



# Accessibility in Higher Education



# Building a Better Student Experience

Higher education has made significant strides toward providing all students with access to education, especially while navigating large-scale shifts inside and outside the classroom. Institutions are paying closer attention to accessibility and how it influences educational delivery as well as student success and engagement. Accessibility, much like today's students, is multifaceted. While many institutions have prioritized ensuring that any student can access digital content and information regardless of their ability or disability, barriers to access still remain.

Consider the students impacted most by accessibility. How can institutions better reach, serve and retain students with disabilities, students in historically marginalized groups, international students, or non-traditional students? Accessibility may not only be impacted by a student's ability, but also by socioeconomic factors like income, occupation, or geography. For example, a student living in an **education desert** – a county without any higher education institution – may be less likely to advance their education.

If educators are going to meet students of all kinds where they are, educational delivery has to include the necessary accommodations for students with diverse needs. The responsibility cannot rest solely on students to seek out resources that facilitate their education, but instead, accessibility should be embedded within (if not the foundation of) the student experience. Increasing accessibility to higher education for all students starts with evaluating the barriers, pedagogy, and technology that significantly impact a student's access to a better future.



# Barriers to Access



Prioritizing accessibility within academic programming and edtech is imperative for meeting student needs now and into the future. Institutions must identify and adopt practices in the classroom as well as within technology that serve all students across the evolving educational landscape. But how? Institutions that are making strides start with identifying the barriers to providing equitable access to all learners.

**Physical barriers to access** are those that impact a student’s ability to engage with electronic material, regardless of their ability, or how well they can see, hear, or process information. Schools cannot deny equally effective opportunities to students with disabilities who are interested in participating in the programs, benefits, and services they offer. When evaluating barriers to education access, physical barriers are not the only barriers to consider.

According to the [2022 State of Student Success & Engagement in Higher Education](#), the top factors impacting student success and engagement were socioeconomic factors all related to access, including:

**Access to the Internet (92%)**



**Access to learning resources (90%)**



**Access to technology devices (90%)**



These factors impacted student success each of the three years this survey was fielded, and represent a fraction of the factors impacting student success.





## Empowering Students Through Accessibility

Brenny Kummer, Assistant Director of Educational Technology at Bartholomew Consolidated School Corporation in Columbus, Indiana shares how accessibility and flexibility can lead to student empowerment. [Read the blog post](#) to learn more about variability in the learning environment and how educators can support learner variability.

### Other socioeconomic factors impacting students' accessibility to education are:

#### Financial

Economic barriers are represented by a student's household income, ability to access resources that aid in learning both inside and outside the classroom (i.e. tutors, laptops, smartboards, transportation or extracurricular activities), and/or the costs they would incur to relocate for study (domestically or internationally). Providing resources, technology, and multiple modes of instruction can help students – regardless of their means or location – gain equal access to learning.

#### Educational

Educational barriers place limits on the amount and kind of education a student receives, whether that's at home, socially, or in academic settings. Being a first-generation college student, for example, can significantly impact how much information a student receives about opportunities beyond high school, and may influence if or when they prepare for higher education. Ensuring students receive support discovering, navigating, and matriculating through academic programs will be key to making education more accessible.

#### Occupational

For students who are dependents, the occupation of their parents/guardians plays an integral role in their access to quality education. Occupation can also act as a barrier for independent, non-traditional or adult learners who are solely responsible for the cost of their education. Affordability, regardless of student type, helps to remove the stigma related to social class and level the playing field for all students.

#### Geographical

A person's place of residence is an important socioeconomic factor. To address potential geographic barriers, consider the environment, neighborhoods, and available resources where a student lives, works and plays. Understanding a location's transport costs, disease burden, or food deserts is a step toward understanding how best to address student needs.





# Making Learning Accessible through Pedagogy

Higher education is navigating large-scale shifts that are inevitably shaping pedagogy. Education has gone increasingly virtual, making hybrid classrooms and [hyflex teaching](#) the norm. While student expectations for education delivery and convenience continue to advance, the need for dynamic in-person instruction persists. How then can pedagogy solve for both?

