

Week of December 7

Trustees,

Fall semester classes have concluded and we've now entered our final exams period. Keeping our current students on track through the pandemic is critical, and we will be intensely focusing on both traditional retention efforts and whatever adjustments to our health and safety protocols may be necessary to ensure their safe return next semester. More briefly on that below.

Among the multi-faceted aspects of our teaching, research, and public service mission to the State of Maine, we're also intensely focused on our future students. Ensuring that there are accessible, affordable pathways from Maine's high schools to high quality, efficient, and market-relevant public higher education and research is among the most important work we do. And with the ongoing pandemic, that work is harder.

Nationally, we know that the pandemic has had a devastating impact on last spring's high school graduates' willingness to begin their higher education studies -- the number of students going to any type of college (community college, public, or private) immediately after high school this fall fell by nearly 22 percent from the previous year, nearly eight times the expected rate from pre-pandemic times. The drop in immediate college enrollment at public four-year institutions such as ours was a bit smaller at roughly 14 percent. As reflected in our own enrollment, the Maine numbers were slightly better still -- we saw a roughly 10.5 percent drop in enrollment among first-year Maine resident students from Fall 2019's pre-pandemic census to this Fall 2020's census, nearly double the 5.65 percent decline in our overall first-year enrollment, which includes out-of-state first-time/first-year enrollment. (That our drop-off in first-time, straight-from-high-school enrollment was so much smaller than the national decline among public four-year institutions of nearly 14 percent may be due to the perception of Maine as among the safest states in the country through the pandemic.)

The overall trend is alarming, though. And looking ahead is no better at the moment. Although the limited data we have on actual matriculations at present is promising -- almost certainly reflecting our intentionally faster action on applications and financial aid packaging -- Fall 2021 applications to our UMS universities overall are down 20 percent compared to this time last year, and, according to the Finance Authority of Maine (FAME), completion rates for the Free Application for Federal Student Aid are down 15 percent.

Simply put, one of the unfortunate consequences of the pandemic seems to be that high school seniors and their guidance counselors are so overburdened this fall with the challenges and mental stress of keeping up with hybrid and online learning, having limited or no high school sports opportunities or other extra curricular activities, and reduced social interaction that the traditional attention they might otherwise pay to preparing for college is greatly compromised.

That's why we engaged more than 50 Maine high school counselors this week with UMS admissions officers, FAME representatives, and the Maine Community College System to

discuss building and promoting a pandemic pathway to higher education for Maine high school students who need additional support and encouragement. Dan Demeritt will be working with Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs Robert Placido to continue this effort with other UMS university colleagues and will be providing the Board's Academic and Student Affairs Committee an update at its January 4 meeting on the promotional work we will be doing in the spring to help get students back on track.

For many System and university leaders, a significant portion of this past week was filled with the New England Commission on Higher Education's (NECHE) annual conference. With unified accreditation as our new operating model, our engagement with NECHE across the expanse of the System has never been more important, and I'm happy so many of our university leaders could take part in the virtual conference sessions, which included sessions focused on student assessment, equity and inclusion, pandemic impact, and post-pandemic opportunities for innovation. I'd like to particularly thank our Chair, Jim Erwin, who participated in a panel discussion on Board governance along with Richard A. Beyer, Senior Fellow and Practice Area Leader on Mergers and Private System Affiliations, with the Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges (AGB); Dr. Jim Hundrieser, Vice President for Consulting Services for the National Association of College and University Business Officers (NACUBO); Thomas M. O'Reilly, President, Pine Manor College; and Dr. Jean MacCormack, Vice Chair of the Board, Bridgewater State University, and former chancellor of UMass Dartmouth. Similarly, University of Maine at Augusta President Rebecca Wyke joined a panel discussion, led by Inside Higher Education's Scott Jaschik, on New England-focused higher education matters. President Wyke was joined on the panel by Dr. Yves Salomon-Fernández, President of Massachusetts's Greenfield Community College, and Dr. Peter Salovey, President of Yale University.

I'd also like to note and congratulate President Wyke's election on Friday to the NECHE Commission. NECHE acts through its [Commission](#), which consists of faculty, administrators, and trustees from its institutional members, as well as public members. The Commission is served by staff employees who are led by Dr. Lawrence Schall, who succeeded Dr. Barbara Brittingham last summer upon her retirement. President Wyke's Commission service will be a point of pride for the System and Maine, and I wish her a professionally rewarding experience.

Finally, as I alluded to above, we are of necessity looking ahead with urgency to our planned January 25, 2021 start of the spring semester. While our fall semester has been largely successful judged against the [Together for Maine](#) plans we made, the pandemic has grown around us and will require more significant testing, logistical resources, and even stricter discipline to the public health protocols if we are bring our students back in January as successfully as we kept them and our university communities through through the fall. I have [pledged to the UMS community](#) that we will communicate any adjustments to our teaching and operations for this purpose no later than January 4, 2021.

I know we will all be wishing our students well this week through their exams, along with a measure of gratitude for our faculty and staff, who, through a trying semester, kept their attention and dedication squarely focused on our students' success.

Regards,
Dan