

Week of July 20

Trustees -

As I write to share this week's reflection on a hot weekend in the zenith of the Maine summer, let me come back to a topic that was front and center at this past Monday's Board meeting: our plans for safely resuming on-campus operations this fall, with more specifics on the testing we will conduct and why doing so is so important.

This morning's *Portland Press Herald* [reported](#) on a small COVID-19 outbreak at American Roots, a Westbrook, Maine apparel manufacturer. After two employees displayed COVID symptoms (who soon thereafter received positive COVID test results), American Roots arranged with the Maine CDC to have all 110 of its employees tested, which resulted in 9 more positive tests, even though those employees had not yet experienced any COVID symptoms. With all employees who tested positive immediately quarantined, and with appropriate contact tracing that resulted in quarantine for 10 additional people, follow-up testing at American Roots, where employees also social distance and wear masks, showed no additional cases of virus transmission to date.

As the Press Herald reports, the Maine CDC credits American Roots's immediate action, planning, and ongoing public health measures as all contributing to stopping the virus's further spread. And I couldn't help but relate to a statement in the article from Ben Waxman, the owner of American Roots: *To not be prepared right now is irresponsible.*

Let's be clear: To state the obvious, we cannot eliminate all risk in our operations. With apologies for belaboring the point, the only way to eliminate *all* risk is to not operate at all -- an unacceptable outcome. Of course, the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic presents a new and significant risk to individual and public health and safety in our traditional on-campus academic operations. That's why the [Together for Maine](#) fall safe return plans we [announced](#) July 1 -- the product of more than 200 planning meetings at each of our universities and System-wide, involving hundreds of individuals who together invested thousands of hours to prepare safe return plans that represented more than 40 weeks of collective effort -- include the same plans for testing, symptom checks, physical distancing, use of facial coverings, and isolating and quarantining that controlled a small virus outbreak at American Roots. We should honestly acknowledge, as we plan our return, that we cannot expect to be 100 percent COVID-free. Our plans, therefore, start with testing to identify and contain the virus before it could spread in any of our university communities.

You'll recall our testing arrangement. Through agreements we [announced June 30](#) with ConvenientMD (CMD) and The Jackson Laboratory (JAX), CMD is providing "wrap around" testing services, establishing sites at each UMS university to gather samples and administer and report results, which, in turn, are tested by JAX for the presence of the virus. In our testing arrangement, JAX is using what is known as [RT-PCR testing](#), which is considered one of the most reliable COVID-19 tests, with high accuracy and low false positives.

With an understanding of the resources we can responsibly commit at this time to testing, we developed our testing strategy based on recommendations from our [Scientific Advisory Board](#) to test all students, faculty and staff arriving from outside Maine; all residential students (that is, students who will be living in our university housing facilities), no matter where from; and a variety of other special cohorts of students and employees, based on the particular nature of activities in which they participate (such as athletes, members of bona fide university singing organizations, nursing students and others). All tested individuals will be required to isolate until negative test results are received; in any of these groups, those who can present a negative RT-PCR test from within the previous 72 hours need not isolate.

And that's not all.

We will conduct ongoing surveillance testing throughout the fall, with the frequency and populations of such testing informed by the baseline campus-specific results of our initial testing described above, a more generalized assessment of virus prevalence in the county and region, wastewater surveillance that tests for virus presence in the septic systems in buildings at the UMaine and USM campuses, and mathematical modeling with JAX scientists and our own Scientific Advisory Board that is dynamically updated with all of the foregoing.

Maine's prudent public health response to date should be acknowledged -- at present, we have the [lowest rate of virus transmission in the nation](#). The goal of our planning, and particularly of our testing and containment strategies, is to keep it that way, even as we acknowledge the inevitability that our testing is sure to uncover some asymptomatic presence of the virus among our returning community members. But with disciplined tracing, isolation, and quarantine measures, strict communal adherence to social distancing, personal hygiene, and face-covering requirements, and ongoing surveillance testing, we continue to believe we can safely and responsibly resume operations on campus this fall under our current plans, even as we acknowledge that we must continue to adjust our plans as state guidance and the pandemic evolve in Maine.

To wrap up this aspect of my weekly report, I can share the first results of our testing. On Wednesday, 54 returning student athletes were tested at UMaine. Specimen collection went smoothly, and we received results within 48 hours that there were no positive tests in this first group. We will shortly develop a public-facing online "dashboard" to report our testing results in the aggregate; given the significance of our operations in our local communities, it'll be important that we are transparent to maintain public confidence in our universities through the pandemic, however long it lasts.

In closing for this weekend, let me turn to *the why* -- why, that is, it's so important that our public university system remain open and accessible to Maine's citizens. To do so, with thanks to UMS Deputy Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs Kay Kimball for calling my own attention to it, I'm sharing here a just-released Brookings Institution report on the public university's out-sized impact on social mobility, particularly now as we are just beginning to assess the impact of the

pandemic on public higher education. I invite your read of the materials both [here](#) and [here](#), as well as in the attached. We rightly focus on developing and expanding Maine's workforce, but in doing so, we also recognize the broader social good, reported on in these materials, that comes from access to and success in our public universities.

I wish you well in the week ahead.

Regards,
Dan