Transcription for


THE KEY WITH INSIDE HIGHER ED

EP. **40: HIGHER ED'S NEW DIGITAL DIVIDE**

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INSIDE HIGHER ED

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DOUG LEDERMAN: Last year, as the pandemic transformed colleges and universities overnight, it forced students to learn in their natural habitats instead of on campuses. The already uneven playing field for students based on demographics tilted even more. Denied the sort of broadband access, computer facilities, and study spaces that many colleges make widely available to students, some learners found themselves on the wrong side of a digital divide that is often masked in normal times. Compared to some of her peers in rural communities, who struggled to keep up with their studies because they lacked high-speed internet access, Jayla Johnson had it pretty good, the University of Georgia senior journalism major says.


JAYLA JOHNSON: I live in the metro Atlanta area. Wi-Fi is used to everybody being at school 8:00 to 4:00, and then coming come everybody's on it at different times. It's not used to all day every day everybody was doing it, so we had to change our internet package, because we wasn't sure what it was when my computer was going so slow, even though it's a newer computer. So our struggle was like somewhat, but it wasn't as bad as my friends who live in rural areas, who had to travel to Chick-fil-A's and McDonald's to do their homework in a parking lot.

DOUG LEDERMAN: Jayla's biggest issue, in fact, was a much more human one--asking grandma to stay still to try to avoid triggering the lockdown browser that some of her courses used as a security measure during the exams.

JAYLA JOHNSON: I'm with my grandmother. You can't boss a 73-year-old around. She's not going to go for it. And I wouldn't dare do it myself.

DOUG LEDERMAN: Last month, Inside Higher Ed explored issues such as these in "Bridging the Digital Divide--Lessons from COVID-19," a report that you can download free on our website. In this episode of The Key we'll hear the report's author Lindsay McKenzie, Inside Higher Ed's technology reporter, discuss the nature of today's digital divide in higher education, and steps faculty members, colleges, and others are trying to take to close the gap that threatens to derail the educational plans of some economically disadvantaged students.

LINDSAY MCKENZIE: The biggest takeaway I had is that these are not new issues at all. These are issues that people have been thinking about for a long time. But collectively, I think higher education institutions have been able to ignore them because it's happening off campus, right? It's sort of an unseen problem. And on campus, I think a lot of institutions are doing the right things. You know, they had the campus IT labs, they had the campus Wi-Fi. Which is great, you know. That provides access for all the students that need it. But when you can't access the campus, everything falls apart.

DOUG LEDERMAN: We'll also talk to Lori Williams, president and CEO of the National Council for State Authorization Reciprocity Agreements, and Reggie Smith III, CEO of the US Distance Learning Association, about the importance of broadband access and the disproportionate impact of the digital divide on students from groups already underrepresented on college and university campuses.

LORI WILLIAMS: I think that COVID is only lifting up and bringing to our awareness many of the issues that were already there. But then, of course, they've been exacerbated because students are now, many of the most vulnerable students, are working at jobs that are making it difficult for them to be able to continue as a student. Or maybe they've lost their job. And if you're making a choice between whether you're going to feed your kids and pay your rent, or continue with your degree right now, you've got to go with the short term and think about the long term later.

DOUG LEDERMAN: Before we dive in, a quick note of thanks to NC-SARA for sponsoring the report and

making it available to our readers free of charge.

Our first conversation is with Inside Higher Ed's Lindsay McKenzie, who spent much of the late fall and early winter reporting and writing the digital divide report. Lindsay, welcome to The Key.

LINDSAY MCKENZIE: Thank you, glad to be here.

DOUG LEDERMAN: Could you describe what you set out to do with this report and how the goals and direction maybe changed over the course of the reporting?

LINDSAY MCKENZIE: There were two central themes that we were playing with, which was the digital divide and digital equity. And those did continue through the report, and there was some debate about which to focus on more. But I think in the end we covered both because they are related.

But on the digital divide, going in I thought that the digital divide described the haves and the have-nots, the students who have, you know, laptops and smart phones and broadband, and those that don't. And as I started looking into it more and more, I realized that isn't really true today. Most students have access to those things, or at least those devices. The different now is that there are some students that have really amazing Mac Books and expensive laptops. They have the latest iPhone. And there are some students that have a really old laptop, maybe something that won't charge. So it's more of a difference of not being to maintain devices. I mean, it's still an issue of socio-economic status and being able to afford to maintain these devices. It's shifted slightly from what I thought it was.

