Instructional Continuity For Students with Limited Access to Technology

As students disperse across the United States and other countries to ride out the COVID-19 pandemic, it's to be expected that some of them will have little or no access to the technologies needed to access remote course work. While several internet companies are offering to work with students, [link] that assumes a student lives in a place where they would have access to broadband even if they could pay for it. In many geographical areas, that is simply not the case. In a May 2019 report, the FCC estimated that 21.3 million Americans do not have access to high-speed internet. Other reports have placed the figure as double that. Assuming students can rely on public libraries is also not a viable plan since so many municipalities have issued stay at home orders. Without access to high-speed internet, even accessing Canvas is difficult, if not impossible.

What can be done for students in locations without adequate technologies? First of all, it's important to take into consideration the Department of Education Guidance memo issued on March 5 regarding these unusual circumstances. (The HLC has indicated it is going to be flexible with institutions operating within DOE guidance at this time.)

"To meet the Department's requirements for providing distance education, an institution must communicate to students through one of several types of technology – including email – described under 34 CFR § 600.2, and instructors must initiate substantive communication with students, either individually or collectively, on a regular basis. In other words, an instructor could use email to provide instructional materials to students enrolled in his or her class, use chat features to communicate with students, set up conference calls to facilitate group conversations, engage in email exchanges or require students to submit work electronically that the instructor will evaluate."

The DOE guidance is significant in helping us remember what we're doing is instructional continuity--not distance education. Distance Education requires a long period of planning and constructing a course in a learning management system such as Canvas. At Saint Louis University that process includes peer review to ensure the distance course meets several pedagogical standards. [link] What instructional continuity and distance education have in common is the DOE's requirement for "substantive communication."

How does this advice translate to a practical setting for individual instructors and students? Here are some points to consider if you find yourself working with students who don't have access to technology.

1. **Begin by revisiting your learning outcomes and the individual student's progress towards meeting those outcomes**. Since we were halfway through the semester when the emergency shift to remote instruction occurred, what are the most important outcomes the student still needs to accomplish?

2. **Talk, probably best via phone, to the student about their individual situation**. Do they have a computer or are they trying to do everything on their phone? Are they sharing that computer with other people so their time on it is limited? Can they access the internet? When and how? Can they log into Canvas or email?

3. **Reconcile what the student still needs to do to achieve the learning outcomes with their technology access.** Factor in the DOE guidance here.

   - If the student can only access email, can you have regular email contact with them to complete the course?
   - If you have more than one student in the same situation, could you set up a small email group? While setting up a situation where you have part of your class working on Canvas and in Zoom meetings, and part on email is not ideal and going to be more work for you, remember to focus on what the students still need to accomplish. What is the easiest way to get them there?
   - If you are recording Panopto videos for the rest of the students, can you email the student a transcript? Can they access Zoom on their phone and use just audio to save data?
   - If the student needs to write a research paper, how will they access materials they need? Can you work with the SLU Libraries [link] to email or snail mail resources to the student? Will the paper assignment need to be adapted so the student can utilize what they have on hand? Will you accept a handwritten paper if the student doesn't have access to a computer and printer? Is it reasonable to expect a student to complete a research paper on their phone?
   - If the student needs to take an exam that you've moved online for others in the class, would you be comfortable emailing the exam to take on paper? Would you make the exam open book or ask the student to observe an honor code? How would the student return the exam to you after they've completed it? Could they take a photo of their completed exam and email or text it to you? Could you do an oral exam over the phone, either straight

question/answer, discussion, or spoken presentation? Is there an alternative way you can assess the student without an exam?

The Reinert Center is available for consultations with faculty to discuss specific situations and strategize on how best to help students complete coursework. Please contact us through our Request for Consultation form. [link]