Broadband Funding Can Support Digital Learning

Access to high-speed internet can be crucial for digital learning. Over the past few years, federal and state governments have allocated substantial funding to improve access to high-speed internet. Despite overall progress, substantial difficulties remain in measuring who actually has access to high-speed internet, in reaching some areas of the country, and in inequities of use when high-speed internet is available.

As digital learning becomes more ubiquitous, there is huge potential for improving equity for marginalized students. Without intentional effort to address inequities in access to high-speed internet, however, digital learning's promise can be limited and instead rendered another tool that further marginalizes some groups of students (and potential students). Fortunately, recently passed federal legislation provides major financial support to states and creates an opportunity to make substantial headway on equitably improving access to high-speed internet.

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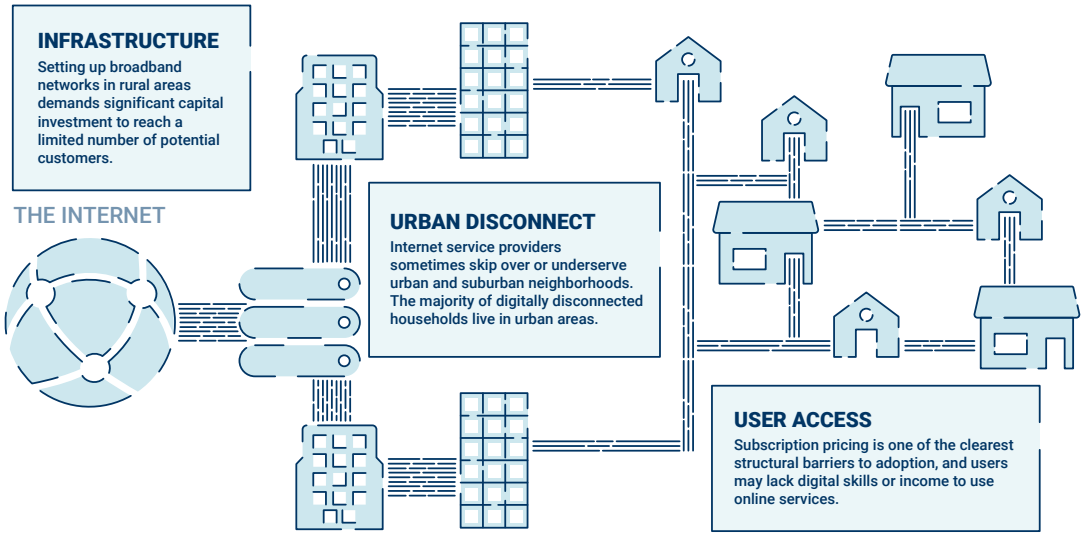
What is **Digital Learning?**

Digital learning includes a broad range of content and communication tools, curricular models, design strategies, and services that personalize instruction for students in blended and online learning environments. Evidence demonstrates digital solutions lower the cost of course materials, improving access to them. In addition, digital solutions, such as adaptive learning, paired with active learning have the potential to improve course outcomes for poverty-affected students, and Black, Latinx, and Indigenous students.

BROADBAND BREAKDOWN

Numerous systemic barriers prevent equitable access to broadband.



Access to high-speed internet and the digital divide

Access to high-speed internet, usually defined as providing download speeds in excess of 25 megabits per second, is critical for taking advantage of the promise of digital learning. Certainly, it is beneficial in other areas of life as well, including improving access to health care,

employment, social connections, and others.[1] While federal investments and state and tribal efforts have improved the availability of broadband internet, actual accessibility for individuals remains challenging.[2]

By one estimate from the height of the pandemic when most students were working online, 4 million college students – or 22 percent – were struggling with internet access.[3] While this would certainly impact those students, struggles with connectivity are also a likely contributor to recent enrollment declines as students have concerns about being able to complete coursework with unreliable or inaccessible internet, due to cost, infrastructure, or other factors. This is very clearly an equity issue as the impacts are more likely felt by racially marginalized and poverty-affected students. Data show that Black and Hispanic and low-income individuals are less likely to have broadband connections at home than white or upper income peers.[4]

State funding **opportunities**

In November 2021, the federal government approved $65 billion to improve broadband access as part of the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act. The bulk of the funding—$42.5 billion—goes to state governments through a grant program (with some state match required). Other major components of the act include subsidies for low-income families to pay for commercially provided internet service, grants focused on digital equity, and funds for tribal connectivity. States and territories will have opportunities in the near future to develop plans to utilize these funds, which will be distributed using formulas that account for underserved areas and locations with high costs for high-speed internet.