DOUG LEDERMAN: So is it really more about the sort of sufficiency and vibrancy of students' access than whether they have it at all?

LINDSAY MCKENZIE: I think so. I think that's right.

DOUG LEDERMAN: What are the biggest impediments you saw for students?

LINDSAY MCKENZIE: I've heard from instructors that when they're teaching in person, they'll have students that will have to find a plug in the wall and might sit next to it in the class to kind of keep up, because the battery is so rubbish on the computer. At home, I think, it's the same thing, right? I mean we're learning online still in many cases. And if you have a rubbish device that just doesn't work properly, or you're sharing a device, because that's a different thing that a lot of studies don't quite differentiate, the difference between ownership and access, a lot of people sharing devices. It just means that you do not have access when you need it all the time and that access is not always that great.

DOUG LEDERMAN: Then I assume that not only are we talking about the devices themselves, but also about the access to the internet.

LINDSAY MCKENZIE: Um-hum. I would say so. I think often in K-12 the digital divide refers to the homework gap, which is specifically around internet. There isn't as much information and research on the homework gap in higher ed, but it's still very much there and it's something that we've really noticed recently, because students are not on campus. They can't access the campus Wi-Fi networks. They're going home and they might be sharing a Wi-Fi network with five other people and it's really hard to hold a conversation over Zoom if, you know, you're all competing for that bandwidth.

DOUG LEDERMAN: Well, we also saw those images of students in parking lots that were pretty compelling. Obviously, sometimes the old phrase, a picture's worth a thousand words, maybe there are only a handful of those news stories or images of students in Wendy's parking lots or whatever. But those stuck, I think, in a lot of our minds. And we saw some campuses setting up their parking lots to provide that access. But that seemed like, again, for some of us who are privileged in not having to think about those things, those things kind of stuck.

LINDSAY MCKENZIE: The parking lot Wi-Fi initiatives that some campuses did were great as a really short-term solution, but it's not a great long-term solution. I mean, ideally, no one should be working in their car. You shouldn't have to drive somewhere for internet access. So it was more of a stop-gap than anything, but it was a good one at the time.

DOUG LEDERMAN: Yeah, and again, in terms of drawing attention to the issue, it think it probably had an impact, again, just the visual of it probably helped bring this alive. So we dug right in to some to the meat of it. But maybe let's pull back a little bit and just give us a sense of a couple of handful of takeaways that really you came away from your months of reporting and writing feeling are the things

we collectively in higher ed ought to be focusing on about this set of issues.

LINDSAY MCKENZIE: Yeah, I think the biggest takeaway I had is that these are not new issues at all. These are issues that people have been thinking about for a long time, but collectively I think higher education institutions have been able to ignore them because it's happening off campus, right? It's sort of an unseen problem. And on campus, I think a lot of institutions are doing the right things. You know, they had the campus IT labs. They had the campus Wi-Fi, which is great. That provides access for all the students that need it. But when you can't access the campus, everything falls apart. And I think what I've learned is that we should really be looking at what happens in students' homes as well as on campus, and considering how they study when they're not on campus. And I think a lot of students are learning in their own time. Off campus I would the majority of learning is happening in their bedrooms. So I think we really need to think more about that. And it's difficult because you don't have to pry into students' home lives. And in the report I touch on privacy issues. But I really think that we really be doing a lot more to support to support student learning anywhere they are.

DOUG LEDERMAN: When we think about the impact of the pandemic, which, you know, we're pretty much coming up next week is a year since it landed in most of our lives, the awareness of students as people beyond the person who walks into the classroom building and into the classroom, and then out 50 minutes later or whatever, I think has been one of the really striking things. And so you're right, there's a balancing act there to not intrude overly. But what's your sense of sort of what the appropriate balance is there and what are the ways that institutions can, while respecting privacy, recognize their students' situations?

