Dear colleagues,

As I reflect on this November Council Report and consider that we will soon be nearing the end of this very different Fall term, I’m continually reminded of the great spirit of this organization and how all areas of the university have banded together to meet the challenges brought on by COVID-19. To acknowledge this commitment to helping guide the university through these difficult past few months, the university is providing all faculty and staff with additional days off from Monday, December 21 to Thursday, December 24. The university will be closed during this time and these added days will coincide with the university’s scheduled winter closure between Friday, December 25 and Monday, January 4.

Please take this extended time off to rest and recharge. As indicated in the recent employee pandemic engagement and wellness surveys, faculty and staff are feeling the additional burden and increased demands brought on by the pandemic. The health and wellbeing of all members of the university community remain the highest priority and we encourage everyone to utilize the wellness resources that are available to faculty, staff and their families. We hope that these additional days off will contribute to the overall wellness of our campus community in supporting a healthy mind, a healthy body, and a healthy life.

Closing the university earlier than planned required careful consideration of exam scheduling. The resulting schedule that enables us to conclude all exams by December 19 is only possible because of changed assessment practices in some classes. We recognize this is a one-time situation reflective of our current remote delivery environment.

The desire is for all faculty and staff to be able to take full advantage of the additional time off for some much-deserved rest and relaxation. Thank you for your contributions to making us the university the world needs.
USask to pay tribute to distinguished honorary degree recipients

I am proud to announce that USask will honour three survivors who went on to make major contributions to their communities and to society, and whose stories have inspired and informed Canadians all across the country.

During this year’s virtual USask Fall Convocation online celebration beginning Nov. 10, the university will award honorary degrees to: Holocaust historian Max Eisen, the only member of his family to survive the horror of Auschwitz during the Second World War; celebrated author Joy Kogawa, who endured the internment of Japanese-Canadians during the war; and Fred Sasakamoose, who suffered through a decade in the residential school system after he was taken from his family during the Second World War, but would go on to make history in the National Hockey League.

We are humbled and honoured to recognize these three extraordinary individuals for their respective accomplishments, courage and conviction, commitment to community, and passion and perseverance in sharing stories that need to be told. This is an opportunity to celebrate the impact that each of these outstanding individuals has made to their communities and country. I am grateful to have the opportunity to express our admiration and appreciation, and to bestow the university’s highest honour during our Fall Convocation celebration.

Max Eisen (Honorary Doctor of Laws):
One of the few survivors of the Nazi concentration camp of Auschwitz, Eisen came to Canada after the Second World War to build a new life, and to educate others about the Holocaust. The author of the recent award-winning book, By Chance Alone: A Remarkable True Story of Courage and Survival at Auschwitz, Eisen has spent the past three decades travelling coast to coast telling his first-hand account of a horrible chapter in human history. Eisen also committed to finding justice for the millions of victims of the Holocaust, testifying at the trial and conviction of two Nazi SS guards from Auschwitz.

Joy Kogawa (Honorary Doctor of Letters):
One of the country’s most revered authors and a passionate advocate for the plight of Japanese-Canadians who were forced from their homes into internment camps during the Second World War, Kogawa began her celebrated career as a writer while studying at USask in the 1960s. She went on to craft award-winning novels including Obasan and worked tirelessly to educate and to earn reparations for those interned during the war. Her contributions to Canadian society were celebrated when she was invested into the Order of Canada in 1986, earning one of the country’s highest honours.

Fred Sasakamoose (Honorary Doctor of Laws):
From residential school survivor to band leader, Chief, Elder, and a passionate proponent of creating opportunity for youth, Sasakamoose has spent 60 years serving his community of Ahtahkakoop Cree Nation, after becoming the first Indigenous player from Saskatchewan to make it all the way to the National Hockey League. Sasakamoose, a member of the Order of Canada who testified for the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada about the abuse that he suffered in residential school, now teaches youth to hunt, fish and trap, and counsels them about drug and alcohol addiction.

Eisen, Kogawa and Sasakamoose will be honoured on the graduation celebration website, which will launch on November 10 and will be accessible through the USask convocation website.
USask VIDO-InterVac expands international role

USask VIDO-InterVac has been awarded a grant of almost $830,000 from the COVID-19 Therapeutics Accelerator to determine the effectiveness of several antiviral compounds against COVID-19. The COVID-19 Therapeutics Accelerator was launched in March by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, Wellcome, and Mastercard, with additional funding from a range of donors, to help speed the discovery and scale-up of effective treatments against COVID-19. Testing will occur in VIDO-InterVac’s world-class containment Level 3-agriculture (CL3-Ag) facility using a hamster model of SARS-CoV-2 infection, a model meant to mimic human infections.

As a world leader in infectious disease research and vaccine development for humans and animals, VIDO-InterVac frequently works with companies and research institutes in the fight against COVID-19. VIDO-InterVac is currently engaged with more than 80 organizations globally to test antivirals, vaccines, and other therapeutics.

USask research teams awarded funding for COVID-19 mental health projects

Two USask-led research teams have been awarded a total of $400,000 in federal funding to expand the reach of innovative digital technology projects aimed at meeting mental health needs of people coping with physical distancing and isolation during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Nursing associate professor, Dr. Tracie Risling, has been awarded $170,487 by the Canadian Institutes of Health Research (CIHR) and $25,000 by the Saskatchewan Health Research Foundation (SHRF) to develop a customized two-way mobile phone texting process that will help people underserved by the health system gain access to mental health services—particularly online services that are emerging to address challenges arising from the pandemic.

USask psychology professor, Dr. Megan O’Connell, has received $174,577 from CIHR and $25,000 from SHRF. Her team will expand a pilot project for older adults in Saskatchewan that employs “virtual socialization hubs” and will also extend the program into British Columbia. The hubs involve eight to 10 seniors meeting online weekly or bi-monthly on a secure Zoom videoconferencing site. Participants receive support and training in using the technology, and phone assessments take place through trained staff chatting monthly with each participant.