

Week of August 31, 2020

Trustees -

Respecting your time this Labor Day holiday weekend, I'd like to just briefly address a few points and reflections from the last week.

You may have seen Bangor Daily News or WABI reports this week about our upcoming January 1, 2021 transition from the current UMS sponsored group health plan for our retirees to a Health Reimbursement Account (HRA)-funded individual health plan through the Medicare Exchange. Our retiree group health plan is costly due to the limited number of individuals on our plan and their health experience compared to the millions of Medicare-eligible individuals insured through the Medicare Exchange. Benefit levels have eroded annually and premiums were scheduled to increase by double digits this coming January. By funding an HRA for our retirees, giving them the flexibility to use those funds to select insurance plans that meet their specific health needs (with appropriate support through the transition), the overwhelming majority of our Medicare-eligible retirees can acquire better plans, often with more benefits, for less money than the current UMS group plan premium provides, which can result in savings for both retirees and UMS.

Our HR and Labor Relations teams are actively engaged with our retirees, with our labor union partners, and with our vendor (Aon) to ensure the earlier stages of our transition can go as smoothly as possible.

Trustees who attended this past Wednesday's Facilities, Finance, and Technology Board Committee meeting via Zoom heard an executive session update on our ongoing FY21 budget work. With the semester just started, we're projecting credit hour revenue approximately \$1.7 million over preliminary FY21 budget levels, with the bulk of expected Early College revenue yet to materialize due to the later fall start of most high school students. To be sure, budget challenges remain. Auxiliary budgets are strained with additional facility costs and lower revenue to manage the COVID situation, and the state's curtailment decisions have yet to be made (though early signs suggest we will be spared most of the initial 10-percent reduction target for FY21).

I said I'd keep this holiday weekend update short and I meant it. I'd like to close now with an important reflection on our progress to date.

That we can reasonably project credit hour revenue that exceeds our conservative initial budgeting estimates suggests something that I think is important to acknowledge: our students have confidence in what we've accomplished to make it possible for them to return. When we quickly shut down on-campus operations and in-person instruction in mid-March, we had no capacity to identify and track the virus or reasonably control its spread within our university communities. That left us with no realistic choice except to shut down our in-person operations to protect the health and safety of our students, faculty, staff, and university communities.

How far we've come since then.

With perhaps the most robust asymptomatic testing regimen in all of Maine, if not northern New England, we've tested and received results for more than 12,000 students (as of this morning). This effort has allowed us to identify and isolate 13 individuals so far who would have had no idea that they were carrying COVID-19 into our university communities. While too many individuals have made important contributions to this effort to name them all, I would highlight Chip Gavin, Gretchen Catlin, and Mike Noblet on our System staff, along with Melissa Maginnis (UMS Scientific Advisory Board), Dick Young (UMaine), Lisa Belanger (USM), Keenan Farwell (UMF), and others at our universities for their recommendations, planning, and work to manage our ongoing testing regimen and coordination with the Maine CDC to manage our positive test results.

Our information technology management and effort has been nothing short of amazing. With CIO David Demers leading the way, supported by individuals such as Tiff Mauri and Todd Berry, UMS IT and staff have managed the collection, organization, security, and presentation of all testing data for campus response teams and designed and engineered the secure reporting dashboards UMS and our campus response teams use to make informed decisions about controlling virus spread.

We've also been a model of transparency, providing daily public updates, such as this update on September 4, to the media and public of the state of our safe return. Our transparency has engendered public confidence in our work and return, and our Executive Director of System Communications, Dan Demeritt, deserves special attention and thanks for coordinating that effort, along with campus-based communications leaders such as Margaret Nagle (UMaine), Marc Glass (USM), and Kerry Watson-Blaisdell (UMFK).

Our facilities teams across the state, including among them Stewart Harvey (UM), Brian Schaefer (UMFK), and Joe Moir (UMPI), have brainstormed cleaning practices, ventilation, pedestrian flow, plexiglass placement, and creative social distancing to employ environmentally-based public health mitigation strategies to keep our community members safe.

The work of our faculty in instruction also deserves special note. We should all pause to thank our faculty for their efforts to improve the student experience through a variety of teaching and learning modalities that foster instructive engagement with their students without unreasonably risking virus spread and public health.

Our public service and research missions continue as well, and I can share two examples of notable work through the pandemic in these areas too.

Human problems related to domestic violence, juvenile justice, human rights, and family, housing and other disputes have not stopped in the face of the pandemic -- indeed, many of those problems have been exacerbated by the pandemic. At Maine Law's Legal Aid Clinic,

Professor Deirdre Smith, the Associate Dean of Experiential Education, led Clinic students through a challenging summer of COVID-compliant meetings with clients, Zoom court appearances, personal (masked) court appearances, and crucial legal filings to help Maine people who need lawyers, but cannot afford them, obtain access to justice and to critical legal services despite the pandemic.

And UMaine's Advanced Manufacturing Center stepped up to help Enercon Technologies (of Gray, Maine) manage a national contract in the COVID testing effort, which required Enercon to ramp up its production by a factor of 12 -- essentially rolling out a year's worth of production now every month. The Advanced Manufacturing Center is helping Enercon automate their processes to manage the increased production needs.

Pausing to acknowledge this hard work is not to say we've let our guard down. We will adjust our plans and operations if virus spread requires doing so. But this weekend, I wanted to make sure we acknowledge the hard work and success we've had to date. It's been a tremendous effort that's both made our safe return possible so far and demonstrated the unsurpassed value and service we provide to our students and state.

Enjoy the weekend,

Dan