LINDSAY MCKENZIE: I think the best way I found was individual instructors asking their students how are you learning right now? What device are you using? How's your internet? Can you download something without trouble? You know, can you be on a Zoom call without any problems? I think surveys are probably the way to go, because you can know sort of from online resources that maybe you don't have great internet in your area, or you might know you have lots of students on financial aid. So you might know roughly what the situation is but you won't know specifically in your class what they need and what they're dealing with. So I really think surveys are the way to go.

And I was surprised how many people weren't doing them. Because it seems like a kind of obvious solution. If you're thinking about how you can best teach your students right now, but you aren't sure how they're learning, what they're using, how they're accessing the internet, what the internet's like, those are big barriers. And it seems like a good idea to at least check in with them and ask, and they could maybe not tell you, but they have the option to speak up if they have problems.

DOUG LEDERMAN: I'm talking with Lindsay McKenzie, who the technology reporter at Inside Higher Ed and the author of our recent report on the digital divide during the pandemic. Were there particular examples you came across about the best ways to survey students or people who were particularly effective at it?

LINDSAY MCKENZIE: Yeah. Christopher Ali at the University of Virginia has a really good example. He's a fellow at the Benton Institute. He's a broadband scholar, so that's what he does for his work, he studies broadband. And he had a really good questionnaire that started, I think the first question is, Are you somewhere safe and sound?--which I think is a great opening question, because it speaks to the difficulty of the situation some students are in right now. And then it gets into really granular detail about what students are able to do with their internet. It asks what device they're using, because there actually are a lot of students just studying on their phones right now and that makes learning online incredibly challenging. So I think that was a really good example. I know there are institutions that have also done institutional level surveys. But I do think instructor to class is maybe the best way to go, just to get the granular detail that will actually be able to inform your teaching.

DOUG LEDERMAN: Well, especially when you realize that there are, and we didn't dig into it too much in this particular report, but certainly our coverage over the last year has explored it a lot, there are certain kinds of techniques and certain kinds of approaches, both to instructional delivery, to assessment, to all sorts of things that might be affected by whether and how much your students have good internet, because you can be more asynchronous than synchronous, all sorts of things you might do. So arming the individual instructor with that information does seem pretty logical.

LINDSAY MCKENZIE: That was kind of a surprising thing I found that there were some instructors who, although they were teaching remotely, were really not teaching in what I would describe as a technologically advanced way. They were really paring everything back. I think Professor Ali said he came up some kind of like Microsoft Instant Messenger-style way of chatting with his students. And he made sure everything was possible to download at the beginning of the week. So, you know, we have a student who's driving to the Wi-Fi, they can do that. They can download what they need and they can go back home and study offline. I think a lot of people haven't really thought about what it is like to study online if getting online is a problem. And there are ways you can make it more accessible by just thinking about the file sizes and the file types, and not requiring everything to be live, because that's a huge ask if you don't have great internet.

DOUG LEDERMAN: I waned to dig into a couple of other issues that sort of came up. You talked a bit in

the report about the institutions that had tried to make, attack the problem through making technology available through loaning programs, etc. What's some thinking about where we were during this last spring and last fall, and maybe what might make sense going forward in terms of institutions making technology more available to those students who don't have sufficient technology?

LINDSAY MCKENZIE: I think prepandemic, when I saw institutions giving away devices and aiming for the one-to-one student to device parity, it seemed kind of gimmicky, like something that would attract students maybe. It was a lot of online institutions, which makes sense, obviously, that students are online, they need laptops. But then we also saw institutions like Ohio State, their partnership with Apple means that every first-year student gets, I think, an iPad Pro and a pencil, and they've really integrated it into their teaching. I think we'll see more and more institutions looking at those kinds of arrangements where every student gets a device.

I think there was maybe a feeling that it wasn't necessary before. It's also a very expensive thing to do. There are just institutions that may never be able to afford to do that, but I think perhaps more will be considering it and thinking it's necessary now than before, because they've realized actually they didn't, not all the students had the devices they thought they had, or they ran into problems. I think that device loan programs are a great solution if they are long-term loans, like the students can keep them basically as their own laptops. If it's just like a 24-hour, 48-hour thing, which I think a lot so institutions did before the pandemic, you know, if you have a test coming up, you can come into the library a borrow a laptop for a few days. I don't think that's going to be good enough going forward. I think there's an understanding now that students really need these devices to succeed, not just, you know, academically, but also personally and professionally. It's how we keep in contact. It's how you get a job. It affects so many other areas of your life.

