


# Chapter 51

## Improving Social and Economic Mobility for People With Disabilities Through Online Education

Jessica D. K. Love

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4872-1945>

Purdue University Global, USA

### ABSTRACT

*Students with disabilities face many roadblocks to graduation, including but not limited to campus buildings that are difficult to manage, rigid class schedules that do not accommodate a disability, and unnecessarily complex process for obtaining ADA accommodations. Online education is comparable to traditional university programs in quality and accreditation standards. Online education could improve graduation rates and thus provide a higher probability that a graduate with disabilities will find a job and have greater opportunities for economic mobility.*

### INTRODUCTION

Daniel Freeman lives with cerebral palsy. In his blog post “What College has Taught me about my Disabled Body” he details his experience of attending classes at a university (2015). Freeman writes:

*No one knows how to approach it, especially since I do not use a wheelchair, hearing aid, or any other signifier that communicates my Otherness. But as I have evolved throughout my collegiate experience, I’ve realized just how much my disabled body has shaped that experience: specifically, I’ve observed just how others see, think about, and react to me being in space, which has led me to the sad realization that my body will always be a barrier. It is a barrier for colleagues, for friends, for students and professors — populations who often seek to remedy disability by way of technology, rather than personal inquiry or relationship building (2015, para. 4).*

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-6684-3542-7.ch051

Freeman is not alone in his struggle to navigate education with a disability at the post-secondary level. His experience reflects a larger problem of ableism in higher education that many traditional universities are failing to fully address in ways that create more avenues of opportunity for students with disabilities. Many attempts at creating an accessible campus are reactive rather than proactive and does not fully support a large and growing number of potential and current students. The number of people in the United States living with a disability is showing no signs of decreasing, and the need for a college degree in order to obtain employment is increasing. This creates a difficult situation for people with a disability looking to attend college, obtain employment, and live independently. It affects working-age adults with a disability who would work, but cannot, mainly because they lack a degree. The road to independence and socioeconomic mobility is not easy for this population but online educational opportunities can potentially help pave the way for a better future.

The number of people with disabilities in the United States continues to grow. In the United States, 26% of adults are living with a disability (Center for Disease Control, 2019). People living with mental and physical disabilities often live on social security benefits, or depend on the help of family members to survive. Around half of the people who leave the work world because of a disability are under the age of 50 (O'Brien, & Figueiredo, 2009). This is considered a "work disability." A person has a work disability when they are able to work but lack the support, training, or education to actually be a part of the workforce. These are people who are affected by disabilities, but not severely enough to need long-term care or institutionalization and many times, people who fall into this category end up relying on family resources or state and federal resources to survive. As of 2007, "37 percent of people who reported a work disability received Social Security benefits" (O'Brien, & Figueiredo, 2009, p. 2). Social Security Income is one of the most widely used benefits with 18.9% of working-aged adults with disabilities utilizing the service (Erickson, Lee, & VonShrader, 2017). This can put strain on families as well as contribute to feelings of helplessness and hopelessness for the person with disabilities.

People with a work disability can end up in these situations because there is a lack of opportunities to successfully obtain a college degree for jobs that would allow independent living. People who leave the work force, or never enter the workforce because of a disability report low levels of education. As of 2017, 19% of people who are unable to work but who are too well to be institutionalized ages 21-64 have less than a high school diploma (Erikson, Lee, & VonShrader, 2017). As of 2017, the percentage of working-age (21-64) people with disabilities in the United States with just a high school diploma was 34.4% (Erickson, Lee, & vonSchrader, 2019). The number of working-age people with disabilities who hold an associate's degree or less (some college courses passed) was 31.7% and those reporting a bachelor's degree is 14.8% (Erickson, Lee, & vonSchrader, 2019). The general population of Americans with a bachelor's degree is 36% (U.S. Department of Education, 2018). There is a gap between able-bodied citizens with college degrees and degree holders living with a disability. The gap indicates a problem within higher education systems and the systems' ability to meet the needs of students with disabilities.

In addition to challenges faced in higher education, people with disabilities are no longer qualified for many jobs they previously were. The 21<sup>st</sup> century has seen significant degree inflation in the workforce. Degree inflation happens when jobs that traditionally have not required a college degree (such as photographers, administrative assistants, and machine operators) start requiring a two or four-year degree to hold the position (Selingo, 2017). A high school diploma is no longer the threshold for employment and the diploma has, in fact, been replaced with a college-earned degree (Wolfston, 2014). Associate's degrees do well to get a graduate's foot in the door, but bachelor's degrees are becoming the preferred standard. Harvard Business School reports that nearly 6 million jobs could be affected by degree infla-

12 more pages are available in the full version of this document, which may be purchased using the "Add to Cart" button on the publisher's webpage:

[www.igi-global.com/chapter/improving-social-and-economic-mobility-for-people-with-disabilities-through-online-education/289101](http://www.igi-global.com/chapter/improving-social-and-economic-mobility-for-people-with-disabilities-through-online-education/289101)

## Related Content

---

### Nature of Tweets in the 2015 Nigerian Presidential Elections

Nwachukwu Andrew Egbunike, Noel Ihebuzor and Ngozi Onyechi (2015). *International Journal of Civic Engagement and Social Change* (pp. 34-52).

[www.irma-international.org/article/nature-of-tweets-in-the-2015-nigerian-presidential-elections/142486](http://www.irma-international.org/article/nature-of-tweets-in-the-2015-nigerian-presidential-elections/142486)

### Exploring Fresh Insights in Psychological Contract Research: Unveiling Perspectives From the Global South

Kudrat Khuda (2023). *International Journal of Public Sociology and Sociotherapy* (pp. 1-16).

[www.irma-international.org/article/exploring-fresh-insights-in-psychological-contract-research/335896](http://www.irma-international.org/article/exploring-fresh-insights-in-psychological-contract-research/335896)

### Strategies to Support Teachers in Designing Culturally Responsive Curricula in Online Learning Environments

Natalie Nussli, Yi Guan and Kevin Oh (2021). *Research Anthology on Culturally Responsive Teaching and Learning* (pp. 343-370).

[www.irma-international.org/chapter/strategies-to-support-teachers-in-designing-culturally-responsive-curricula-in-online-learning-environments/284766](http://www.irma-international.org/chapter/strategies-to-support-teachers-in-designing-culturally-responsive-curricula-in-online-learning-environments/284766)

### Culturally Responsive Teaching and Mentoring for African American Males Attending Post-Secondary Schools: Diversity Beyond Disability

York Williams (2021). *Research Anthology on Culturally Responsive Teaching and Learning* (pp. 149-166).

[www.irma-international.org/chapter/culturally-responsive-teaching-and-mentoring-for-african-american-males-attending-post-secondary-schools/284755](http://www.irma-international.org/chapter/culturally-responsive-teaching-and-mentoring-for-african-american-males-attending-post-secondary-schools/284755)

### From Facebook to WhatsApp: The Changing Mood of Social Networking in India

Faizia Siddiqui, Mohammed Iftikhar Alam and Roshan Lal Raina (2014). *International Journal of Civic Engagement and Social Change* (pp. 23-36).

[www.irma-international.org/article/from-facebook-to-whatsapp/120712](http://www.irma-international.org/article/from-facebook-to-whatsapp/120712)