

## **Policy Brief**

### **Leveraging Higher Ed policy for digital access in times of COVID-19**

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**Abstract:** With the COVID-19 crisis dominating our consciousness and shutting down public life, including educational and commercial activities, there is a fear that this may adversely affect universities and institutions of higher education. In this context, there is growing recognition of the power of digital technologies in learning and many institutes of higher education have moved toward online and digital learning methods. However, research has shown that not all students are equally equipped to benefit from this shift. This is also a moment for universities and university consortiums to come together to formulate policies for better digital access for their students, especially those from racial minorities and disadvantaged groups, including students with disabilities. This brief offers a comparative perspective of how things are done in the U.S. and India.

This brief suggests that innovative policies - both at the state legislative level as well as at the university level - are needed to address this gap.

In addition, this policy brief points to steps that can be taken to increase digital access as well as increasing digital readiness, through creative

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policies as well as unconventional funding models.

#### **Introduction/Problem Statement**

Online education was poised to be the ‘next big thing’ with the launch of Massive Online Courses (MOOCs) and other online educational platforms in the early 2010s.

However, MOOCs have not fully lived up to that promise, due to a number of reasons<sup>10</sup>.

Despite continued growth in access to digital learning and growth in the infrastructure of how to deliver this learning – through increased broadband coverage, etc., - the gap between those who can access these services and those who do not have remained.

We will need to address this gap – both from a policy perspective as well as from an implementation perspective, before online education can be fully exploited for student success and for achieving student-learning outcomes.

Issues of access and equity become particularly important when one considers the challenges in setting up and delivering online instruction. Given the closure of campuses around the country, there is a growing need for more online classes. The needs of minority students and other vulnerable groups, who may not have access to laptops, internet connection, etc., are particularly high. In addition, those who are disabled or disadvantaged in any way are particularly vulnerable to be left out of the learning process, despite provisions for accommodation in Section 504 of the United States’ Rehabilitation Act and Titles II and III of ADA for disabled students.

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<https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2016/09/inequality-in-the-virtual-classroom/501311/>

While in the U.S. internet penetration rates are very high, in most states there are regions where many people do not have access to the internet or high bandwidth streaming services. This creates a challenge when it comes to delivering and participating in online pedagogical platforms. Higher education policy can be key in addressing these divides, especially when it addresses the digital divide. i.e., addressing issues of access, funding, and mentoring for disadvantaged students.

In a country such as the U.S., where most students take electricity and internet access for granted, the challenge may be internet speed. However, in countries such as India, the challenges are more fundamental such as a lack of reliable electricity or access to laptops and other hardware that is hard to come by<sup>11</sup>. This policy brief analyses the challenges to delivering online learning courses as well as the practical issues that arise – in terms of readiness of students and faculty, as universities explore this versatile medium. By outlining the actions that universities and civil society actors can take to help those students who are most vulnerable, this brief is a call to action for greater inclusion in online learning during times of crisis.

Lastly, this policy brief sets forth recommendations to enhance access to the internet and services that enhance learning digitally.

### Three Challenges to Overcome

There are various challenges to overcome before online education reaches its full potential. Still, the most important are: a lack of digital readiness skills; a lack of skills in looking for information online, and a need for

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-53471749>

mentors or teachers who can show these students how to navigate the online learning space.

1. Lack of digital readiness: The digital divide that exists on campus can create more barriers for students who are disadvantaged.

In a Pew Research study in 2016 that examined 'digital readiness,' is a measure for how well they could manage tasks using the internet, most Americans did not do well. This report points out that the "adoption of technology for adult learning in both personal and job-related activities varies by people's socio-economic status, their race and ethnicity, and their level of access to home broadband and smartphones." What this means is that the range of skills needed to participate online as a student is quite wide. In addition, not all students are prepared to do this effectively, nor do they have the resources – social or technological – to learn how to do this. In India, communities and civil society organizations are coming forward to help fix the gap in infrastructure, as media reports have documented. There is a growing awareness of this lack of infrastructure, and community groups are stepping forward to help with laptops, mobile phones, and other equipment needed for online classes<sup>12</sup>.

There seems to be a problem with digital readiness at the university level as well. There is a great deal of research that is pointing to the gaps in readiness to move fully online, even at the higher ed level, in the U.S. (Handel, M; Stephan, M; Zikuda, M; Kopp, B; Bedenlier, S; Ziegler, A., 2020). The scenario is the same globally, with many countries having greater

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-53471749>

challenges given the socio-economic challenges before millions of people who have been laid off work<sup>13</sup>.

2. Lack of research skills, using digital platforms: The Pew study measured their skills across the following five domains: “their confidence in using computers, their facility with getting new technology to work, their use of digital tools for learning, their ability to determine the trustworthiness of online information, and their familiarity with contemporary “education tech” terms.”

The findings from this report were quite stark: About 52% of those surveyed were ‘relatively hesitant’ about online learning, while just about 48% were ‘relatively or more prepared.’ Only 17% of digital learners are ‘digital-ready,’ meaning they are willing and excited to engage in learning and are able to cope with the demands of learning online. This should give us pause to think and reflect on how to make this medium work for all.

