The Broadband Divide: A Widening Chasm in Higher Education?

A major challenge for colleges and universities is gaining affordable access to the national high-speed networks via the local loop.

The Federal Communications Commission (FCC) recently released its second report on the deployment of advanced telecommunications services and advanced telecommunication services in the United States. Echoing its first report, the FCC concluded: “Advanced telecommunications capabilities is being deployed in a reasonable and timely fashion.” However, the report cited several categories of consumers who may never have access to advanced services if deployment is left to market forces alone: inner-city, rural, and tribal residents; low-income and minority communities. This is an especially important issue for higher education professionals who, in instituting market-access to broadband to deliver sophisticated instructional and research applications for their researchers and students anytime, anywhere. A major challenge for colleges and universities is gaining affordable access to the national high-speed networks via the local loop.

The FCC was directed, under Section 706 of the Telecommunications Act of 1996, to facilitate the deployment of advanced network services. To date, the agency has taken a “hands off” approach, explaining that broadband deployment is still in its infancy; and that competition and private investment should be given more time before federal intervention. Nevertheless, several states have already taken the tax-incentive approach. Many states are seeking to emulate Colorado’s Rural Technology Enterprise Zone Act, passed in 1998. The Colorado law provides a tax incentive for broadband deployment in underserved areas. Some 20 other states have introduced similar legislation, often referred to as a broadband tax deduction.

Under increasing pressure, the FCC is now considering several recommendations: allowing multiple Internet service providers access to cable companies’ infrastructure for the delivery of advanced services (open access); eliminating service fees; and competition for advanced services (open access); examining ways to make more licensed and unlicensed spectrum available for broadband services; and sharing school and library facilities with surrounding communities. Likewise, many members of Congress, especially those representing rural states, have become impatient with the lack of progress by the FCC and industry in providing advanced network services to their constituents. Both Republicans and Democrats are introducing legislation at a furious pace, hoping to advance the competitive capability of the entire broadband deployment. The majority of bills introduced over the past two years, though exposing different regulatory approaches, have reflected a common goal: the granting of inter-LATA relief for the incumbent carriers. None of these bills, however, have made it to the president’s desk. And even though removing regulatory hurdles may help some colleges and universities, doing so probably will not produce any immediate results in those institutions located in the remote rural areas where competitors do not see any economic advantage to building the necessary infrastructure.

In another move intended to bridge the digital divide, Congress offered tax incentives to telecommunication providers that deployed in underserved areas in 2001, equal to 10 percent of total technology infrastructure investments that improve the quality of life in a designated rural technology zone. The Colorado Public Utility Commission is expected to report on any progress to the Colorado legislature by September 2003. Although the Colorado approach does not focus specifically on advanced networking, it is one that should be monitored closely.

Also worth close monitoring are EDUCAUSE initiatives that seek to increase access. Net@EDU, the networking arm of EDUCAUSE, has a member-driven working group focused on helping higher education institutions find alternative strategies for obtaining affordable access to high-speed network services. The Broadband Pricing Working Group (BPG) has produced several documents, available on-line, that may help higher education institutions purchase high-speed fiber networks. Over the past year, the BPG has been engaged in a dialogue with the broadband vendor community, particularly new companies, on how best to cross this chasm within the competitive marketplace. The group plans to offer detailed recommendations to EDUCAUSE in early 2002.

Considering the number of people who do not have even “low-speed” access to the Internet, these networks may appear to be a trivial issue. But the situation of information “have-nots” will not improve if they are not able to skip a step in the Internet access paradigm. Instead of a digital divide, we must be wary of a broadband divide, particularly in higher education.

Acting as facilitators for public discourse and research, those in higher education must have access to advanced networks. For as we come to expect network to support the high-speed applications necessary for collaboration and learning, the type of access available—whether to the regular or to the advanced network—could determine our capacity to contribute and participate in society.

Notes

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