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Research Brief from the OVCSA Research and Assessment Committee:

Assessing the Digital Divide Among New Freshmen

A recent article in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* reports that the digital divide between African American students and students of other ethnic groups is growing according to a recent finding out of UCLA's Higher Education Research Institute ("Among Freshmen, A Growing Digital Divide" February 4, 2005). The digital divide generally refers to the widening social gap with respect to the use of computers and technology. Based on results of incoming freshmen at over 400 colleges and universities nationwide, the disparity in use of computers is growing among various ethnic groups.

At UIC, a similar digital divide exists. Of the 2004 entering freshman class, 87% of the white students reported using a computer 'frequently'. This figure is 89%, 77% and 71 % for Asian, African American and Latino students, respectively. These proportions within each ethnic group align closely with national norms. (See Table 1). A survey of new freshmen that participated in spring and summer 2004 pre-enrollment testing showed even higher computer usage rates. A total of 95% of the 2291 participating in a Testing Services survey indicated that they used computers 'Very Often' or 'Often' for classwork, homework, papers or library access. Racial/ethnic breakouts are not available from this survey.

With computer prices dropping and Internet access increasing, every cohort of new students reports increased familiarity with and use of computers. However, African American and Latino students still lag behind other groups in spite of increases overall.

Some of the disparity can be explained by differences in the socioeconomic backgrounds of students. Of the students who report a family income of over \$75,000 on the Freshman Survey, approximately 89% were frequent computer users in contrast to 78% of the students from families with income of less than \$40,000. African American and Latino students are disproportionately represented in the lower income brackets. Fifty-three percent of the Latino, 57% of the African American and 19% of the Caucasian students reported a family income of less than \$40,000.

With the implementation of the new student registration and financial aid system and Blackboard technology in the classroom, students are expected to be facile with computers. As UIC moves to more on-line technology in and out of the classroom, the digital divide becomes more meaningful to student success.

At UIC, various campus offices offer free workshops and training for students to respond to deficiencies in computing 'know-how' among students. The Academic Computing and Communications Center (ACCC) hosts a variety of specific software training classes for students, faculty, and staff. The African American Academic

Network (AAAN) offers opportunities through its computer laboratory for students to practice computer skills. In addition, AAAN offers workshops and tutorials specifically targeted toward various software programs and Internet skills.

To address the digital divide, it is imperative that African American and Latino students increase their use of and familiarity with computers and software programs. Access and training are the key components to this issue. For example, access means ensuring that computer labs are available to and convenient for these students. Perhaps additional labs are needed. Training student employees on office software also presents an opportunity for administrative offices to contribute to improving the skills of these students outside the traditional training in computer labs. Computers skills are vital to virtually all aspects of student life and clearly a necessary skill for success in the workplace. As part of UIC’s commitment to prepare students for success in their discipline, we need to assure adequate preparation in a fundamental aspect of all careers, that is computer literacy.

Table 1: New freshmen who reported that they used a computer ‘frequently’ during their last year in high school.

Sample source	Year	Afr Amer	Latino	White	Asian Amer
National norms ¹	1985	24%	23%	28%	30%
National norms ¹	1995	45%	45%	55%	58%
UIC Students	2002	66%	69%	84%	87%
National norms ¹	2004	77%	81%	87%	91%
UIC Students	2004	77%	71%	87%	89%

¹National Norms source: “The American Freshman: National Norms for Fall 2004” UCLA, Higher Education Research Institute, Cooperative Institutional Research Program.