3. Lack of mentoring for disadvantaged students: Research has shown that students who come from affluent families have better access to the internet and digital technologies and are generally better prepared than those from poorer backgrounds.

### Existing Policy Frameworks and What Needs to Change

Several policy bottlenecks are preventing equitable access to digital learning for students. Some relate to access to the internet, while

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.insidehighered.com/digital-learning/article/2020/04/15/unequal-access-learning-fall-without-students-and-another-mooc>

others relate to related infrastructure and soft skills that are necessary for success.

1. Federal and state funding for internet access<sup>14</sup>: While the majority of the schools in states such as California have met the Federal Communications Commission’s (FCC) threshold for digital access, the situation in other states is not as rosy. California managed to achieve these high levels due to concerted efforts by state lawmakers and support from federal grants to ensure that schools were connected to the internet, and had the infrastructure in place. Despite this, most schools are struggling to offer courses or pedagogy online during the COVID-19 crisis.
2. No internet access in low-income communities: While schools may have internet access, most teachers assign homework that needs to be done at home. In this case, the FCC reports that about 16% of schoolchildren in California had no internet at home, and more than 27% (up to 1.7 million) did not have a broadband connection. This is a real problem related to infrastructure issues, and involves state legislature to make broadband access easier and cheaper.

#### Case analysis: Bryn Mawr College’s push for digital readiness<sup>15</sup>

Bryn Mawr College’s Library and Information Technology Services created a new internship program that teaches students digital skills without them even realizing it. As a recent Chronicle of

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.ppic.org/publication/californias-digital-divide/>

<sup>15</sup> <https://www.chronicle.com/interactives/2019-The-Digital-Student>

Higher Education report pointed out, students are taught a broad range of skills, including Digital communications, Data management, Data Analysis and Presentation, and even some programming, all on the job (citation?). The philosophy of the internship program is that digital skills are not only for tech students but also for anyone who is on campus and can be helpful even after they have graduated. This work was facilitated after the college received the Next Generation Learning Challenges Grant in 2011.

#### Recommendations

Below are a few recommendations for policymakers, university administrators as well as & nonprofits working in the higher education sector:

1. Formulate a 'digital readiness' policy at the university level: Identify and conduct a survey of 'digital readiness' on campus to find out how many of your students are ready to engage in online learning. Depending on this, organize workshops, short-term training, and 'mentoring' groups to motivate those who are likely to be those not likely to engage;
2. Create incentives for faculty members to participate in creating a healthier and more open online learning atmosphere. This includes creating funding streams and free workshops and grants for that faculty who are reluctant to engage in this medium, to step forward and create more online courses and both synchronous and asynchronous learning experiences;
3. Create university task teams to ensure that students who are traditionally

disadvantaged are actually able to access services and to mentor;

4. Commit a funding stream that will allocate funding toward increasing digital access: through the development of new courses, mentoring programs, creation of new grants for faculty, etc.;
5. Create a policy framework and evaluation model for ensuring that issues related to digital access are monitored and continuously revised, at the university level;
6. Create university-wide policies to ensure compliance with the American Disabilities Act (ADA) and Under Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act and Titles II and III of ADA for disabled students<sup>16</sup>;
7. Create separate funding for disabled students, focusing on their technology needs. The measure by the state of C.A. to fund nearly 1 million students with tablets is a welcome move in this direction<sup>17</sup>;
8. Continue to creatively adopt unconventional technologies and allow for asynchronous learning: In India, for instance, there has been a lot of creative thinking and adoption of various technologies – quite unconventional in some cases – such as the use of WhatsApp, Google Classroom, and Zoom meetings

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<sup>16</sup> <https://www.nfb.org/programs-services/center-excellence-nonvisual-access/higher-education-accessibility-online-resource>

<sup>17</sup> <https://edsources.org/2020/california-makes-internet-enabled-tablets-available-to-nearly-1-million-students/637773>

towards delivering education, to meet their learning outcomes for the year<sup>18</sup>.

Recommendations for nonprofit and partners of universities:

1. Engage nonprofit and higher Ed leaders, both locally and nationally, to inspire students to pursue learning. Position online education as a continuing education opportunity that should be on top of any adult learner's agenda.
2. Create a university-wide network of leaders and mentors who can advocate for digital access and resources for all students – in particular, the ones who don't have access to these technologies;
3. Universities can both individually and collectively champion innovative models such as One Community, an Ohio based nonprofit that seeks to offer broadband access to rural and under-served areas<sup>19</sup>;
4. Universities and university consortiums such as the U.C. and Cal State Systems can come together to *formulate policies* to offer subsidized or free internet access to their students in their residences (on & off-campus).
5. Colleges and private foundations should step up and use the endowments and funding available to them to help their students. The example of the Portland Community College Foundation is an

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<https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/online-classes-coronavirus-schools-students-teachers-e-learning-meenakshi-gopinath-6451089/>

<sup>19</sup> <https://muninetworks.org/tags-146>

exemplary one<sup>20</sup>. The PCC Foundation has allocated \$750,000 towards laptops, grocery store vouchers, computers, and internet service.

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<sup>20</sup> <https://www.pcc.edu/news/2020/04/pcc-foundation-support-fund/>