

EDUCATION

When the Classroom Goes Digital, Who Gets Left Behind?

The rapid digitalization of education, while offering potential benefits, presents significant accessibility challenges for students with disabilities across U.S. schools and universities. Despite legal requirements under frameworks like the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), unequal access persists in online environments. Many students with disabilities rely on assistive technologies, but institutional practices often fall short in ensuring digital content, platforms, and materials are compatible. Proactive measures, including comprehensive audits, faculty training, and adherence to accessibility standards for elements like captions and alt text, are critical to bridging this digital divide and achieving equitable educational opportunities.

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By Accibly Editorial Team · ⌚ 5 min read

Executive Summary

The rapid digitalization of education, while offering potential benefits, presents significant accessibility challenges for students with disabilities across U.S. schools and universities. Despite legal requirements under frameworks like the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), unequal access persists in online environments. Many students

with disabilities rely on assistive technologies, but institutional practices often fall short in ensuring digital content, platforms, and materials are compatible. Proactive measures, including comprehensive audits, faculty training, and adherence to accessibility standards for elements like captions and alt text, are critical to bridging this digital divide and achieving equitable educational opportunities.

Introduction: The Shifting Landscape of Education and Accessibility

The increasing adoption of digital learning platforms, online testing systems, and digital resources has transformed educational environments across U.S. schools and universities. This shift, driven by technological advancements, has fundamentally altered how students access materials, participate in classes, and complete assignments. While offering new opportunities, this rapid digitalization also presents a critical challenge: ensuring equitable access for all students, particularly those with disabilities.

The imperative for digital accessibility has grown as more educational content moves online. Research highlights the importance of understanding digital access, especially given that a significant number of students, including those with disabilities, are engaging with online courses.

The Digital Divide: Unequal Access in Online Environments

The widespread transition to online learning and digital resources has created what some describe as an unequal access landscape, or a 'disability divide.' As the world increasingly operates online, students with disabilities may face new barriers if digital platforms and content are not designed with accessibility in mind.

The prevalence of online education underscores the critical nature of this issue. For instance, a survey of college students found that 34 percent of respondents with a documented disability had enrolled in an online degree program, and 71.6 percent of all respondents, both with and without disabilities, had taken online courses. This widespread engagement necessitates that digital environments are inherently accessible to prevent disenfranchisement.

| Legal Mandates and the Role of Assistive Technology

To address the needs of students with disabilities, specific legal frameworks are in place. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) addresses assistive technology (AT) devices and services for children with disabilities, providing guidance on their use. Assistive technology is considered a powerful tool for providing support.

Assistive technology encompasses electronic devices designed to support individuals with disabilities and diverse learning needs. This includes a variety of tools that enable students to interact with digital content. Furthermore, the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) extends its protections to ensure digital access for students in higher education, highlighting the legal obligation of institutions to provide accessible online environments.

| Implementation Gaps: Challenges for Institutions and Faculty

Despite legal mandates and the availability of assistive technology, educational institutions frequently encounter challenges in ensuring full digital accessibility. One significant hurdle is that faculty members do not always prioritize accessibility when developing or updating course materials.

This often leads to a need for schools to implement consistent reminders to instructors on how to maintain compliant courses, especially when adding last-minute content. Regular audits of classes are essential to identify and rectify accessibility issues, ensuring all digital resources meet necessary standards.

| Strategies for Inclusive Digital Learning

To overcome these implementation gaps, educational institutions can adopt several strategies to ensure digital accessibility. This includes performing thorough audits of online classes to confirm that all videos have closed captioning, all images include alt text descriptions, and all hyperlinks are unique and clearly identifiable.

Beyond initial audits, ongoing efforts are crucial. Schools should continuously remind and train instructors on how to create and maintain accessible course content. This proactive approach helps to embed accessibility best practices into the core of digital learning, creating a more inclusive environment for all students.

| Conclusion: Towards Equitable Digital Access

The increasing reliance on digital education presents a clear mandate for educational institutions to prioritize accessibility. While online learning offers numerous benefits, it also risks exacerbating a 'disability divide' if not carefully managed. Addressing unequal access requires a concerted effort to align technological advancement with inclusive design principles and legal obligations.