DOUG LEDERMAN: One thing that I have heard in some reporting that I've done is sort of on another related front, is this idea that institutions may need to become more responsible for ensuring wireless equity. There's a provost I know who talked about the desire, his desire, his belief, that institutions maybe should be contracting and ensuring wireless plans for all their students as just a matter of course. I mean, I don't anybody's probably there quite yet. But as we've seen more cities and communities work toward community access for broadband, that seems more attainable now than it might have been in the past.

LINDSAY MCKENZIE: Yeah. I would love to see that happen. I think it's expensive. Again, it's a difficult thing to pull off unless, you have, you know, a really great partnership with maybe a local internet provider or there's some kind of arrangement where maybe the university owns some of the internet

infrastructure, which some universities are involved in and actually do have their own wireless plans, which is a really interesting way to go, but it requires some technical know-how, obviously. There are institutions that have loaned out hot spots alongside laptops, which, again, I think is a good short-term solution, but again, pretty expensive.

I think the problems a lot of institutions will run into is by opening up Wi-Fi access, you know, in these car parks and different places, it does pose a slight security risk, right? The more open the network, the easier it is to infiltrate. So that's always a balance I know CIOs are thinking about. They want it to be open, but at the same time they want it to be secure. So that's a difficult balance to strike. But I really like the idea of maybe negotiating a basic plan with an internet provider and potentially contributing to it or creating a fund or something for students that can't afford it. Signing up to the internet is really confusing I think as student. Like you just don't know what you need and how much it's going to cost. And that's a lot to navigate that as a young person you might not make the best decisions on. Like you don't necessarily need the $100-a-month package, but maybe the $20-a-month isn't enough. It's pretty tricky.

DOUG LEDERMAN: Maybe we'll see that as the next domain for donors--instead of a name on a building the so-and-so wireless connection brought to you by Donor C. I kind of like... I think we're on to something, yeah.

LINDSAY MCKENZIE: I kind of like that. I think that would be good. I don't want to say that the big telecom companies haven't done anything, but they could definitely do a lot more, like Verizon and Comcast, like they have deals for low-income families, but I think for students it's difficult to navigate, and there's a lot of hoops you have to jump through to get these discounted prices, and it could definitely be a lot more streamlined for students.

DOUG LEDERMAN: Well, especially all those big technology providers have, or a lot of them have, philanthropic arms or philanthropic goals, so that could fit nicely.

Last couple of things before we close again, talking to Lindsay McKenzie, the technology reporter at Inside Higher Ed. Talk just a little bit about the risks of not closing this digital divide further. We saw during the pandemic disproportionate impact on students from disadvantaged groups in terms of continuing their education. And, obviously, that can't all be blamed on the digital divide, but it seems pretty obvious from some of the surveys we've seen and then some of the data we've seen that technology access and comfort in studying at a distance were part of the problem, along with the

demands on students to get extra work or to take care of family members, so a bunch of factors. But what's our sense of sort of what damage the continuation of the digital divide could have on disadvantaged students particularly?

LINDSAY MCKENZIE: I think as long as we continue this remote learning setup or a situation where students are taking most of their classes online, my fear is that students in high school right now or people considering going to college will feel like you to have to have a great laptop, you have to have great internet. You have to have a room where you study by yourself, you know, on top of the financial challenges of going to college. I think there's a problem with people just feeling cut off by the barriers that exist right now.

Obviously, once we go back to in-person instruction, things will be slightly better, but I think we need to not lose sight of the fact those students are still learning when they're not campus. And these problems are still there. That it's, you know, alleviated slightly by the facilities of the campus and support networks on campus.

So I worry that people who would have gone to college before are maybe now reconsidering, and particularly that will be low-income people. It'll be people from less economically thriving areas. It will be people who don't have siblings or parents who went to college, who can tell them you can get support from the college. I think it's just a lack of awareness of the support that's out there is going to put people off going to college. And it's scary, I mean, particularly when you think about the impact maybe on STEM or tech careers, you know, areas where companies are really struggling to hire diverse workers already. I could see a pipeline issue down the road where people who are in school now think those careers are not for them because they're just not accessible.

