

Week of May 18

Trustees -

In the midst of a sun-filled holiday weekend that I hope is filled with some much-needed relaxation, I'll share just an abbreviated report of some of this past week's most important work.

Our attention continues to be primarily focused on planning to be ready to offer as much in-class instruction and on-campus experiences this fall as can be reasonably managed under prevailing public health conditions. At the same time, it's important that we understand that higher education remains a competitive marketplace. This past week saw universities around the country -- Notre Dame and the University of South Carolina among them -- announce more definitive plans for in-classroom, on-campus operations in the fall, no doubt responding to national surveys showing that nearly 80 percent of college-bound and returning students prefer to be on campus and in class (though some notable institutions have announced plans to remain fully online through the fall, including Harvard, Oxford, and the California State University System).

For those institutions that want to resume in-person operations in the fall as much as possible -- UMS among them -- testing, social distancing, other public health mitigation strategies, and flexible instructional modalities are all critical elements of the planning. To that end, we continue to monitor developments at the state and national level around vaccine trials and testing and develop plans to ensure that our capacity to test students, faculty and staff and our social distancing, scheduling, and environmental measures are together robust enough to permit the kind of in-person and on-campus operations we're expecting to offer. At the same time, we're launching enhancements to the web-conferencing capacity of our classrooms -- you heard that plan presented by UMS CIO David Demers at Monday's Board meeting -- and working to design our courses with substantial flexibility and multiple modalities that would permit, for example, a small group of students (socially distanced) to be present in class while additional students are participating remotely, with the professor either remote or in person and a rotating schedule so that all students have an equitable mix of in-class and remote experiences over the duration of the course. We're also considering schedule adjustments that would have students not return following Thanksgiving to eliminate the significant risk of virus transmission associated with holiday travel away from and back to our university communities.

My senior team and I continue our twice-weekly planning meetings with all of our Presidents and their own senior teams, and we met again with the labor leaders of our employee bargaining units this past Wednesday. Vice Chancellor Ryan Low provided a financial overview of our FY20 and FY21 challenges, as you heard this past Monday, and we continued our discussions about our fall planning.

Later on Wednesday I keynoted a web-based national discussion on "State Finances and Higher Education in the Wake of COVID-19," which was co-hosted by the Washington,

DC-based Bipartisan Policy Center, the State Higher Education Executive Officers Association, and The Institute for College Access & Success. Panelists included Jeff Andrade, Senior Vice President of the McKeon Group; Daniel Greenstein, Chancellor of Pennsylvania's State System of Higher Education; Alex Johnson, President of Cuyahoga Community College and Chair of the Board of Directors of the American Association of Community Colleges; James Kvaal, President of The Institute for College Access & Success; and Kathryn White, Director of Budget Process Studies at the National Association of State Budget Officers. With BPC's Senior Policy Analyst for Higher Education Jinann Bitar moderating, we discussed how the spread of COVID-19 and its resulting economic fallout have brought a new spotlight to the volatility of state higher education funding.

We continue to work with the Governor's office and your fellow Board member DOE Commissioner Pender Makin to discuss proposals for the best uses for the Governor's Emergency Educational Relief Fund, which are federal funds available to be used for educational purposes to respond to the ongoing pandemic. CIO David Demers and Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs Robert Placido are collaborating with Maine Community College System leadership to craft proposals to expand broadband access around the state and transition Maine's K-12 system to the Brightspace Learning Management System that we and MCCS will be using (and which I briefly described in last week's update). Currently, the K-12 schools use a hodgepodge of solutions, with little training or support. Having the entire "K-20" system on the same learning management system would enable us to collaborate on online teaching practice/education, best practices, templates, administration, etc. And because Brightspace is mobile-friendly, students would have more access on the devices they are comfortable using, and have a better learning experience at the same time. I'll report further as this develops.

Though it gets less attention amidst the pandemic, we continue our work on some of the most significant initiatives underway across our System. UMS Chief of Staff and General Counsel Jim Thelen will share our latest unified accreditation draft later this morning with staff from the New England Commission of Higher Education for their review and comment before we finalize the document. We'll transmit the official substantive change application for unified accreditation to NECHE in early June, and we'll appear before the Commission via Zoom on June 23 to discuss the application further. Separately, UMaine President Joan Ferrini-Mundy and I received an update from the Maine Aqua Ventus offshore wind project team on Thursday morning. Negotiations with two project developers are nearing completion on the US Department of Energy-grant funded project that will demonstrate UMaine's floating offshore wind turbine technology in state-approved waters off Monhegan Island. You'll hear more on both matters in the coming weeks and months.

I'd like to conclude this morning by calling your attention to an academic initiative to find educational opportunity in our response to the pandemic. VCAA Robert Placido and Associate Vice Chancellor Rosa Redonnett are working with the career services offices and the micro-credentialing initiatives we have underway to enable our universities to offer their students

opportunities to earn Education Design Labs' Resilience and Initiative badges as a way to demonstrate important "soft" skills acquired during the COVID-19 crisis. These are particularly important given the constraints we faced around continuing experiential learning this spring. The badge will be available at no cost to any student (new and continuing) with a maine.edu address. We're developing marketing materials and a web page for this initiative and hope to be ready to launch the effort by June 1.

I hope you agree that, through this work, we are continuing to demonstrate that the University of Maine System is Maine's most important educational asset in our service to our students and state. And we will be ready to carry on that mission safely this coming fall.

My best wishes for a restful weekend.

Regards,
Dan