Changing student demographics have shifted not just enrollment but higher education as a whole. For example, student needs, attendance, and non-academic responsibilities have evolved. Therefore, education must be accessible to students seeking in-person, online, and hybrid experiences – and not only in a linear fashion but also on an as-needed basis.

Students today experience higher education with more fluidity. What does that mean, more fluidity? [Fluid students](#) are a growing segment of the student population that requires the ability to flow in and out of higher education and the workforce as they pursue academic goals, skills achievement, and workforce readiness. In a fluid ecosystem, all students, not just those with disabilities, benefit from multiple, flexible options for learning materials.





According to [Instructure's annual survey](#), 74% of students are nontraditional and that number is growing. Juggling multiple responsibilities in addition to education, adult learners seek greater flexibility, choice, and consistent access to programs that provide a streamlined path to career advancement.

That means, where possible, empowering students to select the programs, tools, and learning resources that are most appealing to them. Allow students more options to engage on their terms according to their learning styles, whether that's through asynchronous or synchronous learning, online quizzes, downloadable resources, discussion groups, collaborations, or other tools.

[Our annual survey](#) consistently finds that students are only sometimes aware of the tools and resources available to them. Educators can prevent this by diversifying their pedagogy and familiarizing themselves with the tools and learning management system (LMS) features designed to help facilitate teaching and learning.



# Making Learning Accessible in Tech

## 1. Take Advantage of the Existing Features Within Your LMS.

Leveraging the tools within your learning management system (LMS) can go a long way to better serving every student. Your LMS is likely designed for accessibility in a variety of ways. Many of today's leading solutions are built to meet a common standard, such as [Web Content Accessibility Guidelines](#) (WCAG), developed to provide a single, shared standard to make web content more accessible to anyone with disabilities. Canvas LMS is certified WCAG 2.1 AA, substantially conformant by a non-profit third party, ensuring accessibility tools and assistive technology will properly work with your courses.

For educators, Canvas LMS also offers a [Canvas Course Accessibility Checklist](#) for educators that outlines how to be accessibility-compliant using the Canvas Rich Content Editor.

## How to Build Accessibility-Compliant Web Content

- Provide Alt Text, text-based descriptions, to images
- Utilize tools for assessing accessibility
- Use descriptive text in hyperlinks
- Format text with headings to help students navigate
- Create lists with bulleted or numbered list tools
- Build tables using a caption, header row, and header columns
- Emphasize text with bold, italic, or underlined formatting, not color alone

All of these features allow screen readers to skim your content before it begins to read the items. Some learning management tools go a step further, providing native accessibility tools. Canvas features a built-in [Accessibility Checker in the Rich Content Editor tool](#) that checks for common accessibility errors as an educator builds their course content.





# Equitable Access for Everyone

At Instructure, we believe in creating access by design, so we build tools that help everyone to learn together at their own pace. Each product supports education for everyone, wherever and however they learn best.

Many of our employees are former educators with hands-on experience helping learners with their accessibility needs. Others are passionate advocates for our customers, always trying to learn more. That's why we're committed to:

- Regular internal testing and third-party evaluation.
- Delivering instructional design and on-line learning based on best practices.
- Apps that enable flexible access from anywhere.

Utilize accessibility tools to check for the use of color blind-friendly visualizations, for example, or to replace text with images for the visually impaired. Also, add captioning to a video created in or uploaded to a Canvas course. These easy-to-use features take much of the guesswork out of creating accessible courses.

If your institution's LMS does not integrate with third-party accessibility tools, meeting the needs of every student will prove a challenge. That's why Canvas LMS integrates with [Microsoft Immersive Reader](#) and other tools to help meet learners wherever they are.

## 2. Support Access to Multiple Tools & Tech

More than identifying the barriers to success, institutions must also address them. Providing uninhibited access to the internet and digital tools is necessary to pursue equity and access for all learners.