Ultimately, ensuring equitable digital access involves more than just complying with legal requirements; it demands a proactive commitment to creating truly inclusive learning environments. By prioritizing comprehensive audits, ongoing faculty training, and adherence to accessibility standards for

all digital content, schools and universities can bridge the digital divide and provide all students with the opportunity to succeed.

| Key Findings

KEY FINDINGS

The global push towards online learning has led to a 'disability divide' where students with disabilities experience unequal access to digital educational resources.

Assistive technology (AT) is a powerful tool for supporting individuals with disabilities and diverse learning needs, with a significant percentage of public school students enrolled in special education programs.

Legal frameworks such as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) require the provision of assistive technology devices and services for eligible children.

The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) is relevant to ensuring digital access for students in higher education.

Despite these legal and technological supports, educational institutions frequently face challenges, including faculty not prioritizing accessibility, necessitating regular audits and ongoing training to ensure compliance with accessibility standards (e.g., for closed captioning, alt text, and unique hyperlinks).

| Evidence

Evidence Reviewed

29 statements support this investigation, drawn from 8 sources.

KEY EVIDENCE

OBSERVED · 90% confidence

[![View on publisher site icon](https://cdn.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/pd-medc-pmc-cloudpmc-viewer/production/bb3d0162/var/data/static/img/usa-icons/launch.svg)] (<https://doi.org/10.1007/s10209-021-00803-5>) View on publisher site [Source](#)

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As a library, NLM provides access to scientific literature. Inclusion in an NLM database does not imply endorsement of, or agreement with, [Source](#)

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Reassessing the disability divide: unequal access as the world is pushed online
[Source](#)

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A .gov website belongs to an official government [Source](#)

[View all 29 evidence items](#)

Analysis

The evidence consistently highlights a disparity in digital access for students with disabilities within educational settings. The transition to online platforms, while potentially beneficial for some, has concurrently created new barriers. Legal frameworks like IDEA underscore the necessity of assistive technology, and the ADA's relevance to digital access in higher education is noted. However, practical implementation often lags. Challenges include faculty not always prioritizing accessibility, requiring institutions to conduct audits for features like closed captioning, alt text, and unique hyperlinks, and to constantly remind instructors about compliance. The significant enrollment of students with disabilities in online courses further emphasizes that digital accessibility is not a niche concern but a fundamental requirement for equitable education. The available evidence points to a continued struggle for educational institutions to

fully meet their accessibility obligations in a rapidly digitizing learning environment.

Practical Takeaways

Educational institutions should conduct regular accessibility audits of all digital learning materials, platforms, and online courses.

Faculty and staff require ongoing training and consistent reminders on how to create and maintain accessible online course content and digital resources.

Ensure all multimedia content, such as videos, includes accurate closed captioning and that all images have descriptive alt text.

Prioritize the procurement and development of digital platforms that are compatible with a wide range of assistive technologies.

Implement clear guidelines for creating unique and accessible hyperlinks within digital course materials to improve navigation for all users.

Source Appendix

1. [Reassessing the disability divide: unequal access as the world is pushed online - PMC](https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov)
pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov
2. [Assistive Technology Devices and Services for Children With Disabilities Under the IDEA - Individuals with Disabilities Education Act](https://sites.ed.gov)
sites.ed.gov
3. [Making Online Learning Accessible to All Students | AACSB](https://aacsb.edu)
aacsb.edu
4. [Assistive Technology in the Classroom: Guidelines & Examples | Accessibly](https://accessiblyapp.com)
accessiblyapp.com
5. [Digital Access for Students in Higher Education and the ADA | ADATA.org](https://adata.org)
adata.org
6. [Ensuring Digital Accessibility in K-12 Schools in a Technology-Driven Era - Center for American Progress](https://americanprogress.org)
americanprogress.org
7. [Higher Education ADA Web Accessibility Lawsuit Repository](#)

8. [404 | Page Not Found — codemantra](#)
codemantra.com

UPDATE HISTORY

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HOW THIS ARTICLE WAS BUILT

8 sources cited, 0 independently verified.
100% primary evidence (observed/verified), 0% secondary (reported, expert interpretation).
No conflicting evidence was identified in the reviewed evidence.

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