DOUG LEDERMAN: So any last points that you want to make before we wrap it up?

LINDSAY MCKENZIE: Yeah, I think there's growing awareness of these issues, and thinking about it and the scale of the problem can make it seem, you know, really scary and insurmountable. But I think individuals can make a big difference here, you know, whether it's the instructor who reaches out students and checks they're okay, and they can do the class online. If they need extra support, maybe they can refer them to things that the university is doing. I think there is a bright side, which is that the nature of the problem has been exposed. It was always there but we were able to kind of ignore it. And I think we can't ignore it anymore. And my hope is that it will get more attention and more funding, and more proactive solutions. So I think there's may be a silver lining out there behind a rather cloudy sky,

but it's potentially positive that now we know the scale of the problem, we can fix it potentially.

DOUG LEDERMAN: And the report that Lindsay wrote, which is available free on our website, is one of those things that can help draw attention to it, so, Lindsay, thanks for your good work on it and thanks for joining us today.

LINDSAY MCKENZIE: Thank you.

[MUSIC]

DOUG LEDERMAN: You're listening to The Key at Inside Higher Ed. Be sure to subscribe to this free podcast on your favorite platform, including iTunes, Stitcher, and Google Podcasts.

For our next discussion, I'm joined by Lori Williams, president and CEO the National Council for State Authorization Reciprocity Agreements, and Reggie Smith III, CEO of the US Distance Learning Association. NC-SARA, as Lori's group is called, focuses in ensuring access to high-quality online and distance education by forging agreements among states on how to regulate online programs. The USDLA is a nonprofit group that supports research, development, and practice in distance learning in higher education and beyond.

So, Lori and Reggie, welcome to The Key and thanks for joining us.

LORI WILLIAMS: Thanks so much for having us.

DOUG LEDERMAN: Lori, given the various roles you've played in both postsecondary and online education, how do you approach the digital divide and what concerns you most about it?

LORI WILLIAMS: Well, first of all, I'd just like to give you and Lindsay kudos on an excellent report. It was not only informative with respect to the current state of the digital divide, but also very practical in advising institutions about what they can do to mitigate the worst effects of the digital divide. You know,

as your report indicates, it's about so much more than whether students have equipment and internet access. Our organization focuses on state authorization of distance education. And outside of SARA, rules for that vary quite a bit from state to state, so our organization's requirements of states and participating institutions really don't address these digital divide issues. States are our members, and so our sponsoring this report and talking to you today is a great opportunity to talk about the digital divide and these issues.

DOUG LEDERMAN: Reggie, from your perspective, you know, kind of a similar question, what aspects of the digital divide kind of most keep you up at night? What most worries you about it?

REGGIE SMITH: Truthfully, it's providing the access. Early on the pandemic making its way across the country, you know, we had to jump out in front and really do a virtual town hall for historical Black colleges and those universities to really look at the funding and the broadband impact. And with the digital divide, I've always looked at different populations, including inside higher ed, that population, but also K-12. What's happening with foster care, kids in the system. So what keeps me up at night is the broadband access to all of the tools and technologies available for a long-distance learner.

DOUG LEDERMAN: We've clearly seen the enrollment numbers for last fall, we saw the audiences, the demographic groups of students who are historically least well represented in higher education most affected by the pandemic in terms of inability to continue their educations. We saw enrollment drops being much bigger for community college students, for certain underrepresented minority groups. And obviously there are lots of reasons for that that go beyond digital access. But it's also pretty clear that that was part of the problem. Lori, I'm interested in both of you, but Lori maybe start, how much do you think the issues that we raise in this report about digital access contributed to sort of the under-enrollment of underrepresented populations?

LORI WILLIAMS: As your report pointed out, students from low-income backgrounds, first-generation students, people of color, they've already, and always been more vulnerable. And now we see that they've suffered the most under COVID. But these issues of broadband availability have been around for quite some time.

Many years ago when I was in Vermont at Vermont College, I was approached by a group that was focusing on making broadband access the equivalent of a utility in the state of Vermont. In their view, it should be like water and electricity. And I firmly believe that. And the reason they were talking to me was because the state capital of Montpellier is in a valley, and there was this little spot on the campus at

Vermont College that had the highest peak. And that was where they wanted to put the cell tower and they were looking for permission to do that. That was the first time that it really occurred to me, this is going back like 20 years.

