

OPENING STATEMENT OF SENATOR JOHN KERRY ON THE DIGITAL DIVIDE
SCIENCE, TECHNOLOGY AND SPACE SUBCOMMITTEE

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Thank you, Mr. Chairman, for holding this hearing. Despite some gains in the past few years, there remains a significant digital divide in our country. While the number of Americans accessing the Internet has skyrocketed in recent years, the percentages of minorities using the Internet remains well below the national average.

The term digital divide, I think, means different things to different people. The first, and most common example of a digital divide in this country, is the lack of affordable access to broadband networks. Significantly, less than 15 percent of our nation can access the Internet through these high-speed connections. There is a digital divide between those companies who have reliable high-speed Internet service and those who still rely on slower methods of service. As the Internet increasingly becomes an engine of commerce, this problem is no longer one that affects a few specialized businesses. Rather, affordable high-speed Internet access is becoming an important national economic necessity. In order for our businesses – from the largest to the smallest – to sell products and services on-line, they all need to be able to reach more people faster through the Internet. Businesses located outside of urban centers – the only place where broadband is widely deployed – are losing out. Consumers, too, face this same type of digital divide. In order to benefit from the often lower costs of purchasing products over the Internet, consumers need to be able to complete their purchases with confidence that their transactions will be completed quickly and correctly. This is the commercial aspect of the digital divide. I am proud to have worked closely with Senator Rockefeller and Senator Snowe to introduce legislation that would address the critical problem of connecting businesses and homes in high-poverty areas of cities to the Internet by creating a tax credit for companies that deploy high-speed broadband networks in these areas. While some urban business customers receive extremely fast service, most Americans do not. In fact, most residential customers and even business customers in rural and low-income areas are still limited to extremely slow "dial-up" service.

But there is another type of digital divide, and that is in the world of education. I am concerned by remarks, such as those made last year by the Chairman of the FCC, which seem to mock the term "digital divide." Make no mistake, there is a disparity in technology education and opportunity at every level of schooling – elementary, secondary and postsecondary – and that most certainly constitutes a digital divide. The education digital divide shares some of the features of the commercial divide. Rural schools and insufficiently funded urban schools lack the connectivity and reliability of wealthier areas. This disparity disproportionately affects minorities and translates into missed opportunities in the workplace. So while Hispanics, African Americans and Native Americans make up a quarter of the workforce, members of these minority groups represent just 6 percent of the nation's domestic engineering workforce. That's unacceptable.

We have just begun to expose more elementary and secondary students to the Internet through the E-rate program. E-rate is proving to be successful, but we must ensure that students who are introduced to the Internet through E-rate in grade school have the chance to expand their technology

horizons at post-secondary institutions. Senator Cleland's bill will help better provide that opportunity to minority-serving institutions, and I'm proud to support it. In order to foster a better technology-driven educational experience at these colleges, we've got provide on-demand access to the Internet and, more importantly, we need to provide the kinds of low-interest (or no-interest) loans to improve computer ownership rates. But unfortunately, more than 75 percent of HBCU students do not own a computer. Lack of computer ownership helps to dissuade students from taking engineering, math and science classes.

Twenty million technology-related jobs will be created in the next decade, and we will leave an entire segment of the population behind if we do not increase opportunities for disadvantaged students. As our economy continues to become more technology-driven, it is not be enough to simply attempt to develop a stronger corps of scientists and engineers in this country. Our challenge is to increase technology literacy across the board. And that means investing in schools and community centers where access to the Internet is uneven at best, or where computer ownership is marginal.

It is indeed disheartening that the Administration proposes to zero-out funding for programs such as Community Technology Centers or the Technology Opportunities Program, a matching grant program whose mission is to bring the benefits of the Internet to underserved communities. The program demonstrates how the Internet and other emerging technologies can be leveraged to improve lifelong learning, health care, economic development and public safety. Senator Cleland's bill would expand TOP to provide grants to Historically Black Colleges and Universities to help them improve their technology infrastructure. This will help bridge the very real digital divide.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.