

Week of June 8, 2020

Trustees -

Even as the COVID-19 pandemic continues to affect nearly everything we do, I hope you are beginning to enjoy at least some of what early summer in Maine offers.

As I reported last weekend, we completed our work on the 60-page Substantive Change Request for Unified Accreditation of the University of Maine System. This past Wednesday, we transmitted paper and digital copies of our Request to the New England Commission of Higher Education (NECHE). We will appear for a virtual meeting of the Commission (via Zoom) on Tuesday, June 23, from 2:45-4:00 p.m. to discuss our Request and answer the Commission's questions about our plans, and we are optimistic that we will receive at least a preliminary indication of NECHE's response and decision within a week or so thereafter.

An example of the kind of System-wide academic coordination and planning that unified accreditation will help to foster lies in discussions underway between Presidents Cummings (USM), Wyke (UMA), and Serna (UMF) and Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs Robert Placido about ways to strategically position all Education programs at System universities to better serve statewide needs through regional reach and coordination and program complementarity. This is a strategic approach to program planning that we expect to extend to far more programs as we begin to take advantage of unified accreditation.

It also sets us up well for another strategic focus I'll advance in the coming year -- educational efficiency. Facing budget uncertainty for the foreseeable future, but realistically knowing that there will be little if any new money for investment, we simply must become more efficient in how we allocate our resources and plan our academic offerings around the System and between and among our universities. With the robust institutional research capacity we've developed over the last few years, we will undertake more in-depth academic department analyses, beginning with our nursing programs, to review full-time faculty numbers, salaries, productivity, course-by-course enrollment, and other metrics. Watch for more reports on this topic through the summer and into fall.

Speaking of fall, our attention remains focused on the many elements of a safe return to our campuses for the beginning of the 2020-2021 academic year. Testing looms large, as the availability and extent of testing capacity upon return heavily influences our planning. We are in the midst of discussions with a number of potential partners for broad-based COVID-19 testing to establish a baseline for the safe fall return of our various community members. Despite the high cost of doing so -- estimated at \$130-\$150 per test -- should it become possible in the near future for us to secure, through external partnerships, sufficient capacity to test all students, faculty, and staff, the most responsible action will be to make such arrangements as soon as possible. I will continue to update you here as our testing discussions and plans advance

continue, and I will keep the Chair informed should there be significant developments in the meantime.

To give you a sense of the range of issues that require thoughtful planning now, beyond our basic academic operation, consider the following additional discussions that are underway:

- with university Chief Business Officers and residence life staff to discuss residence hall capacity, appropriate social distancing, hygiene, and potential budget impacts of various decisions;

- with international travel coordinators to finalize recommendations on international student exchange programs;

- with Maine Community College System and Maine Department of Education leadership to discuss the use of the Governor's federal CARES Act Emergency Education Relief Grant funds (proposals under consideration include a K-12 schools pilot to use Brightspace, the same digital/online learning management system that UMS and now MCCA use, and collaborative faculty development to support the Early College Plus program)

We continue to assess various data on COVID-19's impact thus far on both our state and our students too.

Rosa Redonnett, our Associate Vice Chancellor for Student Success and Credential Attainment, is my representative to the State Workforce Board, which met Friday for a report of COVID-19 impacts on the Maine workforce through April. As Rosa summarized for us after the meeting, while there was nothing surprising in the report (which is attached here for your reference), you may note that counties that are normally among the lowest in unemployment were in the middle of the pack due to their high concentration of tourism/leisure/hospitality businesses (and in the Portland metro region, of manufacturing). You may also note that educational employment has been the least affected sector of the workforce thus far.

Also late this week, Kay Kimball, our Deputy Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs, circulated an important national survey of student experiences with online learning this past spring through the pandemic. The report (attached) was prepared by Hanover Research, an educational research consultant with which UMS engages. The survey's results, aggregated from nearly 27,000 responses from students (both graduate and undergraduate), parents, faculty, and staff from 33 colleges and universities around the country, are summarized at page 3 of the report. I would call your attention to one item in that summary in particular -- while students reported concerns with online quality and their comfort with the modality, a significant majority of students reported that it is critical to the quality of the experience that there be live or recorded access to faculty lectures, with another significant number of both faculty and students reporting that device (e.g., laptop or digital tablets) access is also critical. I'm pleased to note that the investments we're making this summer in classroom upgrades will significantly expand our

capacity across the System to provide this very type of access for students and faculty whose instructional experiences include online or hybrid modalities.

We are planning to conduct our own System-wide assessment of our response to COVID-19 soon, and will of course report any notable findings back to you as we shape our own future planning from them.

At our foundation, we are academic institutions, so let me close with two points of positive academic news, one COVID-related and one not.

First, in our developing relationship with Northeastern University with the launch in Portland early this year of that university's Roux Institute, I'm happy to report that academic leaders at the University of Maine and Northeastern have reached tentative agreement on the first two joint degree programs between our institutions through the Institute. Each is a "4+1" agreement, one in Bioinformatics, the other in Computer Science.

The Bioinformatics 4+1 agreement was developed by Ben King and Bob Gundersen (from UMaine's Department of Molecular and Biomedical Sciences) and Jared Auclair (Northeastern), with input from other Northeastern faculty and UMaine's Scott Delcourt (Associate VP for Research and Senior Associate Dean of the Graduate School). The Computer Science 4+1 agreement was developed by Penny Rheingans (from UMaine's School of Computing and Information Science) and Bryan Lackaye (Northeastern), with assistance from other faculty at both institutions and again from UMaine's Scott Delcourt. Both programs will allow talented UMaine undergraduates from a number of STEM fields to complete four years of study in Orono, earn a B.S., and complete one year of graduate study in Portland that culminates in an M.S. in either Bioinformatics or Computer Science.

These are the first two academic agreements forged within the UMaine-Northeastern Roux relationship, and there is potential for similar agreements between Northeastern and the University of Southern Maine as well. I hope they are but the first of many like them to come.

Second, you may remember that I reported to you in my Week of May 18 message that we hoped to launch a free program offering a Resilience Badge. Initiated by the Career Services offices at UMS universities, the free offer to earn a 21st Century skill Resilience Badge comes in response to lost student employment and internship opportunities as a result of COVID-19. Participating students will have an opportunity to learn and practice a skill increasingly valued by employers, and they'll be able to share their badge as a credential of value on resumes and LinkedIn profiles.

The program is now [up and running](#), and I'm happy to report that 173 students representing all 7 of our universities have already signed up in the first weeks of the Resilience Badge offering.

It's through work like this that we'll continue to find additional cause for optimism for our future success.

Best wishes for a productive week ahead.

Regards,  
Dan