

Creating the CyberSouth



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Introduction

The Southern Growth Policy Board's second Telecom South conference, "One South: Digitally Divided," focuses on the challenge presented to Southern Growth's members by the Digital Divide – the growing division between those who have access to the Internet and computer technology and can make use of it, and those who do not. This report, *Creating the CyberSouth*, was prepared for Southern Growth for distribution to the participants at the conference to help frame the three days of discussion.

It provides background information on the nature of the challenge nationally, together with detailed data defining the characteristics of the divide as it exists today in each of fourteen Southern states, and a summary of some of the initiatives that those states, plus the island of Puerto Rico, are taking to address the challenge.

The report is in three sections.

Section one, *Defining the Digital Divide*, briefly addresses the debate over whether or not a serious division exists between those who have ready access to today's networked economy and those who do not. It reviews some of the key research that has been conducted to date on the topic, and concludes that the evidence suggests clearly that a growing Digital Divide exists, that it matters and that it can be divided into four key dimensions – access to technology, computer literacy, information literacy and availability of content.

Each of these dimensions is discussed in terms of the distinctions that exist nationwide between groups of differing income levels, educational background, race and ethnicity, as well as among residents of rural America, suburban areas and the nation's center cities. Distinction is drawn between alternative means of addressing the issue, emphasizing the difference between the ultimate goal of universal service through the home and the shorter-term objective of providing universal access through a convenient network of public access points.

Section two, *One South: Its Digital Divides*, provides a statistical snapshot of the Digital Divide as it exists today in each of the thirteen states that are members of Southern Growth and Florida. The analysis is based primarily on the most recent National Telecommunications Infrastructure Administration (NTIA) survey data, covering the years 1997 and 1998, supplemented by a limited amount of information from other sources. Unfortunately, the absence of data for Puerto Rico made it impossible to include the island in the analysis.

The conference was held at the Hotel Roanoke and Conference Center October 1-3, 2000. It was hosted by the Virginia Tech Center for Organizational and Technological Advancement. Virginia Tech's School of Public and International Affairs prepared this report for Southern Growth.

Based on this information, a series of detailed, state-by-state analyzes are made of the divisions that currently exist between different segments of the population in each state, expressed in terms of their familiarity with computer technology generally, their access to and use of the Internet, and their attitudes toward its importance to their daily lives. Population segments are defined in each case in terms of the

household income, education level, race and ethnicity of the respondents, as well as their place of residence –rural, suburban and center-city areas.

The analysis includes information both on the magnitudes of the divisions as of 1998, and the rate of progress that has been made in closing them. The data are summarized graphically, in a manner that is designed to highlight both the nature of the challenge facing Southern Growth members and the distinctions that exist among states.

Section three, *Addressing the Challenge: A Review of Some Current SGPB Member Initiatives*, reviews some of the steps that the members of Southern Growth are already taking to address the challenge. It is based on a telephone survey of Southern Growth members, plus a review of information available on state and other Web sites and an analysis of printed materials provided by Southern Growth members.

It includes a brief overview of the major initiatives that are already underway, plus a more detailed discussion of five topics – *Primary and Secondary Education Programs*, ***Improved Infrastructure and Service Provision***, *Community Access and Work Force Initiatives*, *Partnering with the Private Sector*, and ***Mobilizing Statewide Response***. Wherever possible, reference is made to appropriate Web sites where the reader may obtain further information, and selected, illustrative examples are provided of specific initiatives.

It should be emphasized that the discussion in section three is intended simply to illustrate some of initiatives that are currently underway, as a means of helping foster communication among Southern Growth members. It is not intended to reflect a comprehensive listing of all current or planned initiatives by Southern Growth members. In those cases where the writers have omitted reference to a significant initiative or have failed to characterize one accurately, we apologize.

