programs and an increase in government investment targeted toward programs designed to resolve the digital divide. Especially relevant are: The Community Technology Centers funding from the Department of Education, the Universal Service Fund (e-rate), the National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA), the Technology Challenge grants, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development's partnership with Communities in Schools (CIS) and the Cisco Networking Academy Program.

Rethink Market Approaches

While the market approach is important to this Nation, it is necessary to realize that the market often fails to address issues of information inequality. Viable and sustainable economic development as well as training, data collection and research are critical to solving these market failures.

More Research, Data Collection and Evaluation Are Necessary to Solve the Digital Divide

In order to combat the problem of the digital divide, continuing research, data collection and evaluation is important. Research teams should consistently assess community access to technology and engage the community in ways to solve access problems or to create better uses for existing access.

Better Technology and More Minority Owned Businesses

Better technology can help increase the use of information technology tools. Minority owned companies, a growth in minority researchers, and an increase in policy-oriented employees will help to overcome content and cultural barriers.