

McMaster's Laptop Bridging Program & Sheridan's Laptop Lending Program

A Historical and Current Overview

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Background

McMaster University is currently engaging in several institutional projects related to accessibility and accommodations, including a review of the university's academic accommodations process (Spring-Summer 2023) and an analysis of accessibility and accommodations infrastructure related to teaching and learning (Winter 2023-Summer 2025). The Accessibility in Teaching and Learning (ATL) Project was designed specifically to identify current state and future measures the university can be taking to prepare for the emergence of the forthcoming [AODA Post-secondary Education Standard \(AODA PSE Standard\)](#).

As McMaster was engaging in its academic accommodation process review, roles and functions related to the Office of Disability Service's Testing Centre and assistive technology (AT) support services were scoped out of the review due to time and capacity limitations. These components were thus addressed to a limited extent as part of the initial phase of the ATL Project, specifically analyzing current infrastructure related to assistive technology support within the university context.

Around 45 staff with roles in academic leadership and accessibility were interviewed as part of ATL's engagement strategy, employing a consistent interviewing approach. Key Informants were prompted to identify institutional or external barriers hindering staff from fulfilling current roles or adapting to new AODA PSE requirements. Several gaps related to current assistive technology support were unearthed during this engagement period, including the ability for students with disabilities to access assistive technology demos and trials to familiarize themselves with the technologies before moving forward in purchasing them for educational purposes through the university's Office for Disability Services. Furthermore, a notable gap was identified regarding external provincial barriers, specifically the delay students often experience between applying for provincial grants to purchase technology and the actual acquisition and utilization of assistive technology to enhance their post-secondary educational outcomes. At times, students cannot apply for these funds until the beginning of or well into their semester and are therefore being forced to go without or are needing to transition into AT use while they are actively engaging in their studies.

To partially address these gaps, McMaster applied for eCampus AODA / Accessibility-specific funding to support the potential development of a pilot AT 'bridging program' to sit within our Office of Disability Services that would seek to address institutional and provincial barriers related to the timely access and use of AT for students with disabilities attending the university.

In its quest to advance accessibility and accommodation frameworks, McMaster University continues to draw upon the insights gained from the ATL Project and external benchmarks, notably Sheridan College's Laptop Lending Program. This reflection has spurred our team to propose a novel bridging program aimed at expediting access to AT for students with disabilities. Recognizing the urgent need to overcome both institutional and provincial barriers which delay access to AT, the initiative is strategically designed to offer immediate support and resources. The program represents a proactive approach to ensuring that students can readily access and utilize AT, thereby fostering an inclusive and equitable educational landscape which supports students with disabilities in their academic pursuits.

Historical Overview of Sheridan's Laptop Lending Program

On Wednesday, March 6th, 2024, our team had the opportunity to engage in a detailed discussion with Carren Tatton, Learning Strategist, and Ricardo Loza, Assistive Technologist, from Sheridan College. They provided an in-depth overview of the evolution of Sheridan's Laptop Lending Program, which has become a cornerstone of Accessible Learning student activities, supported by their Learning Team.

The inception of the program dates to the early 2000s when the digital divide became evident among the student population. Recognizing the crucial role of technology in education, Sheridan College initiated a Laptop Lending Program for students with accessibility needs and began their program with an initial fleet of 5 laptops. This move was aimed at creating a system of equitable access to technology, ensuring every student had the tools necessary to compete academically.

Current Status of Sheridan's Laptop Lending Program

Focused primarily on international students, Tatton's strategy involves a personalized approach to the lending process, where students are encouraged to name their loaned devices, fostering a sense of responsibility and personal connection to the lent technology. Moreover, the program supports lending for up to a whole term, offering flexibility and tailored support which aligns closely with the academic calendar and individual student needs. The combination of the relationship-building and management by the Accessible Learning Team has resulted in very little breakage and a level of confidence when setting students up with their student technology-aided learning plan for long-term funding sources. In contrasting Tatton's approach with the existing practices at McMaster, it becomes evident that adopting a more personalized and flexible strategy could

lead to substantial improvements in accessibility and accommodation efforts, particularly in meeting the diverse needs of a global student body.

As of 2024, the program has seen substantial growth and refinement. Responding to the diverse needs of its student body, the program now boasts 70 laptops across 3 campuses, each equipped with common assistive and learning technologies catering to a wide array of academic disciplines. The implementation of an advanced inventory management system called Reftab in 2022, has significantly enhanced the operational efficiency of the program, allowing for real-time tracking and maintenance of the laptops.

