

What is a VPN and How You Might Use It

Need to work from home, the coffee shop or hotel room but want to make sure your network traffic is safe? You may want to consider using the campus **Virtual Private Network (VPN)** server and software. In some cases this is the only way you will be able to access campus resources. The VPN client software creates a “tunnel” from the client system back to the campus VPN server. Traffic using this tunnel is encrypted by the client software, transmitted across the Internet from your location to campus, and then decrypted by the campus VPN server.

One item to be aware of is that when the VPN software is running on the local machine Internet traffic will be tunneled to campus and then go out to the Internet. In most cases this is not necessary and will slow down your Internet experience. Reading the local news via the VPN is not a good use of the VPN or your time.

One application where VPN usage is required is in running the **remote desktop protocol (RDP)**. With RDP a user can access a campus desktop system from an off-campus site and use it like they are sitting at that office system. With RDP you will have access to the campus resources that you would normally have when using the office system. A rendering of the office desktop system will run in a window of the local machine.

Another instance where the VPN is necessary is mapping a network drive. Mapping a drive allows a user to access data stored on another system like it was on a drive on their local machine. When users login a campus office or lab system, drives are automatically mapped for them. Mapping campus drives from off campus is a manual task and users must be running the VPN software to do this.

If you are connected to the campus wireless network, TritonNet, you may need to use the VPN to access campus resources. Some resources, such as www.umsl.edu, do not require VPN. RDP and drive mapping from TritonNet do require the VPN.

One time using VPN may come in handy is accessing the Internet from a public wireless connection, such as the service provided by a local coffee shop, hotel, or conference facility. Using these sites may be convenient but you may be putting your data at risk. To be safe you can make use of the VPN to encrypt your data. Remember, this will probably slow down your Internet access but it will provide some security. If you are accessing a site using secure HTTP (HTTPS) then using the VPN is not necessary since your data is already encrypted by HTTPS.

ITS provides VPN service as a way to access campus resources in a secure manner. VPN also provides a level of security when accessing sites from a public network. Both of these come with some overhead but the added security may be worth it. VPN software is available for most systems, including smart phones. The VPN software can be downloaded and installed on your system by accessing <https://TritonVPN.umsl.edu>.