



Mr. Marc H. Morial

Let's Move Forward Together – (Courtesy Microsoft)

The promise of equal opportunity remains unfulfilled for many Americans—advances in technology could change that

In the 140 years since slavery was finally abolished throughout the United States, the nation's advance toward racial equality may never have been slower than it is today.

This is one of the troubling findings of The State of Black America 2005, the National Urban League's annual analysis of the relative condition of blacks and whites nationwide. The report shows that despite considerable progress, African Americans are still significantly disadvantaged.

The biggest disparities are economic. Blacks are three times more likely than whites to live below the poverty line. Black families' median net worth is less than one-tenth that of their white counterparts. Black unemployment is more than double that of whites, and that gap has widened during the past year.

In other areas such as education, the news is not much better. Teachers in minority schools have less classroom experience, on average, and less education in the subjects they teach. Closing the gap in college graduation rates would require an additional 24,000 black students to earn bachelor degrees each year.

To help address these and other inequalities, the National Urban League recommends specific public policies, as well as concerted efforts by African Americans themselves. A good place to focus positive action is in an area already showing significant improvement: access to technology.

A year ago, black families were only half as likely as white families to have Internet access at home. But the latest data show that African Americans have narrowed this digital divide by 35 percent in just 12 months.

Information technology—increasingly powerful, easier to use and less expensive—is rapidly becoming much more accessible. As it does, it could be an invaluable tool for demolishing historical barriers to greater equality.

Technology generates tremendous economic opportunities. For example, during the past quarter century, the number of jobs in science and engineering has grown four times faster than the U.S. labor force as a whole. In many high-tech fields, qualified workers are in short supply.

The supply could be increased by developing the potential high-tech talent of the nation's African Americans, Hispanics and other minorities currently under-represented in the technology workforce. One way is by continuing to expand access to technology and related skills. Microsoft's community efforts in this area, particularly its Partners in Learning and Unlimited Potential programs, are making important contributions to the advancement of digital inclusion.

In addition, the nation could do more to encourage young people to study and excel in science and mathematics. Targeted efforts to strengthen the science and math achievement of minority students should pay large dividends, both in social progress and in improving U.S. economic competitiveness.

In today's increasingly competitive global economy, America simply cannot afford to leave any of its people behind. We must recommit ourselves to greater progress—together, as one nation.

***By Marc H. Morial
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