Financially-based support programs, such as grants, scholarships, paid internships, and low-cost housing and transportation, can be implemented to make headway against inequity.

Further, providing more flexibility around academic support, access to technology for student use, self-paced learning, and extracurricular opportunities are important ways to impact student engagement.

Organizations are finding it helpful to partner with local technology companies and nonprofits to offer internet and digital resources to students who need them most.





# Creating Consistency in the Student Experience

For many students, the academic experience differs drastically from one course to another. It can be a delicate balance to honor the academic freedom of faculty while meeting the expectations of today's diverse and tech-savvy students. Unfortunately, inconsistencies in the educational experience may negatively impact accessibility and the overall student experience.

An evaluation of how students navigate between in-person and online instruction can reveal gaps in providing a seamless student experience. How students engage with their peers and instructors through an LMS, as well as how they progress through coursework all impact the student experience. When a student consistently faces roadblocks to their academic success, they are more likely to discontinue their education.

The number of students who discontinued their higher education without earning a credential now adds up to [40 million former students](#) and grew by 1.4 million during the 2020-21 academic year.

While there is not a one-size-fits-all solution for all learners in all learning environments, technology can be a powerful tool for providing more access to learners.



## Consider these methods for providing academic consistency within edtech:

- **Start with building a foundation of accessibility** within your edtech and LMS that allows students to use the tech regardless of their ability to manipulate a mouse, how well they can see, their ability to distinguish colors, how well they can hear or how they process information.
- **Evaluate the adoption and use of existing technology.** How are students, administrators, educators and decision-makers engaging with edtech? What limitations or barriers do they encounter within the edtech that impact teaching and learning?
- **Implement best practices**, such as providing institution- or department-wide templates to help create visual consistency.
- **Outline tips and tricks for educators newly adopting an LMS** and connect them with LMS power users.
- **Engage users as part of a community** of educators that learn together and share their achievements. It's one of the reasons the [Canvas Community](#) has grown to more than a million active users.
- **Streamline adoption** with [tools designed to help faculty and students](#) seamlessly navigate new platforms.
- **Act with K-20 in mind.** When students use the same LMS from early years to post-graduate and adult learning, barriers to access and friction are removed.

An institution's edtech should help educators better understand how students navigate the academic journey. For example, Canvas LMS offers [interactive analytics that makes it easy to view LMS usage](#), and allows administrators to see and understand the data that matters most to them. This free feature within Canvas brings data to the surface to enable more informed decision-making and help facilitate more accessible teaching and learning.



## Accessibility in action in North Carolina

North Carolina's schools for the deaf and blind use Canvas LMS to empower students every day. The school uses Canvas to empower students with technology and tools that help them complete assignments, learn sign language, read and write in English and engage with their academic peers and teachers. With Canvas available to students 24 hours a day and using the internet, students can participate in classes and have the time and access to complete assignments independently.

[Watch the video to see Canvas LMS in action.](#)





## Prioritize Mobile Access to Education

Discussion about equity and accessibility in higher education often leads to the importance of mobile technology as a primary mode of connecting with students. Optimizing the student experience requires attention to the devices they use daily.

And equity means ensuring all students have the support they need to succeed in their courses, including optimizing course design.

Educational tools and apps should be native mobile – not just adapted from the web – and downloadable on a user’s device. This means they can be used without internet connectivity, are faster due to harnessing the device’s processing power, and provide a better user experience. Accessing course content from a phone is easier and more convenient than accessing it through a browser.

## Built to Meet Students Where They Are: The Canvas Mobile App

The [Canvas Mobile App](#) supports equity and accessibility for the students and instructors who use it. The app is designed, developed, and tested consistently for accessibility – supporting high contrasts, large text, and screen readers on devices for both iOS and Android platforms.

Additionally, the Canvas mobile app provides more security and reliability than web apps, offers robust, feature-rich experiences for faculty and students in separate native apps, and makes using Canvas LMS easy, intuitive, and interactive.

