

Week of December 14

Trustees,

The University of Maine System has now wrapped up its fall semester exam week. I'll start right there by returning to an effort we launched at this time last year to support students whose first efforts at college were less successful than they may have hoped.

Last December we [launched the \*Make the Grade\* initiative](#). You may recall that, through that program, students who failed a course but passed others were given the chance to retake the course, or another, at no cost as long as they took advantage of focused advising resources and support to get back on track.

I'm pleased to report that, judged by the first-year fall return rate, which tracks the percentage of students who return immediately for the start of their sophomore year after finishing their first year, the *Make the Grade* initiative appears to have made a difference. Compared against the Fall 2018-to-Fall 2019 return rate (the year before *Make the Grade*), Fall 2019-to-Fall 2020's first-year fall return rate was five percentage points higher among students who failed a course in their first semester. And the first-year fall return rate increased two percent among all first year students during the first year of *Make the Grade* as well.

Over 150 first-year students who failed a course the Fall 2019 semester applied for a *Make the Grade* free course in the Spring 2020 semester. A UMS in-state student who took advantage of a *Make the Grade* three credit-hour course would have saved an average of \$807 in tuition costs, while the benefit to UMS is a student continuing to work toward degree completion who would otherwise have abandoned the opportunity for the degree's life-changing benefits.

To be sure, by the following fall, UMS still loses about half of students who fail at least one course in their first semester. We have to continue to work to support and retain these students, and thus will be announcing early this coming week that the *Make the Grade* initiative will continue. We'll be studying the outcomes from *Make the Grade* to learn what we can do better, and we'll keep our focus on this and other retention efforts to better support our students. I hope you'll watch for the *Make the Grade* news, which will include some selected stories from students who stayed on track with the support provided through the *Make the Grade* effort.

I'll turn now to our Spring 2021 planning, which in the ongoing pandemic remains our most important focus at present. We have no greater responsibility than to ensure that the resumption of in-person/on-campus teaching, learning, research, and work can be done so safely in a pandemic that's of a much different nature than it was at the beginning of the fall semester.

First, though, we look farther ahead to the promise of the vaccines that have recently been approved. I [announced on Monday of this week](#) the creation of a Vaccine Planning and Partnership Task Force to coordinate and report on the work underway across our campuses to plan for and support the distribution of vaccines for COVID-19. The task force, which will be

chaired by UMaine President Joan Ferrini-Mundy (who also chairs the [UMS Scientific Advisory Board](#)) and includes my Chief of Staff and UMS General Counsel Jim Thelen, UMS General Services Officer Chip Gavin, and UMS Executive Director of Public Affairs Dan Demeritt, will engage with our Scientific Advisory Board and other university scientists, nursing and public health program leaders, academic and student affairs leaders, communicators, and facilities and emergency response team members to inform its work. We've been monitoring and planning for the distribution of vaccines for COVID-19 throughout the public health crisis, and our work to date has included providing input to various distribution plan discussions, offering state partners an inventory of 220 cubic feet of ultracold storage space that we have available on our campuses throughout the state to support vaccine distribution and a survey of UMS nursing programs to identify individuals for surge staffing and other healthcare delivery opportunities. The task force will provide a summary briefing of its initial work at your January 6, 2021 FFT Committee and a further report at your regular January 25, 2021 Board meeting.

I think it's fair to say that we all hope the availability and distribution of vaccines around the country will arrest the further spread of the pandemic and help return us to more normal operations by fall.

But until then, our every effort is focused on the Spring 2021 semester return planned for January 25, 2021. To bring our students back successfully -- and successfully here fundamentally includes, as it has through the pandemic, our commitment and responsibility to both individual and community public health and safety -- we will need far more robust testing efforts and the resources to implement them. COVID-19 is more prevalent in our communities, state, and region than it was when we returned in the fall. But our fall experience shows us that, if we can return our students and employees safely to campus, we can keep them as safe, or perhaps even safer, than the general experience of the communities surrounding us -- as long as we can test our entire in-person population regularly and isolate the cases we find apart from our communities. These are the simple public health science facts and realities of the pandemic. We are fortunate to have received just over \$8 million from the State of Maine to reimburse us for our COVID testing and PPE expenses through the pandemic to date. At present we expect to deploy those resources to our Spring semester testing and related efforts to ensure we can keep our university communities safe through whatever in-person teaching, learning, and work we can prudently manage until the vaccines turn the course of the pandemic.

Let me end here with news closer to the heart of what we do at our best.

The American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS), the world's foremost scientific society, recently invited the [University of Maine's Senator George J. Mitchell Center for Sustainability Solutions](#) to lead a statewide project to help Maine scientists and engineers engage with diverse stakeholders and encourage the use of science in decision-making. Maine is one of the first states in the country that has been invited to participate in this program, which is known as the Local Science Engagement Network (LSEN) program.

Under the leadership of [David Hart](#), the Mitchell Center has developed a national and global reputation for excellence based on its experience growing innovative partnerships between interdisciplinary research teams and local communities. For example, when the Mitchell Center led a \$20 million National Science Foundation grant several years ago, it created a statewide network in which teams of faculty and students *from every UMS university* participated in collaborative projects designed to promote community and economic development while protecting the environment.

The Mitchell Center is currently negotiating with AAAS regarding the scope of a planning grant for the Maine LSEN. If additional funding becomes available for LSEN in the future, students and faculty from all of our universities will have opportunities to collaborate with local communities to create a brighter economic and environmental future. And in that case, we could explore how to connect LSEN to the Harold Alfond Foundation-funded Research Learning Experience initiatives that will be part of the \$20 million Student Success and Retention components of the [Alfond grants](#). I can think of no better way to connect all of our universities and their students and researchers to the promise and benefits of these grants.

In closing, we look ahead to a holiday period that I hope is not only restful and rewarding for all of us, but healthy as well.

Regards,  
Dan