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# News Release

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## Tutoring goes high tech at NMCC

**Aroostook County** - Tutoring has gone high tech at Northern Maine Community College as students looking for assistance with coursework are now able to sit down at home or elsewhere and meet face to screen with someone on campus who can help. Using Skype software and a web cam, NMCC Academic Success Center tutors and students are connecting in a way that is innovative, convenient and, if early results are any indication, just as effective as traditional face to face sessions.

The on-line distance tutoring program is being introduced at NMCC this semester not to replace existing student support services, but to augment them and to better reflect the busy and diverse lives of the student body, as well as the geographic distance and climate challenges that often make it difficult for students in northern Maine to seek the academic assistance they might need.

“We recognize that many students live off campus and travel great distances,” said Laura McPherson, director of the NMCC Academic Success Center. “You have to be able to move with the times. If you stay static, then you are really not meeting students where they are. We have a large number of non-traditional age students with young families, work responsibilities and other circumstances that make it very difficult or impossible for them to travel to campus outside of class for help. We also have students that live far away from campus, including those who take courses through our off-campus centers in Houlton and the St. John Valley.”

The idea to use on-line, real time, computer video technology to provide tutoring assistance was first conceived over a year ago at NMCC, when one of McPherson’s student tutors, Mariah LeMieux-Lupien, had to miss a day of class because she was ill. Pam Buck, the computer-aided drafting instructor, allowed LeMieux-Lupien to attend class via Skype with the help of fellow student Robert Williams. She was able to see and hear the lecture, as well as contribute to the class.

That experience spurred a discussion at one of the ASC staff meetings and led to a pilot project last spring. Part of the experimentation involved the testing of various applications, including Meebo and similar real-time communication offerings by Google and Yahoo. Skype, according to McPherson, was selected after the test phase because of the better quality picture.

The move is now on by McPherson and her tutors to launch the new program by first demonstrating it to students. Informational mini-workshop sessions began with the start of the semester and will continue for a few more weeks on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays. As an extra incentive for attending, students have the opportunity to sign up to win one of five web cams, valued at \$33 each, that will be given away on February 11.

The instructional sessions take the students through everything from how to download the free Skype software and operate the web cam to an actual tutoring demonstration that shows how students can use the technology to do everything from solving an algebraic equation to reviewing an English writing assignment. Students are also walked through the Academic Success Center website and shown how they can search for a tutor by the subject area they need assistance with to schedule an appointment for Skype tutoring. The site also shows which tutors are logged-on to Skype at any given moment, providing students who may be having difficulty with homework the opportunity to connect and get help on the spot.

While some are just now learning about how to navigate the new on-line, real-time tutoring, others have already used it and are reaping the benefits. Student Kristopher Bouchard of Houlton recently “Skyped” to get help with his trigonometry homework from tutor J.R. Kierstead.

“It was different at first, but once we got going it went very well,” said Bouchard. “It was very helpful to me. We were able to work through the problem by writing the steps down and showing our work back and forth by holding it up to the web cam. It was the next best thing to sitting down next to one another.”

From his perspective, Kierstead sees tutoring using real-time communication technology as having some benefits over the traditional in-person sessions. Aside from the obvious convenience, he has seen how tutoring on-line has resulted in more effective and efficient use of time.

“I have found that it creates a much more structured environment. By communicating using technology, the time seems to be much more focused on the student’s part,” said Kierstead. “Besides, if you can understand trigonometry over Skype, then I think you can pretty much do anything.”

Skype is not the only technology-driven platform the NMCC Academic Success Center is using to connect with its students. McPherson and her tutors use Facebook, Twitter, Yahoo Messenger and also have a blog for the ASC.

For now, Skype tutoring sessions are being offered Monday through Thursday between 8:00 a.m. and 8:00 p.m. Those hours may change and/or expand in the future to better accommodate student users. Future expansion of the program may also include incorporating a new Beta version of Skype that can connect multiple sites and allow individuals to see everyone participating in the real-time discussion. This feature would allow for group tutoring sessions from students at various locations.

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J.R. Kierstead (left), a tutor in the Academic Success Center at Northern Maine Community College, works with Kristopher Bouchard (on computer screen) an NMCC student from Houlton on a trigonometry problem via Skype. The ASC at NMCC is introducing “Skype” tutoring as a convenient option for students beginning this semester.