Students can access their courses from any smart device with an internet connection through wifi or a data plan. With the app, learners can stay current with their courses from anywhere – at the coffee shop, while waiting for their shift to begin, or while waiting for their child’s music lesson to finish.

A focused experience helps eliminate distractions and empowers students and faculty to:

- Communicate with each other via direct messages.
- Create, customize, and view their calendars so they can focus on what’s most important.
- Provide or access differentiated curriculum and instruction with MasteryPaths.
- Customize notification settings, set reminders, and place alert thresholds.





## Mobility and Accessibility at Palo Alto College

At Palo Alto College, Canvas Mobile App provides essential access that reliably boosts success for students and faculty wherever and whenever they work and study. The school is located in a rural area, where many students live 20-30 miles outside of San Antonio city limits. Income inequality and lack of accessibility to reliable internet are challenges. iOS and Android platforms.

[Watch the video](#) to see mobile edtech solutions in action at Palo Alto College.

### STUDENT PERSPECTIVE:

“It’s important to have Canvas on your phone, because there are some times that my internet is not the best, and I have the opportunity to grab my phone and access anything I need when my laptop isn’t working or I’m out and about. It’s such a great way to contact your teacher or other students on the go and stay connected, regardless of where you are.”

**Lizeth Razo-Robledo,**  
Student,  
Palo Alto College

### FACULTY PERSPECTIVE:

“Being able to provide this instant connectivity has transformed teaching. The accessibility of that has brought a lot of equity for our students to be able to do remote learning.”

**Edlyn de Oliveira,**  
Music Instructure and ePortfolio Co-facilitator,  
Palo Alto College

### ADMINISTRATOR PERSPECTIVE:

“When I’m sitting at my computer, sometimes I’m scrolling through Canvas for my own courses, because in many ways the functionality is better and more seamless there than it is on the computer, and it is more immediate as well. Students can just pull out their phone and get to whatever information they need in a matter of seconds.”

**Patrick Lee,**  
Dean of Academic Success,  
Palo Alto College





# Build the Foundation for an Accessible Future Now

While higher education institutions cannot solve every socio-economic challenge a student may face, they can significantly influence their access to and experience with education. It's an effort that needs support and commitment from all levels of an institution, from the policies that drive decisions to the faculty that engage with students each day.

By prioritizing flexibility, accessibility, and consistency within the student experience, institutions can support students of all kinds and stay in lockstep with an ever-changing educational landscape.

## Resources

[Education Deserts in the US: How Online Education Can Close the Gap](#), Wiley University Services, 2022

[Higher Education Accessibility Online Resource Center](#), National Federation of the Blind

[2022 State of Student Success and Engagement in Higher Education Report](#), Instructure

["Fluid students flowing in and out of education are higher ed's future. Here's how colleges must adapt."](#) Anne Khademian, Higher Ed Drive, Aug. 15, 2022

["More Than 40 Million Americans Have Now Attended College Without Earning A Degree,"](#) Michael T. Nietzel, Forbes, April 25, 2023



# Powering the World's Smartest Classrooms.

Instructure is an education technology company dedicated to helping everyone learn together. We amplify the power of teaching and elevate the learning process, leading to improved student outcomes. Today, Instructure supports more than 30 million educators and learners at more than 6,000 organizations around the world.

The Instructure Learning Platform makes learning more personal and student success more equitable by delivering the solutions you need to support, enrich, and connect every aspect of teaching and learning. The Instructure Learning Platform for higher education includes:



**Canvas by Instructure:** bringing together Canvas LMS, video engagement with Canvas Studio, a branded course catalog system by Canvas Catalog, and student badging and e-portfolios with Canvas Credentials.



**Impact by Instructure:** helping teachers and students adopt educational technology to promote deeper engagement with learning while guaranteeing the campus edtech ecosystem is utilized to its fullest potential.

Learn more at [instructure.com/higher-education](https://instructure.com/higher-education).