

Task Force on the Fall 2020 Virtual Learning Experience Final Recommendations

Submitted on November 24, 2020 by the Task Force Co-Chairs - Jeremiah Hurley, Dean, Faculty of Social Sciences, and Ishwar K. Puri, Dean, Faculty of Engineering

BACKGROUND

Following the decision to move the winter 2021 semester online, Provost Susan Tighe established a [Virtual Learning Task Force](#) to support the best possible online learning experience.

The mandate of the Task Force has been to collect feedback from students and instructors regarding the online teaching and learning experience to inform recommendations to improve the experience for winter 2021. The findings have been informed by the experiences and insights of the 30+ members of the Task Force drawn from across the university, as well as various surveys commissioned to assess various aspects of the student and instructor experience in this unique environment.

As the Task Force undertook its work, its findings helped inform some early recommendations that were forwarded to university leaders as their timely implementation was important for students and instructors. These included the need for a focused look at mental health and supports for well-being. While there are many existing supports and programs, McMaster's [Okanagan Charter Group](#), which looks at the health and well-being of the overall campus, has been asked to take on this challenge. The Task Force also recommended a delayed start to classes in the second term. This too was supported by university leaders and the delayed class start was announced on [November 19](#).

In this document, we present the final recommendations for the Provost and Vice-Provost's consideration.

FINAL RECOMMENDATIONS

The Task Force membership included stakeholders across campus including technology experts, teaching and learning experts, instructors, students and administrators. The final recommendations were informed by the experiences of members of the Task Force, conversations and consultations with the units they represent, and the findings of the Equity and Inclusion Office's Winter 2020 Student Engagement and Experience Survey ([Quantitative Results](#) and [Qualitative Results](#)), and the [MacPherson Institute's Fall 2020 Experience Survey](#). The recommendations below have been organized by the Task Force's recommended timeline for implementation and within each category are listed in no particular order.

SHORT-TERM

- We recommended that McMaster University delay the start of the winter 2021 classes to January 11 to allow both instructors and students to make use of a few additional days to prepare for the term. *This recommendation was moved forward prior to the full report and [implemented by the Provost](#).*

- We recommend that the Provost and Vice-Provost invite instructors to remove a week of lecture-based course content at the beginning of the term and substitute alternative course-related activities so as to foster student success through the term.
- We recommend that the University promote and share the joint Task Force and MacPherson Institute's compiled list of teaching tips to support instructors with their winter course preparations and to help reduce students' experiences of isolation, confusion, and excess workload.
- We recommend that the Provost and Vice-Provost direct instructors to use Avenue to Learn as a course hub to centralize all course-related learning resources, deadlines, activities, and assessments.
- We recommend that the Provost's Office to explore the needs for additional or live support for the MacPherson Institute.
- We recommend that the Provost and Vice-Provost provide additional resources to support Student Accessibility Services' transition to the remote environment.
- We recommend that the University apply the 2020 Career Progress & Merit revisions for 2021.
- We recommend that the Provost's Office direct instructors to campus resources for experiential learning and community-engaged learning.
- We recommend McMaster University offer resources for students on time management, study strategies, scheduling, and stress management in the context of online learning in multiple formats.
- We recommend the Provost's Office continue to provide guidance to instructors regarding safety and liability for experiential learning, community-engaged learning, co-ops, internships, placements and practicums.
- We recommend the University identify or establish a designated group to address the set of issues pertaining to mental and emotional health among faculty, staff, and students at McMaster caused by the wide-ranging effects of COVID-19 on the operations of the University.
- We recommend that the Provost and Vice-Provost invite programs to consider offering core, required courses during the 2021 Spring/Summer/Intercession to give students the option to distribute their course load.

