MEMORANDUM

05 July 2020

TO: Tom Nault, Secretary of Senate

FROM: Kim Myrick, Chair, Senate Committee on Teaching and Learning

SUBJECT: Senate Approval of Guidelines and Recommendations on Student Accessibility to
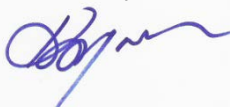   Remote Learning

On July 2, 2020, the Senate Committee on Teaching and Learning (SCTL) convened and discussed the attached document *Student Accessibility to Remote Learning in Online Courses Guidelines and Recommendations – Academic Scenario Planning Committee*. As Chair of the SCTL, I am a member of the Academic Scenario Planning Committee. I submitted the document to the SCTL for consideration.

The SCTL endorses the document with the provision that a central authority is assigned to recommendation #6 with appropriate resources allocated by the university. Recommendation #6 of the document states: "For any remaining students where the above initiatives still do not provide adequate computer or Internet access, then Memorial will handle these on a case-by-case basis whereby the student can email or call a contact person at Memorial for assistance."

All committee members were in favour.

The SCTL requests Senate approval of the document with the endorsement stated above. Any questions concerning this request may be forwarded to Kim Myrick at kmyrick@mun.ca.

Sincerely,

Kim Myrick, PhD
Chair, Senate Committee on Teaching and Learning

Attachment: *Student Accessibility to Remote Learning in Online Courses Guidelines and Recommendations – Academic Scenario Planning Committee*

Student Accessibility to Remote Learning in Online Courses
Guidelines and Recommendations – Academic Scenario Planning Committee

Background

For online courses in the Fall semester, the University has established minimum technology requirements to complete the courses. This involves requirements for experience with computers, type of computer with a webcam, display, software, web browser, and high-speed Internet access. However, not all students will have this minimum level of computer access, for example, those located in rural communities or internationally without adequate Internet access. Therefore, solutions and strategies are required to support those students who may be left behind if they do not meet the minimum threshold of technology requirements.

Recommendations

The available bandwidth and Internet connectivity varies among communities across the province. Some rural communities are without broadband and/or cellular access. It will be helpful to determine how many Memorial students are impacted in under-serviced communities. This would assist to develop appropriate strategies for student accommodations in those locations. A provincial initiative is underway to increase the broadband access for under-serviced communities. This will also be helpful although it is a longer term initiative so other solutions are required in the short-term.

1. **Conduct an analysis that geographically overlays under-serviced communities in the province with the number of students living there based on postal codes to determine the extent of impacted Memorial students.**

A Wi-Fi hotspot is a physical location where students can have Internet access using a Wi-Fi connection. Mobile hotspots can be created by "tethering" or configuring a cell phone to allow a computer to access the internet, and in turn, networked university resources. Mobile hotspots can be created in remote locations if cellular access is available. There may be charges for non-Memorial devices if students use cellular bandwidth. Memorial owned devices would draw from a shared data pool across its entire fleet of phones.

The University can create or otherwise access Wi-Fi hotspots in remote locations by partnerships with other organizations there to share wireless signals from their building. Students might connect to the Wi-Fi hotspot in open, public spaces within a building or a parking lot.

2. **Pursue formal partnerships at the Presidential level with the College of the North Atlantic (CNA), K-12 schools, libraries and other organizations in selected communities, where appropriate, to create hotspots and spaces for Memorial students to be able to access the University network.**

CNA and K-12 schools have a broad physical presence across the province. The amount of bandwidth and guest network capabilities may be limited by their own requirements. There may be limited amounts of wireless capability available from some buildings and therefore they may need to make changes on their side to accommodate any requests from Memorial. Library availability should also be pursued. In small communities, the libraries may be very small and unable to accommodate more than a few students.

In the short-term, there are uncertainties about when these partnerships might be available for Memorial students. Also, in some cases, there may be challenges with physical distancing in small tight spaces within buildings. Alternatively, students could use tethering from their cellular access, although this may lead to additional costs for students to have unlimited data access.

For students in towns with a Memorial campus location, but without adequate computer or Internet access, designated computer labs will be set up to support those students. Since mid-March, typically 5-15 students have used the open computer labs on a daily basis in each of C2003 (Science) and EN3000 (Engineering). Likely more computer workstations will be required in the Fall semester. A campus map can be developed to designate both in-person and remotely accessible computer labs.

3. **Assign spaces within individual faculties/schools as a computer lab for students without adequate computer and/or Internet access, or a central location that supports students from multiple programs.**

Although these above initiatives will support the majority of students, there are likely other cases where a student is still unable to gain adequate computer or Internet access, for example, students in rural locations or internationally where Internet access will not be available.

4. **Memorial will set an expectation that, if a student does not have adequate Internet access at their place of study, then they should access a location that enables a minimum level of required access to the recommended speed of Internet.**

In some cases, course instructors may have more specialized software that exceeds the minimum specified technology requirements. In these cases, the academic unit will develop appropriate accommodations for students who may not be able to secure the software. For example, a LabNet Remote Access system can allow students to remotely connect via their browser into a Memorial computer workstation that accesses specialized software tools from a Memorial laboratory. LabNet software called "Guacamole" was successfully used across several programs in Engineering in the Spring semester. The Office of the Chief Information Officer is currently investigating other cloud-based solutions such as AppsAnywhere. Most of these solutions will require additional funding and support. It is unknown what effort may be required to deploy such solutions at this time.

5. **If a course instructor requires more specialized software, then the academic unit would review the recommended technology standard and adopt the recommendation as their own, including deciding if these are recommendations or requirements for study.**

Decisions on minimum requirements would not be made on a course by course basis. The above initiatives should address many or most cases of student accessibility. However, they likely cannot capture the unique circumstances of every student situation. For any remaining students who still will not have adequate access, then Memorial would handle these on a case-by-case basis.

6. **For any remaining students where the above initiatives still do not provide adequate computer or Internet access, then Memorial will handle these on a case-by-case basis whereby the student can email or call a contact person at Memorial for assistance.**

Solutions will be developed from a range of possible options that best fit a particular situation. Examples include, but are not limited to, working with the individual course instructor to make special arrangements, such as extended deadlines or mailing course materials on a USB flash drive. There is an opportunity to apply to federal funding programs to hire co-op students as virtual learning assistants who could work on phone help lines for student-to-student advising and interactions online.

For students with disabilities who are seeking academic accommodations and faculty members seeking assistance to support students with accessibility accommodation requests, those individuals are encouraged to contact the Blundon Centre.

June 24, 2020