

# Progress On Recommendations

Over the last year, we have seen an unprecedented pandemic impact the McMaster Community in an unforeseen way, however while a response to an ongoing pandemic and a shift to online learning has taken most of MacPherson Institute's time and energy, we are fortunate to recognize that many of the recommendations align well with our response to the pandemic. In fact, some of the work we were doing to address the recommendations prepared us well for some of the changes that we faced at the beginning of the pandemic. Below are the five recommendations and our response to-date with what has been done.

## 1 - Improve existing tools within Avenue, and investigate tools and integration options to better allow for collaboration and peer review.

In late 2019, we provided D2L a report around Avenue Mail's deficiencies and improving Discussions. D2L acknowledged that the Mail tool has not seen many improvements over the last four years, and they see many institutions redirect users to the internal mail provider of choice (in our case, Microsoft). Currently, we are developing a plan to eliminate Avenue Mail for undergraduate and graduate students and shift mail to within Office 365 – however this is a complex task and we do not have a firm timeline on when this will be completed. There are many instructors who use Avenue Mail as their “teaching” mailbox and thinking about how this change will impact our variety of users is a great concern. We continue to explore ways that the existing Avenue Mail can be improved by D2L and will work with them on any improvements where we can contribute.

We also have begun work on how to use Discussions better workshop – in the hopes that some of the issues that were raised around Discussions could be addressed through better documentation and more education around how best to use the tool. While this will not reach everyone who dislikes the Discussion tool, it may alleviate some of the issues people were experiencing.

The desire for an Office 365 integration is planned – there are a few steps that we, and UTS have to complete before we can begin integrating Avenue and Office 365. The hope is that this

will be in place before September 2021.

The Peer Review survey has been put on hold until after the Teaching and Learning Strategy has been set. In the meantime, we added a free, but limited Peer Review to Avenue. This tool allows for group members to assess each other – while it is not as expansive as other Peer Review tools on the market – it is a first step towards using Avenue for peer review activities.

## 2 - Expand service hours and/or capacity for supporting Avenue.

In October 2019, as a result of the survey results, MacPherson decided to extend service hours from 8:30 to 4:30 Monday through Friday to 8:30 – 6:00 Monday through Thursday, 8:30 to 4:30 Friday. In soft launch from October to December, there was little increase in ticket usage, however response time was shortened. From January to March, there was a similar increase in ticket usage, however post-pandemic there has been a marked increase in ticket volume. The hours of service are currently 8:00 -9:00 Monday through Thursday, 8:30 to 4:30 Friday. Weekend ticket numbers still do not provide enough evidence that support is required during those times, but we continue to monitor the situation and will adjust to demand and needs.

Chat support is under investigation currently, and while we see the potential value in the service, there are costs associated with the service that are prohibitive. We will continue to investigate this avenue of support.

This summer and into the fall we provided numerous training opportunities, as well as AMA (Ask Me Anything) sessions that required registration. While the number of registrants never exceeded 6 for the AMAs that we maintained, we will continue to do these sessions. Every workshop we offer were available throughout the summer. In August, there were at least 4 offerings per week, with the last week of August having 6 offerings available for registration. Despite this increase in workshop availability and Ask Me Anything sessions, number of participants were low.

### 3 - Review training offerings and re-design training to respond to user demands.

- a. Develop a variety of methods to provide just-in-time training online and in-person.

Over the last three years, the MacPherson Institute in-person offerings for Avenue training, typically offered throughout the summer and during the February break, have seen declining registrations and attendance year over year. While respondents wanted more training opportunities, they also indicated wanting them in a variety of formats, both online and in-person. This may mean offering more discrete, shorter training sessions more often and/or delivery of training in a more flexible format. Whether the training is delivered centrally by the MacPherson Institute or by individuals within departments, training resources need to be developed and delivered online and in-person to facilitate the just-in-time training that will better support instructor and course developer use of Avenue.

### 4 - Enhance communication of service interruptions and conduct further investigations into reported Avenue outages or slowness of service.

- a. Utilize the Service Disruption Notices system to communicate issues with MacAuth, the authentication system that is used to log in to Avenue, or the portal page that may temporarily impact access to Avenue and direct help requests to the appropriate source.
- b. Solicit support from the McMaster community through a request that individuals report issues with slowness so cases can be logged and investigated.

While system outages do occur, the system availability report provided by D2L (included as Appendix F) indicates that there were no unexpected system outages. The one outage in July was scheduled and communicated to the McMaster community in February 2019, April 2019, June 2019, and twice in July 2019. Reasons Avenue could be perceived as being unexpectedly offline include interruptions to MacAuth, which makes Avenue inaccessible, and issues with the portal page (<https://avenue.mcmaster.ca>), hosted on-premises with UTS, caused by network or server disruptions. Further investigation into the cause of the

perceived Avenue outages is required. Additionally, there are no indications of any recent system slowness that might impact users. The perceived slowness could be caused by a number of factors, including an individual's wireless connection and/or computer configurations or excessive traffic to Avenue or MacAuth. Further investigation into the complaints about system slowness are also merited.

### 5 - Implement a continuous feedback process.

- a. The MacPherson Institute should develop a detailed plan, in consultation with campus stakeholders, for addressing the findings of this feedback.
- b. The MacPherson Institute, in partnership with campus stakeholders, should solicit feedback on other educational technologies in use at McMaster.
- c. The MacPherson Institute will conduct future surveys to solicit ongoing input and feedback.
  - A shorter, more-targeted follow-up survey to investigate ancillary tools and improvements to the system.
  - An annual call for feedback on Avenue (or the current LMS) beginning in 2021.

It is important to acknowledge that conducting feedback cycles takes time, effort and resources, but these efforts are important for understanding how the teaching and learning community feels about institutional tools, enabling ongoing consultation and informing future modifications and improvements to meet the changing and emerging needs of the McMaster community.