Digital Divides and Today’s Technologies

The penetration of information technology into all corners of life created a digital divide between those who had those technologies and those who didn’t. As technology ownership has broadened, the divides have morphed but not disappeared, a dynamic seen in many higher education settings. As learning environments in higher education increasingly use and depend on an expanding array of technologies, colleges and universities should pay close attention to how those developments can present new obstacles to some learners.

This paper from the Campaign for the Future of Higher Education looks at the digital divide as it pertains to online learning. The authors contend that the digital divide is a persistent problem for underserved populations and that online learning exacerbates the achievement gap between prepared and underprepared students.

Pew research on the ownership and use of smartphones found that demographic factors such as race, age, and education level influence the degree to which users are “smartphone dependent”—people who lack broadband at home and rely on their phones for online access.

Commuter Students Using Technology (2014)
CUNY researchers investigated access to and use of various technologies among students at six colleges. They found that for many students, limited availability of technology “constrained the kinds of academic activities some students could engage in to specific locations or times.”

The Promise of Connected Learning (2015)
In this interview, S. Craig Watkins, sociologist and member of the Connected Learning Research Network, discusses the growing importance of extending learning beyond classrooms, particularly into social networks. He points out that the kind of access one has to technology affects how it is used, calling the digital divide “a layer of divides...of social and digital inequality.”

A Study of Four Textbook Distribution Models (2011)
A study at Daytona State College, whose student population consists largely of nontraditional students, found that electronic textbooks have the potential to address issues of access to and affordability of higher education.

This article take a broad look at the role technology plays today—and could play in the future—in higher education. The trajectories discussed illustrate the ways in which some kinds of digital divides have largely disappeared, even as new divides emerge.

The Other End of the Scale: Rethinking the Digital Experience in Higher Education (2014)
The authors of this article argue that, despite intentions otherwise, the growth of information technologies in higher education has often resulted in closed and uneven environments. As a consequence, many of the developments that were intended to increase access have shrunk it.