

Beyond Bridging the Divide: The Case for Integrating Technology in Our Communities

As technology increasingly becomes incorporated into society, community technology initiatives must parallel these advances so that technology becomes a priority in education, job training, and other sectors of society. A key to this process is sustained, flexible funding. Currently, this type of basic requirement is unmet, but if satisfied, would allow community technology centers to more effectively prepare community members for educational and economic success. Without such adequately funded community-based technology programs, individuals will continue to remain behind those with better access to technology. Therefore we must move beyond *recognition* of a digital divide into increased *action* to address the disparity and move toward digital inclusion.

Prepared by the Center for Urban Research and Learning, Loyola University of Chicago
Co-sponsored by the Illinois Community Technology Coalition
Funded by the Illinois Community Technology Fund

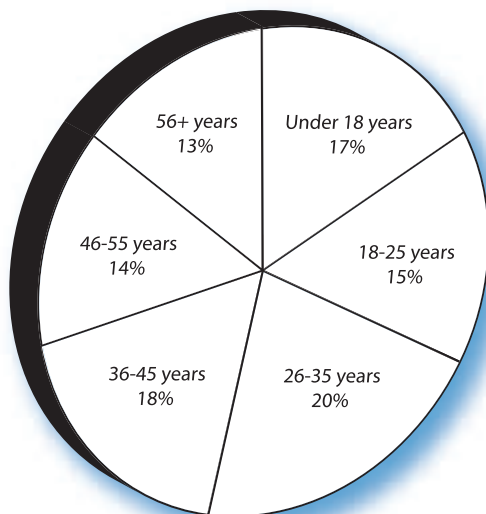
April 2006

In 2000 the Illinois Community Technology Fund (ICTF) was established through a lawsuit to address the potential negative impact that the SBC/Ameritech merger (Docket # 98-0555) could have on citizens in rural and low-income areas of Illinois. In an effort to bridge the digital divide, 76 organizations throughout the state of Illinois received ICTF grants between the years of 2000 and 2001 to provide technology services to Illinois residents representing a broad spectrum of ages and populations.

After the disbursement of the grants, the Center for Urban Research and Learning (CURL) at Loyola University Chicago was invited to collaborate with ICTF to evaluate the effectiveness of the grants. During the evaluation period, 68 of the original 76 organizations provided information on the services offered during the grant period through site visits, interviews, questionnaires, focus groups and reports. **The purpose of this report is to highlight important evaluation findings as well as discuss the potential policy implications of the evaluation results.**

PROFILE OF THE ICTF END USERS

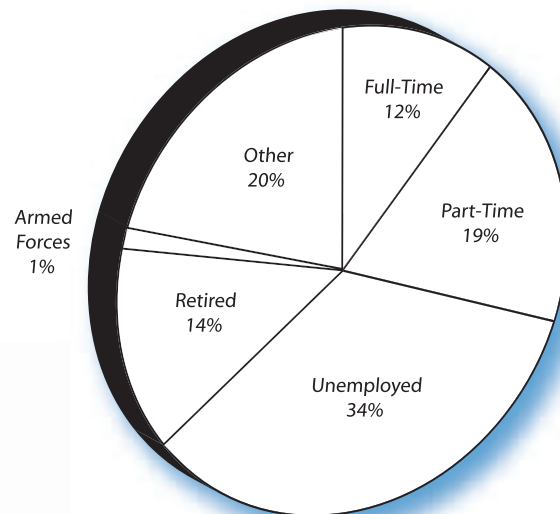
Equal distribution across ages



The programs served a broad spectrum of ages from youth under 18 to adults over 56 years old. The number of individuals served per week at ICTF funded programs ranged from 0 to 10 to more than 100 service users. The most common number of visitors was between 21 and 30 per week (27%).

“The tech project has brought communities and families together because people are excited about their friends and families learning. The families come together at the end of the classes to celebrate the graduation in a community that does not have many community events.” – ICTF grantee