[1] Bento J. Lobo, Md. Rafayet Alam, and Brian Witacre, "Broadband speed and unemployment rates: Data and measurement issues," Telecommunications Policy, 44, no. 1 (2020): 101829. Lisa J Dettling, "Broadband in the labor market: The impact of residential high-speed internet on married women's labor force participation," ILR Review 70, no. 2 (2017): 451-482. Brittney Crock Bauerly, Russell F. McCord, Rachel Hulkower, and Dawn Pepin. "Broadband access as a public health issue: the role of law in expanding broadband access and connecting underserved communities for better health outcomes." The Journal of Law, Medicine & Ethics, 47, no. 2_suppl (2019): 39-42.

[2] United States Government Accountability Office, "Broadband: Observations on past and ongoing efforts to expand access and improve mapping data," 2020, Washington, D.C.: United States Government Accountability Office.

[3] Iris Palmer and Wesley Whistle, "Spending deal supports broadband access for college students," 2021, Washington, D.C.: New America.

[4] Pew Research Center, "Internet/Broadband Fact Sheet," 2021, Washington, D.C.: Pew Research Center.

Additionally, an important bucket of funds ($2.8 billion) will be focused exclusively on digital equity through multiple grant programs, including both formula and competitive grants centered around developing and implementing state digital equity plans. The bill dedicates a portion of its funding to supporting connectivity for community anchor institutions that lack sufficient broadband capacity. The legislative definition of "anchor institutions" includes institutions of higher education.

See ELE's "Broadband Funding" flyer for more on how IIJA supports equitable access to high-speed internet, as well as opportunities for digital learning from that perspective.

How can institutions get involved for the **benefit of their students?**

While state plans and the use of federal grant dollars will depend to some extent on state needs and data developed by the federal government, ensuring that student needs are well represented is crucial. Institutions can consider these potential actions:

- **Connect with your state's broadband office.** States have different approaches for managing broadband issues, but connecting with the right agency or office is a crucial first step. Information on state offices is available here.
- **Identify funding opportunities for anchor institutions.** Some institutions of higher education may qualify as anchor institutions and be eligible for direct state funding under the digital equity grant programs. These grants will be administered by an entity—including state agencies, anchor institutions, or others—selected by each state's governor.
- **Ensure eligible students take advantage of federal benefits.** Ensuring that students take advantage of available benefits can help them afford internet access. One way to do this is to make sure that students who meet federal eligibility standards know that resources are available to them. Details on program eligibility can be found here.

- **Gather data on your institutional digital divide.** Understanding the scope and details of connectivity problems that students face is crucial. Data and information from students can help inform state plans to utilize federal funding, but the time to gather that information is now. It's also critical to remember that any sample of students currently enrolled is likely to understate the scope of the problem because some students may have left postsecondary education at least partially due to connectivity issues.

- **Offer mapping and data expertise.** Institutions of higher education have substantial expertise in data and mapping that could inform broadband planning. For example, due to inherent flaws in federal assessment of broadband deployment, Georgia created its own maps, showing substantially less coverage.[5] Although the federal government plans to create new analyses to guide the new grant programs, institutions and states should be prepared to identify components and dimensions that the federal exercise misses.

More information about strategies for equitably scaling digital learning is available on the Every Learner Everywhere website at everylearnereverywhere.org. Contact our staff to discuss how your institution can utilize federal relief funding to improve equity through investment in digital learning.

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[5] Cat Zakrzewski and Chris Alcantara, "Biden's ambitious broadband funding has a key impediment: an outdated map of who needs it," December 14, 2021, Washington Post.