

Access and Equity in the Digital Classroom

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In the wake of the coronavirus pandemic, colleges and universities scrambled to rapidly

transition to online instruction, seemingly overnight. This certainly brought about drastic adjustments for all, but for some, the access to education was swiftly taken away. While it may seem improbable in today's technological world, there still remains an expansive "digital divide" and many Americans do not have access to broadband internet. The Federal Communications Commission (FCC) uses a download speed of at least 25 Mbps and an upload speed of at least 3 Mbps as the standard for broadband high-speed internet.¹ In a 2018 FCC report, it was indicated that 24.7 million Americans are without broadband internet access.² Many college students, especially those in rural areas, have limited internet access, which has been likened to an invisible barrier that those living in the most rural areas must face. According to the 2010 Census, 19.3 percent of the United States population lives in rural areas.³ Coupling this

with being from a low-income or disadvantaged background, many students now may not have the technology necessary for completing classes online.

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This time of crisis has brought out impressive ingenuity and benevolence from the community. Many internet providers are offering free and reduced internet access for students. Some universities are even offering extended terms for laptop and hotspot rentals.⁴ These are all generous temporary solutions, but for some students, this gesture still provides little resolution for their immediate access needs to complete coursework

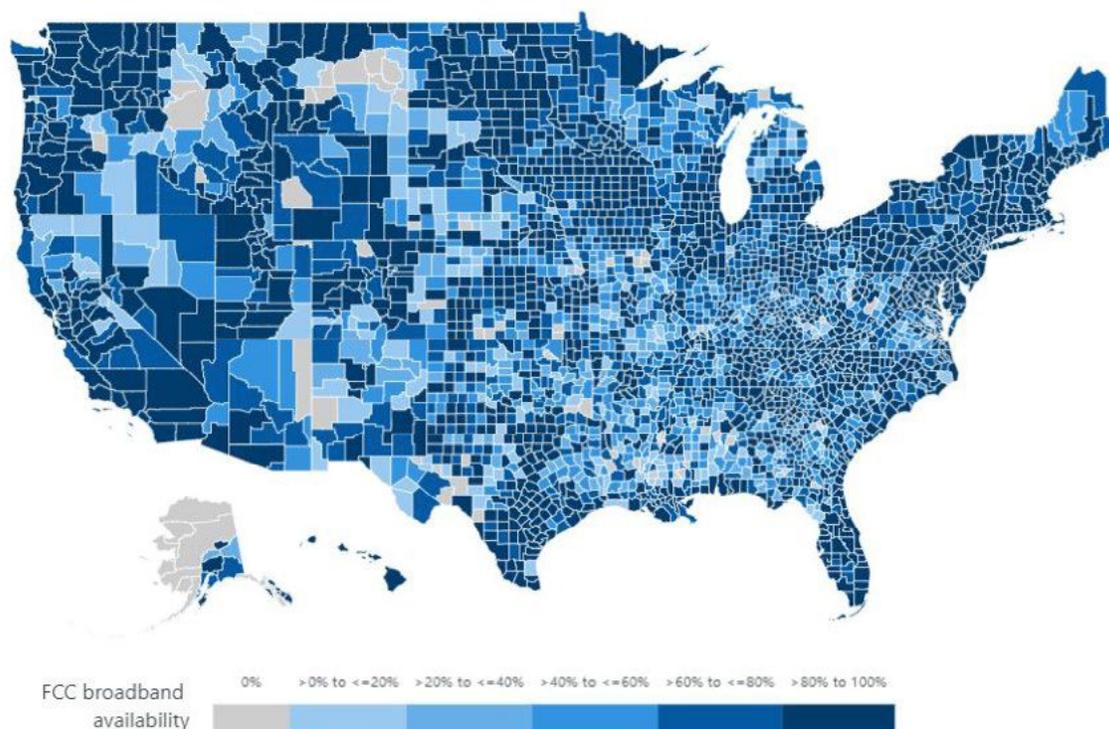


Figure 1. Map of population percentages with access to fixed broadband systems of download speeds of at least 25 Mbps and upload speeds of at least 3 Mbps.²

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and assignments. For example, a mobile hotspot still requires access to cellular networks, which also may be limited in the most rural areas. Emerging accounts from students acclimating to this new reality have described having to venture to neighboring towns (while being advised to shelter-in-place or remain socially distant) or even to parking lots of buildings to access more reliable internet services.⁵ Our traditional classrooms have not only moved online, but to settings that faculty and administrators likely have not considered during this shift. Entering into this phase of “crisis management” in education, it was likely thought that, at least for a short time, faculty and students alike would “make it work;” but as the time away from traditional instruction increases, how will the less fortunate students be impacted in the long term?

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The concepts of the digital divide and digital equity have been a growing area of interest since the early 2000s.⁶ While there is a general consensus for the definition of digital equity, the digital divide is a more complicated construct. Digital equity seeks to ensure that “all individuals and communities have the information technology capacity needed for full participation in our society, democracy and economy.”⁷ The digital divide has evolved from a more narrow view of physical access to include access skills and competencies, motivations and attitudes.⁸ This evolution is critical, as research shows that even with access, students are less likely to be successful as a greater portion of their course load is online.⁸ In fact, these results are more pronounced for transfer students.⁸ Thus, as colleges and universities seek to continue to support students through online distance learning, we cannot solely depend on the temporary benevolence of corporations to address physical access. We must recognize that the solution must be more comprehensive, and look to address more obvious challenges of physical access and beyond if we want to ensure equity in the digital classroom.

Now that many universities are planning to continue online instruction for the summer and even fall terms, the digital divide has the potential to continue widening the education gap for many Americans.⁹ But with challenges come opportunities. In this case, the large-scale transition to online learning offers us the opportunity to seek out better approaches to addressing the digital divide for equity. Efforts to scale higher education outside the walls of residential colleges through technology and MOOCs have been faced with single digit completion rates and tend to draw educated career builders and education seekers.¹⁰ As higher education is faced with significant uncertainty over the next 18 months, we have the opportunity to explore the complexity of the digital divide and identify more effective ways to engage and support broad populations in online learning. Perhaps this is the call to action that we needed to move the needle on access and equity in the digital classroom.

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