

The Hairnet Project

The use of the Internet is exploding as more and more people discover its huge information and connective potential. In the midst of this excitement a disturbing picture has emerged of a growing information divide between income and ethnic groups.

- Among high school students, 82% from the most affluent families have access to a computer at home compared to 14% of poorer students.
- Across all incomes, about 41 % of white families have home computers compared to 19% of black and Hispanic families.
- In schools with higher income students, 64% have Internet access, compared with 31% of schools with students from poorer families.

According to U.S. Secretary of Education Richard Riley, this disparity is not likely to decrease. In fact, he warns of "a growing concern as we enter the new century that the technology gap will worsen."

In an effort to address this concern, some community groups in South Bend offer Internet access in public spaces, including libraries, neighborhood centers and housing complexes. While the library does an exceptional job at training and supporting patrons who come in to use their computers, anecdotal evidence suggests that the computer labs out in the community are not being well-utilized. People are given little training or help in working with the computers. And without first-hand experience of the wealth of information on the Internet, a trip to an out-of-the-way location seems not worth the time or effort.

HairNet is an initiative which will make Internet access possible and attractive by putting computers and the information superhighway directly in people's traffic pattern. Computers linked to the Internet will be placed in African American beauty shops where men and women congregate for hours at a time waiting for their hair to be done.

People will use the technology in a familiar, non-threatening environment, developing computer skills and exploring information according to their needs. To facilitate this learning, and to ensure that employees of the hair salon are not burdened, a community trainer would be available part-time. Gradually, as clients become proficient, they will assist each other, eventually eliminating the need for a trainer.

This idea has met with enthusiasm in the hair salons where salon owners, employees and clients have all expressed excitement. Talking about the need to learn how to use the Internet, one client said, "Jobs aren't just local, they are on the Internet. So we are competing with people coming from all over, not just South Bend. If we don't know how to use the computer we are at a real disadvantage."

The primary goal of this project is to reduce the "digital divide" in our community. Related goals include:

- introducing technology to those who have not used it
- providing computer, Internet and e-mail access in low-income areas
- connecting people with information and local resources
- increasing civic involvement
- providing initial rung on career ladder for community trainers

Furthermore, a HairNet web site will be developed which could become a primary source of information of specific interest to African American residents in South Bend, highlighting news, medical information, discussions, and civic, cultural and recreational events.

Reaction to this concept has been universally positive and encouraging. Memorial Hospital, Sisters

Involving Sisters, The Perfect Touch Hair Salon, The St. Joseph County Public Library, Michiana Freenet, and the Community Foundation of St. Joseph County have already partnered with The Family Connection to begin a small HairNet pilot. We look forward now to the expansion of HairNet into other salons throughout the community.

For additional information, contact: (574) 237-9740

This is a Learning History in progress. Look for updates in the future.