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Disabled Students Lacking Technology to Excel

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Students with disabilities are in need of accessible learning materials and campuses as well as support of their scholarship.

According to federal law, universities must provide students with disabilities equal access to all parts of the educational experience, yet many say these students are

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not being provided with equal access to electronic materials.

Digital formats allow students to access content in a way that may better meet their needs, such as having text read aloud or having it automatically translated to Braille. However, many of the products purchased by institutions do not include this access.

The oversight puts institutions at risk of lawsuits for discrimination against students with disabilities. Despite the increase in the last four years of public-awareness campaigns, legal challenges and government interventions, many schools are still not fully equipped, and the number of investigations is on the rise.

One solution to this issue is the TEACH Act, Technology Equality and Accessibility in College and Higher Education Act, which is supported by more than a dozen disability advocacy organizations. The act would have an impartial expert agency develop optional guidelines to help institutions make electronic materials equally accessible.

However, the American Council on Education has come out in opposition of the Act, stating that making the guidelines voluntary makes them "impossible-to-meet standards," and suggesting that the creation of the guidelines would in fact delay the development of equally accessible material.

According to the ACE:

> "Far from creating helpful, voluntary guidelines, the TEACH Act would keep schools from using new technology to aid students, including

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> *those with disabilities. It would overturn existing legal standards and put an obscure federal agency in charge of approving use by campuses of new technologies — effectively blocking technological progress."*

Despite the obstacles to making technology accessible to all, such as constantly developing technologies, many are still finding ways around the issues to find some answers.

At Beaverton startup, Open Lore, which began as an assistive reading technology company, founders Steve Bauer and Glen Wagner hope to transform their company into an inexpensive, locally sourced technology that will help students with reading disabilities.

Open LORE Read software transforms e-books into speech, reading aloud, highlighting the words as they are read. Users can also type their own text to be read aloud. The program has other design traits to allow for other reading disabilities, such as Irlen Syndrome, which causes issues with reading black text on white paper. Students using the software can change the font color as well as the background page colors.

According to the founders, the goal of their product is to make knowledge available to everyone.

> *"When you look at our software, just about every aspect is designed with that in mind," Wagner said. "We really are about removing those barriers."*

Bauer and Wagner are currently developing a new program that would allow offer vocabulary games and study guides, as well as a mobile camera for uploading documents to be read aloud.

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