

Week of June 22

Trustees -

This message will be the last of my weekend updates in my first year as Chancellor, as we will take a break from reporting over next weekend's July 4th holiday. It's fitting, then, that I can report here, finally, on the most significant achievement of the year.

You know from my announcement during Friday afternoon's Board meeting, as well as from my UMS community message with the [joint press release](#) with the New England Commission of Higher Education (NECHE) that followed, that we have been granted unified accreditation for the entire System.

We presented our request to NECHE this past Tuesday afternoon. As I informed you last Sunday, along with me, our presentation team included Board Chair Jim Erwin, Vice Chancellors Ryan Low and Robert Placido, Presidents Joan Ferrini-Mundy, Becky Wyke, and Ray Rice, and Chief of Staff and General Counsel Jim Thelen. Although this was an unusually large team by NECHE standards -- the standard presentation team for a substantive change request would simply be the institution's president and an academic administrator -- the pioneering scope of unifying six separate institutional accreditations warranted the depth and breadth of our team, and having our Presidents address NECHE's questions during the presentation demonstrated that we are, in fact, *unified* in pursuing this accreditation model.

NECHE Commissioners were very receptive to our request (as is now obvious given the outcome). Their questions were fair, focusing largely on faculty governance, collaboration, and assessment across the System. There was neither express opposition nor even skepticism; indeed, Commissioners were friendly and supportive.

On the whole, my read of this is that NECHE itself understands the innovative nature of what we are trying to do, and likely sees unified accreditation as we do -- as a new tool to advance academic collaboration across the State, expanding and strengthening our program inventory even as we make our universities more efficient to respond to our near-term budget challenges. And I think it's important to acknowledge the work that my predecessor and numerous System and university leaders did over the last five years to establish the foundation on which unified accreditation now finally rests -- indeed, I had a very enjoyable conversation with Jim Page Friday afternoon to thank him for laying the groundwork for this effort.

Now let me address some basics.

Unified accreditation will be effective July 1, 2020. Because NECHE's conferral of unified accreditation is largely based on how we already operate, no immediate change to our System-wide and university-specific operations are necessary -- although going forward we must significantly expand our System-wide academic collaborations to take advantage of what

unified accreditation allows us to do. July 1 was picked to align with the beginning of a new federal Title IV financial aid programs aid year; U.S. Department of Education staff recommended this date to my office and NECHE, and President Brittingham at NECHE has agreed. Perhaps most significant on this front, discussions that Jim Thelen is leading with DOE staff and our jointly retained legal counsel with NECHE indicate that, as we planned, our unified accreditation model should allow our universities to continue to manage their federal financial aid programs based on their already-existing recognition by DOE to do so.

Though we rightly take pride in this momentous achievement, much work lies ahead. We will pivot now to begin planning for both NECHE's confirming visit next spring and the Self Study that we will prepare in advance of NECHE's comprehensive evaluation in Fall 2022 of the initial implementation of unified accreditation.

Also from Friday's Board meeting, you all know well the work we've done to present an initial FY21 operating budget. Given your fiduciary responsibilities, I appreciate the concerns you've shared and attention you've given to our work over the last few months to be in a position to start our new fiscal year this coming week. I do not take lightly that the budget you passed Friday will and must change over the next few months as we learn how fall enrollment, state E&G appropriations, and other expense and revenue adjustments related to the COVID-19 pandemic will shape our planning and operations. I have great confidence in Vice Chancellor for Finance and Administration Ryan Low, his budget and finance team, and our university Chief Business Officers to continue doing the hard work to bring our operations into balance. At the same time, I've heard very clearly your concerns that we take a hard look at the most significant expense drivers in our budgets -- people costs -- and make strategic adjustments that are informed by and advance the Board's strategic priorities. We have no more urgent task heading into the fall.

Finally, and confidentially until we make a series of public announcements over the next few days, I want to briefly summarize where we stand with our fall planning.

As I noted in previous messages, testing will be key to a safe resumption of in-person learning and work at our universities this fall. To that end, we expect to sign agreements as soon as later today with The Jackson Laboratory and Convenient MD to provide for significant COVID-19 viral testing capacity. The financial resources available for this critical effort are finite; they are not sufficient to test every UMS community member every week. Thus, with significant guidance from our Science Advisory Board and other publicly available virus transmission modeling, we will develop testing protocols to maximize the efficacy of available testing capacity and minimize the potential for virus transmission in our communities. On July 1, we will announce the overall framework we will follow across the System for our fall operations, with our universities following with the specifics of their own plans. Together, we will communicate as responsibly as possible how our teaching, working, and research, residence and dining operations, and athletics and other activities will be managed to protect the health of our university communities.

There are literally hundreds of UMS community members engaged in this effort, perhaps the most significant operational endeavor ever undertaken by our System -- with potentially profound consequences. As I've said from the very beginning of our pandemic planning back in January, we must do whatever is necessary to plan and be prepared. Our faculty have been hard at work to develop hybrid learning opportunities, blending remote and in-person instruction to be as flexible as possible. Our facilities and operations staff have given new attention to a range of issues, from building air flow to pedestrian traffic patterns, while our residence and student life staff consider a variety of incentives to boost student compliance with a range of safety protocols to limit virus transmission and ensure public health.

We have no greater responsibilities than what I discuss above, and we will be as ready as we can be to carry on our public mission to the State of Maine.

Best wishes for a productive week ahead.

Regards,
Dan