An Evaluative Study Of The United States Cooperative Extension Service’s Role In Bridging The Digital Divide

Chanda D. Elbert  
Texas A&M University  
CElbert@tamu.edu

Antoine J. Alston  
North Carolina A&T State University  
alstona@ncat.edu

Access to the Internet and other digital technologies has rapidly become a necessary tool to function in today’s highly information rich society. The Internet is utilized by Americans for a variety of tasks such as business transactions, personal correspondence, research and information-gathering, and shopping. In order for an individual to advance economically, educationally, and socially being digitally connected is even more vital. “Now that a large number of Americans regularly use the Internet to conduct daily activities, people who lack access to these tools are at a growing disadvantage. Therefore, raising the level of digital inclusion by increasing the number of Americans using the technology tools of the digital age is a vitally important national goal” (U.S. Department of Commerce, 2000). This phenomenon of individuals lacking digital access is popularly coined as the “digital divide”. The digital divide as defined by Cyber Outreach (2002) is “the gap that separates those who have access to technology and the Internet and those who do not, a disparity which exists along the lines of education, income, and race.” For America how has this gap affected individual citizens, and more specifically, what role does the United States’ Cooperative Extension Service play in alleviating this gap in relation to various demographic variables?

Major Points

The purpose of this poster presentation will be to describe the following:

- The perceptions of extension administrators regarding various socio-demographic issues in relation to the digital divide.
- The role of cooperative extension in bridging the digital divide as perceived by extension administrators throughout the United States.
- The demographic characteristics of extension administrators throughout the United States and the implications for an international audience.

Educational Importance

The digital divide is not becoming less significant but rather more pronounced as the information rich outpace the information poor in gaining access to electronic resources. As a result of the Digital Divide, the information poor are not only unable to use the Internet as a source of information, communication, and entertainment, but more importantly as a tool that can help them to help themselves. How do we as educators help to alleviate this gap?