MEDIUM-TERM

- If the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions continue and Fall/Winter 2021-2022 academic year is to be online, we recommend that McMaster University:
 - consider developing a program comparable to Archway for students in upper years to facilitate meaningful student connections;
 - make decisions regarding the 2021-2022 academic calendar and sessional dates early to include additional breaks and rest to support mental health and wellness proactively to limit changes mid-term, or with limited notice;
 - evaluate the best approach for providing access to a computer and/or other technology for undergraduate students who require this support;

- investigate whether it is viable for students in remote locations with poor internet to gain access to the new McMaster cellular service plan as an affordable source of connectivity; and
 - have the Registrar's Office review timetables and consider revising them to include "virtual" teaching details, e.g., video classroom platform, connectivity credentials required, process to obtain software or license if required, Avenue to Learn details, etc.
- We recommend that McMaster University consider working with the U15 to lobby professional schools to:
 - consider applicant's grade-differences from this year compared to past years due to the stressors related to the pandemic and changes in teaching and learning;
 - be flexible in their requirements for 2021/2022 admissions regarding reference letters and lab-based experiences to accommodate unusual academic circumstances as a result of the pandemic; and
 - reconsider the requirement for students to complete a full course load to qualify for the program.
- We recommend that the Provost and Vice-Provost provide resources for remote, in-person and blended experiential and community-engaged learning, such as:
 - community and student friendly technology;
 - honoraria for community speakers, consultants and mentors;
 - incentives or supports (i.e. staff, TAs) for instructors to develop and maintain partnerships; and
 - funding to develop videos of community partner presentations for classroom use.
- We recommend that the Provost and Vice-Provost continue to clarify SMA3 expectations regarding experiential and community engaged learning.

LONG-TERM

- We recommend that the Provost and Vice-Provost explore the feasibility of Faculties registering first-year students in cohorts through block registration, where these cohorts might develop independently into learning communities.
- We recommend that the Provost's Office direct Institutional Research and Analysis, working in collaboration with the MacPherson Institute, design and conduct a regular student experience survey on teaching and learning. We recommend that the survey capture experience and demographic data to understand their learning experience in their faculty/program rather than their experience with a specific course/instructor.
- We recommend that Provost and/or Vice-Provost direct the Teaching and Learning Advisory Group to host a regular discussion forum that brings together multiple stakeholders including technology experts, pedagogical experts, instructors, and students to continue to advise on teaching and learning.
- We recommend that McMaster University develop a teaching/learning culture and program design that supports instructor capacity and student success and progression through programs while distributing course loads across more than two terms each year.

- We recommend that McMaster University continue to explore future focused technologies, such as Digital Credentials, in ways that can improve the overall learning and student life experience for our students.

CONCLUDING COMMENTS

We recognize that the McMaster community’s transition to the online teaching, learning and work environment occurred quickly and has not been without its challenges. With the passage of time and the approach of the winter season, we are especially mindful of the mental health and well-being of our colleagues and students. These unprecedented times have pushed the Task Force to rethink what McMaster’s commitment to academic excellence means by developing recommendations intended to alleviate students, faculty and staff feeling overwhelmed and provide opportunities to start the winter semester refreshed and prepared together.

We also recognize that McMaster University is currently in the process of developing a Teaching and Learning Strategy and a Digital Strategy. We suggest that the Provost consider the Task Force’s recommendations in the development of these two strategies, as appropriate.

Finally, we are grateful for the time, enthusiasm and honesty shared by our Task Force members throughout this process. It has been a pleasure working with this multi-disciplinary group that has led to this rich and meaningful document:

Greg Atkinson
 Monique Beech
 John Bell
 Paula Brown-Hackett
 Michael Curwin
 Giancarlo Da-Ré
 Juliet Daniel
 Kim Dej
 James Dietrich
 Carlos Filipe

Lori Goff
 Gayleen Gray
 Cathy Grise
 Aadil Merali Juma
 Joanne Kehoe
 Sean Van Koughnett
 Krista Madsen
 Mandeep Malik
 Nick Marquis
 Wanda McKenna

Melissa Pool
 Stacey Ritz
 Sheila Sammon
 Arig al Shaibah
 Ryan Tse
 Sydney Valentino
 Jennie Vengris
 Doug Welch
 Sarah Wojkowski
 Christine Yachouh