The program's evolution is also reflected in its procurement strategy. Based on extensive consultations held in 2023 with IT and students, Sheridan developed comprehensive criteria for selecting accessible software for their laptops, ensuring they meet the specific requirements of various courses and projects, as well as tailoring bespoke software packages for individual students' needs. This proactive approach has greatly increased the program's effectiveness, making it a vital asset in Sheridan's educational toolkit.

To further enrich the support provided to students, Sheridan College has integrated a robust training component into their Laptop Lending Program, addressing a crucial aspect of technological accessibility. This initiative includes the organization of periodic workshops and the creation of a comprehensive course within their Desire2Learn (D2L) platform, which aggregates many resources and tutorials on loaned devices and software. These educational components are designed to enhance students' familiarity with the technology and empower them with the skills necessary for their academic success.

The McMaster Library Laptop Lending Program: A Retrospective

On Monday, March 11th, 2024, our team sat down with Anne Pottier, recently retired Associate Librarian, and Nancy Waite, Coordinator of Library Accessibility Services at McMaster University. They shared insights into the now-defunct laptop lending program once offered by McMaster University Library.

Operating from 2008 and 2011, the McMaster program initially provided 30 laptops for 2-hour loans, available to the entire student body. This initiative targeted students who lacked personal computers and facilitated short-term access for coursework and study needs. Housed at the Mills Memorial Library, the program was a direct response to the increasing technological demands of higher education.

However, the program faced operational hurdles, primarily due to high maintenance of the technology, and constant manual intervention by library staff required to manage the loan process. Additionally, a shift in student needs, marked by a rise in personal laptop ownership, gradually reduced the program's necessity.

A pivotal moment came when a decision was required about whether to invest in an automated laptop vending machine or to reallocate funds toward extending library operating hours during exams. After consulting with the student body, McMaster opted for the latter, reflecting a change in priority toward increasingly demanded services.

Reflections and Lessons Learned

The experiences of both Sheridan and McMaster underscore the evolving nature of technology in education and the necessity of adaptable and responsive support services. Sheridan's ongoing success with its Laptop Lending Program illustrates the importance of continuous evaluation and adaptation to meet the changing needs of students. In contrast, McMaster's phased-out program serves as a reminder of the challenges inherent in such initiatives, notably the importance of aligning services with current student preferences and technological trends.

Moving Forward

Our team imagines a pilot AT 'bridging program' to sit within our Office of Disability Services as 'living' within their (Alternative) Testing Centre, where students and staff could gain access to a variety of devices and AT software to support student trialing, staff technology evaluation, and 'just in time' student use for specific emergencies not currently addressed through provincial funding mechanisms (e.g. if a student loses their device, or has it stolen). The pilot program will begin with a small number of laptops and tablets for lending.

The university's Testing Centre has recently undergone a Needs Assessment, given that it was scoped out of the institutional review, and emerging recommendations indicate that this space has primarily been designed to support certain aspects of alternative testing (e.g. provision of extra time) but not others (e.g. the design of a space / technology integration for complex disability experiences). Given that the Testing Centre has administered 20,000+ tests during the 2023-2024 academic year (as of March 2024 – a 25% increase from last year within the same period), it is critical to deploy this program where students with disabilities currently need quick and reliable access to AT and specialized devices as part of their academic evaluations and beyond.

Assistive technology is often considered as 'separate' or 'distinct' from other educational technologies, but integral to the success of this project has been the re-framing of AT as educational technology that is critical for students with disabilities to enter, navigate through, and succeed in PSE academic environments. To support this re-framing moving forward, our project team imagines that this pilot can be mapped into our 5-year Accessibility in Teaching and Learning Roadmap that will be underpinned by early adoption of the AODA PSE Recommendations. PSE Recommendations from the [2022 Report](#) that this pilot 'bridging program' seeks to directly influence and support for further development and implementation include:

Recommendation 80: Time to practice and learn digital learning and technology accessibility features

Students shall be given the time to learn and practice the accessibility features of digital technologies before having to use them in learning.

Recommendation 85: Usability of digital learning and technology environments

Postsecondary institutions shall ensure the usability of the digital learning environment for all students, including those with diverse information processing styles and sensory/physical attributes through established accessible feedback, tracking and reporting mechanisms as indicated in [recommendation 16: improving campus climate related to accessibility](#).

Students with disabilities, as well as those access professionals who work with them, are integral to the long-term success of both this pilot and further institutional work related to accessibility and accommodation in teaching and learning. As such, we will continue to advocate for partnered approaches to moving this work forward within McMaster, specifically through its integration into pre-existing and emerging institutional Teaching and Learning Strategies and Plans.