Employment status of end users

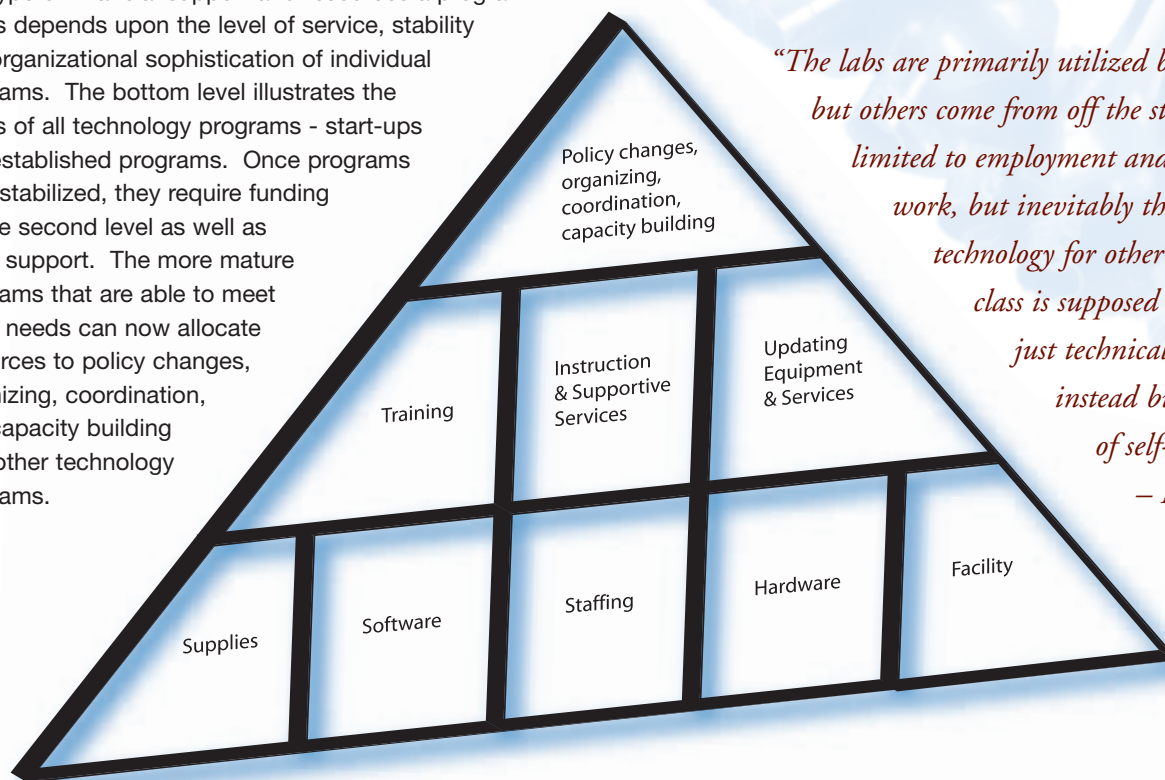


The vast majority of individuals were from traditionally underserved populations in rural and metropolitan Illinois. Program service providers indicated that 80% of the individuals using the center would be classified as lower socioeconomic status. A majority had achieved a high school diploma or GED as their highest educational achievement (57.4%).

“While the center is open to anyone interested in learning or upgrading their computer technology skills, we do strive to reach those participants best served in our geographic area where the Center is located. [Minorities, low-income, disabled, and elderly] comprise a large percentage of the population in this area.”
– ICTF grantee

Effective policies should provide consistent long-term support for all levels of needs in the technology community. These needs are best illustrated in the “triangle of needs” diagram.

The type of financial support and resources a program needs depends upon the level of service, stability and organizational sophistication of individual programs. The bottom level illustrates the needs of all technology programs - start-ups and established programs. Once programs have stabilized, they require funding for the second level as well as basic support. The more mature programs that are able to meet basic needs can now allocate resources to policy changes, organizing, coordination, and capacity building with other technology programs.



“The labs are primarily utilized by the tenants, but others come from off the street. Access is limited to employment and school related work, but inevitably the clients use the technology for other uses as well. The class is supposed to be more than just technical knowledge and instead build their feelings of self-efficacy.”
– ICTF grantee

LESSONS LEARNED

Upon completion of the ICTF evaluation, it became clear that these findings had potential policy implications:

- Lesson 1:** Funding for technology programs focuses too much on immediate gains and hardware and too little on sustainable, program-focused funding. For example, one program had the hardware and facilities needed for a computer lab but was unable to utilize them because they could not secure funding for program staff.
- Lesson 2:** Discussions with individuals in the technology community revealed a need for marked changes in the distribution of the funding for technology programs. Even the most adequate level of funding cannot create the changes proposed if the programs are not supported with *renewable* and *flexible* funding.
- Lesson 3:** These integral changes cannot be made without a reform of the funding system in both the private and public sectors. Instead of conceptualizing technology as a luxury, it should be recognized as a necessary tool to maintain the advancements within a wide array of social services and further economic development through human capital.

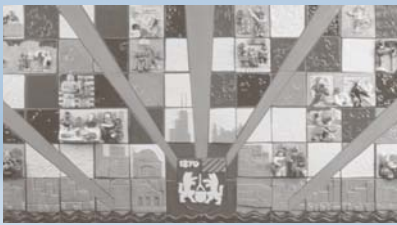
Successful programs integrate technology into comprehensive organizational goals so that technology becomes the means to success rather than the end.

The ICTF evaluation project determined what sector of society used the ICTF grant-funded program but further research is needed to determine the specific needs of each sector (e.g. youth development, higher education, employment assistance) that utilizes technology.

- More funding should be allocated for research on technology needs throughout Illinois.
- A thorough needs assessment and evaluation of existing technology programs in Illinois would create more successfully funded and efficient programs across all facets of the social services.

“The grant was a marvelous opportunity that brought about a collaborative effort for low income rural youth, it gave them access to technology they would otherwise not have had. We were able to provide skills – both computer and critical thinking – for the kids to feel reconnected to the community. It gave them access to higher education.” – ICTF grantee

ABOUT THE RESEARCH COLLABORATIVE



Loyola University Chicago's Center for Urban Research and Learning (CURL) is a non-traditional university research center that builds and supports collaborative research and education efforts by connecting Loyola faculty and students with community and nonprofit organizations, civic groups, and government agencies. More information on the Center can be found at www.luc.edu/curl.



The Illinois Community Technology Coalition is a network of volunteers and professionals in the community technology sector. The ilCTC emerged through the work of the Illinois Community Technology Consortium funded by the Illinois Community Technology Fund over a three year period. More information on ilCTC can be found at www.ilctc.org.

This project was funded by ICTF.

For a copy of the full report visit the project website at www.luc.edu/curl/ictf

Research team members include:

From Loyola CURL: Amy Kerr, Tanya Kellam, Kristie Baumgartner, & Aparna Sharma

Special Thanks:

To the Illinois Community Technology Fund grantees and Loyola CURL staff including David Van Zytveld and Maureen Hellwig, undergraduate fellows, and Urban Studies Students

Photos: Copyright © 2004 FreePhotoBanks.com,
Copyright © 2004 Darren Hester ppdigital.openphoto.net

Preparing People to Lead Extraordinary Lives

LOYOLA
UNIVERSITY
CHICAGO

