

Week of November 16

Trustees,

With Thanksgiving week upon us and the holiday and long weekend ahead, this will be my last weekend report until December 6. And there is much of significance to report today, so I'll get right to it.

While we covered a number of important issues at your Board meeting on Monday, most impactful for all of us were the stories of concern from our retirees and those speaking on their behalf about the ongoing transition from an Aetna group health plan to exchange-based individual plans funded by UMS contributions to a health reimbursement account. Even as we crossed a threshold this week of more than half of our retirees and their dependents enrolling in a new plan, concerns clearly remain about smaller numbers of retirees not being able to find a plan that provides sufficient prescription coverage or that sufficiently covers out-of-pocket expenses.

To that point, before week's end I had begun conversations with Vice Chancellor for Finance and Administration Ryan Low, Chief of Staff and General Counsel Jim Thelen, and Chief Human Resources Officer Carol Corcoran and, separately, with some of your colleagues about options to enhance coverage or funding options to ensure that no retiree and no dependent would find themselves at a disadvantage relative to the current group plan. Even as those conversations were underway, Friday morning we learned that 11 retirees -- including some who addressed your Board meeting on Monday during our long public comment period -- filed a lawsuit against UMS to ask the Cumberland County Superior Court to rule that our retirees have a contractual right to the Aetna group health plan. With these concerns, coupled with pending demands for arbitration from three of our labor unions for similar relief, we decided Friday afternoon to pause to review our options for a better path forward, with better coverage for our retirees and less legal risk for UMS. To be sure, any solution that satisfies both goals will involve more expense. But it's my judgment that the present situation requires this kind of near-term solution to give us time to plan longer term and discuss with our labor partners a financially viable strategy that best serves our retirees and UMS.

The immediate challenge will be to determine whether a solution exists that permits those retirees and dependents who wish to go forward to the HRA-funded, Aon-administered individual exchange plans to do so, perhaps with enhanced funding to limit prescription or out-of-pocket expenses, while permitting those who wish to remain in the Aetna group plan to do so. I want to be clear that it will be a tall order to achieve that balance, and achieving it will assuredly sacrifice the cost savings the exchange-based plan transition was meant to achieve. Ryan, Carol, Jim, and our HR and Labor team will begin discussions as early as today to address these issues, and I'll be reporting to the Chair as the path forward becomes clear. Paramount for us will be ensuring that our retirees and their dependents are held harmless with whatever solution we achieve.

With that, let me turn to the issue that has pervaded our work and even our collective consciousness in our daily lives for nearly the whole span of 2020 to date -- the pandemic and how we've operated through it. We're now on the cusp of finishing the in-person, on-campus instructional portion of our semester -- and doing so without endangering public health through the semester.

First, good news.

Our ongoing partnership with the State of Maine has always been essential to helping to manage the pandemic beyond our campus borders, whether through our early contractual relationship with the Maine Emergency Management Agency to manufacture hand sanitizer, open our PPE supply chains, and graduate our nurses early to support surge staffing in medical and nursing home facilities, to as recently as this week [announcing a new "swab and send" testing site at our Machias campus](#) to increase testing options in Washington County in partnership with the Maine Department of Health and Human Services. Now, the State will offer support in return, with Governor Mills agreeing late this week to authorize reimbursement of \$6.5 million of our COVID testing costs through year-end with available federal Coronavirus Relief Funds (with just over \$250,000 and \$27,000, respectively, going to Maine Maritime Academy and the Maine Community College System for the same purpose as well). Into this coming week, the State will be considering additional requests for \$1.7 million to cover the PPE, face masks and coverings, hand sanitizer and related chemicals and cleaning supplies we've used in our pandemic operations, \$5.8 million to scale up a waste water testing laboratory that could serve the State more broadly in the future, and additional requests for costs and lost revenue associated with our efforts to set aside isolation and quarantine space through the pandemic.

The testing effort has been no less than Herculean, and not just because it has confirmed through the semester that we've been successful limiting the spread of COVID in our university communities. With [today's public dashboard](#) showing a total of just 69 positive results across more than 35,000 tests dating back to July, our testing positivity rate is just under 0.2 percent. Statistical analysis of our ongoing random sample testing shows, with 95 percent confidence, that COVID prevalence in our System was just 0.12 percent as recently as November 3-12. Even as we see an increase in positive tests most recently -- we're monitoring an additional 11 new positives in our latest testing -- as we close in on the Thanksgiving break with the virus raging through the state and nation, our university communities *are still among the safest places to be anywhere*. But with cases increasing even in our communities, our [Thanksgiving departure testing](#) will ensure that we don't send our community members home for the holidays unknowingly taking the virus with them.

You'll recall that, back in late April, only six weeks after our universities [quickly emptied their residence halls and transitioned to remote learning and work](#) to prevent the early spread of COVID, [we began planning to safely reopen this fall](#). We invested heavily in [IT upgrades for our classrooms across the System](#) to support the kind of hybrid learning that would protect our faculty and students. We [engaged university leaders](#) beyond our System and all across the

state to develop the [science-informed framework](#) that would permit a safe resumption of in-person academic operations this fall. We confirmed [partnerships with The Jackson Laboratory and ConvenientMD](#) to ensure we could test our university community members to identify and isolate COVID cases before they could spread on our campuses. We studied the science of a pandemic virus and its spread, listening to the vital recommendations of our [Scientific Advisory Board](#) to inform our own prudent safe-return planning and operations through the fall.

Pandemics have [affected higher education throughout history](#). In the plagues of the 14th century, students and lecturers alike fled universities for the safety of isolated manors or the countryside, and universities canceled instruction or even closed altogether. By the time of smallpox epidemics in the late 1800s and the 1918 global influenza pandemic, the public health strategies we recognize in our own operations today had already taken shape -- required vaccinations, isolation and quarantine, face coverings, personal temperature and symptom checks, temporary in-person instruction suspensions, limitations on public and indoor gatherings, decreased campus density, and even classes and instruction held outside. Harvard College [employed many of these strategies in 1918](#) to limit the pandemic's impact there even as it raged around Boston.

It would be tempting to say now that safely navigating the fall semester was the planned outcome that we expected all along. But it was not assured when we started our journey [Together for Maine](#) earlier this fall. We should both breathe the proverbial sigh of relief and also note an immense measure of pride in what we've accomplished so far. Across our thousands of students and faculty, our staff who worked from home and on our campuses, to the many hundreds of people devoting specific efforts to our planning committees; testing, isolation and quarantine, and contact tracing efforts; facilities and cleaning; instructional and technology support; finance, budget and procurement; communications; and university and System administration, the collective displays of resilience, ingenuity, communal discipline, and good will among us all got us safely through the in-person, on-campus portion of the semester and to the Thanksgiving holiday.

From my vantage point today, we have much to be thankful for.

I wish you all a healthy and safe Thanksgiving week.

Regards,
Dan