This is really important issue not only in urban areas but also in rural areas for students, so I think that COVID is only lifting up and bringing to our awareness many of the issues that were already there. But then, of course, they've been exacerbated because students are now, many of the most vulnerable students, are working at jobs that are making it difficult for them to be able to continue as a student. Or maybe they've lost their job. If you're making a choice between whether you're going to feed your kids and pay your rent, or continue your degree right now, you've got to go with the short term and think about the long term later.

DOUG LEDERMAN: Lori, that's a great point. In the conversation we had with Lindsay just a few minutes ago, she made the case that a lot of the digital divide issues are masked in normal times when students are on campus because a lot of campuses do at least a decent job of having computer centers and other places where students can, and fairly good wireless access and stuff. And that it's in this moment when students were dispersed that we saw real danger and saw these issue sort of escalate. And so I'm curious, Reggie, as you think about sort of the landscape, do you see the elevation of this issue and the sort of intensified focus on it potentially having a positive impact in terms increasing awareness and getting campuses to do better?

REGGIE SMITH: Absolutely, and it's about time to be honest. This broadband issue, and access around it. As a matter of fact, the report was spot-on to include broadband right at the top and really just chomping through down to digital literacy. You know, broadband internet access I think is really the big thing that needs to be addressed in this country, because you can bring all of that stuff into play. I think the pandemic, other than being a really terrible thing that has happened, I think it will really address the broadband, but then also the design of content in institutions that may have had premier programs that had to or were allowed to ignore the online dean or portion of their institution that's doing so well, now all of a sudden that premier program means it needed to transition into online, whether they were a premed program, you know, the students sort suffered through just watching labs on YouTube. But eventually the schools I think will catch up, invest in the infrastructure, invest in the licensing. I think they will also get more demographic data on their students. They will know what devices they have and be able to really shape the content and be able to know what is being delivered.

DOUG LEDERMAN: I think there's lots of evidence that online education works better for some students than for others. Do you think that the sort of increase focus on remote and virtual and online education

as part of the educational delivery system in higher education because of the pandemic, and I think that's going to stick going forward, will get people more aggressively addressing that divide, Lori?

LORI WILLIAMS: I think that you need to start with which audience of students are you trying to serve. There was a great deal of emphasis and focus on traditional age students who would otherwise have been on a campus, the 18- to 23-year-olds. And as we know, there are large numbers even within that population that are not considered traditional students. They're working adults. They're parents. They live off campus. They're not the traditional 18- to 23-year-olds even. And then, of course, there are large numbers of adult students.

And so students that were looking for an experience of having a less risky environment with which to grow up and to try on taking responsibility for themselves as adults on a campus, and all of the amenities and clubs and opportunities for having parties and sports, all those things were just not going to happen in an online environment. And that's a very different set of expectations than it is for those that want a degree so they can move forward in their lives, build social and economic mobility within their family and move forward as adults. And there's a lot of crossover in there for sure. But those are very different populations. And I think addressing the question from that perspective will lead to very different answers than a simple, yeah, it worked, or, no, it didn't, or here's what we need to do differently.

To your point about different populations and the diversity of the students that are coming to campus, first generation students, people of color, LGBTQ, they all have different needs and need to be addressed differently. I think we're past the days of the librarian saying, we're only going to work 9 to 5, you know. I mean, that's a different topic. But speaking to the students in a voice that they can hear, providing services for them that they can really make use of and thinking about things from their perspective in the context of the variety and diversity of student needs, I think is really important.

DOUG LEDERMAN: We're talking to Lori Williams, president and CEO of NC-SARA, and Reggie Smith III, CEO of the US Distance Learning Association. If online and blended education are going to be a more central part of how many, if not most, colleges operate in the future, how patient will parents, students, and policy-makers be in waiting for them to improve how they deliver virtual instruction? A lot of people gave the institutions the benefit of the doubt last spring and probably last fall. Are we starting to see expectations rise and will we continue to?

REGGIE SMITH: Yeah, I think the expectations, the bar is going to go higher. The consumer has a right to

be somewhat impatient because we have been here. And along with the other institutions and associations that Lori mentioned, and so there's a body of literature out there that is deep, taller than the building, and it is wide across a number of organizations.

