

Week of August 17

Trustees,

I want to be short and to the point this morning. Foremost on all of our minds is the progress of our Safe Return plan as students begin returning to our universities.

The University of Maine announced Friday afternoon that three undergraduate students had tested positive for COVID-19. Two are off-campus students who share an apartment; they each tested separately outside of UMS's testing program after experiencing mild symptoms. The third is a fraternity member with no apparent connection to the other two, whose positive results were identified through the UMS asymptomatic testing program.

All three students are in isolation with university support, including meals, counseling, etc. And with the leadership of Maine CDC staff, in coordination with university officials, contact tracing began immediately, resulting in 6 additional students and 2 non-students identified as sufficiently close contacts to be quarantined and tested themselves. Six of those individuals have tested negative; two results remain pending.

We are both serious and realistic about this situation. UMaine President Joan Ferrini-Mundy informed the university community by email Friday afternoon as soon as sufficient information was available to publicly release; she and other university leaders, with support from UMS, [shared additional information](#) with the campus, [hosted a media briefing](#) on the situation yesterday afternoon and will do the same later today. It is critical that the public be informed and trust our ability to maintain public health as we welcome students back to our campuses and their communities.

We are responsibly monitoring the situation by the hour and will adjust our plans and actions accordingly. At present, I am confident reporting to you that our Safe Return Plan is working so far. We're testing broadly because *we want to find these cases* before students could unknowingly introduce the virus into our university communities. *We expected to find cases*, and we made plans for what to do when we did -- work with the CDC, immediately isolate and support impacted individuals, contact trace, and quarantine and conduct additional testing to prevent virus spread. This is the proven science-based method of managing public health in a pandemic so that we have the opportunity for safe operation with the additional protections of social distancing, aggressive hygiene and cleaning practices, face coverings, and modified academic and physical operations.

UMS has completed 1,366 asymptomatic tests so far, nearly 1,100 in the last week alone. The single asymptomatic positive described above represents the single positive case reported on our [public dashboard](#) so far. In the coming week, we will test nearly 10,000 more -- with 6,000 at UMaine alone -- and expect to see more positive tests. So long as we can identify, manage, and contain whatever incidences of the virus we find, we will continue on our present course, with ongoing surveillance testing through the semester.

We are closely watching news, as you may be too, of other university experiences around the country. Just this week, the [University of North Carolina](#) cancelled in-person classes one week into their semester after COVID outbreaks, while [Notre Dame](#) transitioned from in-person classes to remote learning for two weeks to try to quell disease spread there. [Michigan State University](#) reversed its plan for students returning for in-person instruction seemingly for concern that it would not be able to prevent or contain disease outbreaks among its 50,000 students.

Separately, universities are responding quickly and firmly to students who ignore COVID safety guidelines. Both [Syracuse University](#) and [Purdue University](#) suspended dozens of students this week who irresponsibly gathered for large parties in violation of university and CDC guidelines. Even as these events were unfolding through the week, I proactively reached out to all UMS students to encourage them to begin thinking about how they can work with us to ensure that our return to campus can proceed safely and on schedule -- you can see my message [here](#). And separately, we took the necessary step to [clearly communicate](#) that prohibited group gatherings and parties and other related conduct, on or off campus, will be addressed firmly here as well. UMaine itself has disciplined a handful of students already for off-campus parties that threatened public health.

As I told our students, we have one chance to get this right. With Maine in the currently enviable position as one of the safest states in the country through the pandemic, with testing, with disease containment, and with communal discipline, I remain hopeful that we can continue to safely resume in-person academic operations as we have planned. If the pandemic forces us to change those plans, we will. But for now, our plans are working as we intended, and we will carry on safely.

Regards,

Dan