DOUG LEDERMAN: The pandemic and recession have hit a lot of colleges and universities financially, which means that they may not have the money to afford some of the potential solutions to the digital divide, like aying for broadband access for their students, as Lori referred to earlier. Do you have suggestions for steps that institutions and instructors might take that run along the continuum from expensive to affordable or even free?

LORI WILLIAMS: Well, one of the things highlighted in your report as a recommendation for institutions was around laptops, you know, whether purchasing them for students outright, loaning them. And for institutions that are struggling financially, having partnerships with businesses that can provide these is one way to go. Not everybody wants to do that. Some are more willing than others to do it, but it is a really good suggestion.

Another very low cost area is around the recommendation to just be human, whether it's a student support service role at the institution or faculty members, to communicate a message of care, and to behave in alignment with that message.

My own dissertation research years ago was around the competencies of the most effective faculty mentors for online students. And I was looking primarily at SUNY's online programs, that was my research population. And I was surprised to learn thatthe competency that was most often cited as effective on the part of faculty members was communicating that sense of care. And the researcher in me was like, ehh, how do measure that? How do we teach faculty members how to care? But there are very specific behaviors that faculty members can engage in to communicate that sense of care, to share from their own experience as a human being on the planet that struggles with challenges and overcomes them, and can model that for students.

So I think those are a couple of things that I think institutions can do that span the range of cost associated with them.

DOUG LEDERMAN: And the report also focused a lot on the wisdom of surveying students and finding out, which I think falls into that care bucket that you were talking about, finding out where students

struggle, where they are, and using that, particularly at the individual course level by a professor to potentially shape how he or she delivers the course and does assessments, etc. Reggie, do you have suggestions for institutions and professors and others involved in this?

REGGIE SMITH: I agree 100 percent about the care piece and really having some compassion. I agree with Lori. And the report was really great to point out, I'm stuck on digital literacy, because you can have all the nice stuff, but that literacy piece is very important to help people use the technology appropriately and institutions to really support that. And also really important in the report was called out professional development and the discussion around that. And so as an association, we've stood up for professional development committee and really focused to shape our content and some of things that we do on an ongoing basis to put that professional development foot forward.

DOUG LEDERMAN: We've talked about some of the concerns and worries we have. But are there things about how we've come through the and the way these issues have maybe drawn some renewed an intensified attention that leave you hopeful about where we are? Maybe start with Reggie and then go to Lori...

REGGIE SMITH: You know, I think that it really shined a light, the pandemic shined a light on our space. We've been here for some time. For some reason, some institutions kind of shoved it to the side and ignored it, and then it became a really bright thing shining in their eye, and they have to learn how to really transform that capability. I think that's a really good thing, really looking at training, teacher training came out, is a big thing for us, and so I think overall the good thing is that it has shined a light on the gaps that have been here all along.

LORI WILLIAMS: Well, I think that focusing on all of these needs that have been there all along and raising awareness such that they can be rectified is really important. I also think that it will important as the COVID situation subsides for institutions to think about whether and how they want to continue in distance education, if they'll take it seriously and look at the effect of practices. Otherwise, students are going to vote with their feet on whether they want to stay in programs or not. Not every student wants to spend time in distance education. You know, I talked earlier about the differences in the populations of students that come to higher education and what it is that they're looking for, and somebody looking for a safe space to try out adult challenges and decision-making on a campus is a really different student than a working adult who's been around the block a few times.

DOUG LEDERMAN: That was Lori Williams, president and CEO of the National Council for State

Authorization Reciprocity Agreements, and Reggie Smith III, CEO of the US Distance Learning Association. Thanks to both to them for being here, and thanks again to NC-SARA for support that helped to make our report on the digital divide possible.

And thanks to all of you for listening to another episode of The Key, our 40th. Last week, we got word that we'd had 100,000 downloads of The Key since Paul Fain started it for Inside Higher Ed last year. We probably have a ways to go to match Bruce and Barak's podcast or The Daily, but we'll take it. Join us next week as we discuss the state of adult learners in California and around the nation. Until then, stay safe and well. I'm Doug Lederman and this is The Key.