

Week of October 19

Trustees,

With the national news recounting daily now that new and ever greater numbers of COVID-19 cases are spreading throughout the country, I'd like to start here with an update on where things stand across our university system with our safe operations in the pandemic. I'll follow and close with what appears to be the most significant impact of the pandemic to date -- the challenge of engaging with and enrolling Maine's high school graduates -- and what we're doing about it.

Today marks the two-thirds point through our planned in-person/on-campus operations for the fall semester, marking the period when students first began arriving on our campuses until they return home just before Thanksgiving, at which time all academic offerings will be remote. Our plan to have modified and lower density in-person instruction and work, with testing, contact tracing, isolation and quarantine, strict masking and social distancing, group size and travel limitations, and all other public health mitigation strategies -- and all following civil guidance and the public health science of this pandemic -- has worked so far.

Of the just over 24,000 asymptomatic PCR screening tests we've conducted to date, we've identified 25 positives results, allowing us to isolate individuals with COVID-19 and quarantine their close contacts to limit or prevent the spread of the virus in our university communities. The Asymptomatic Screening Dashboard at [Together.Maine.edu](https://together.maine.edu) represents known results on all asymptomatic tests going back to July 22, 2020.

We are managing just 9 known cases at present, and System-wide, 99 percent of university-administered quarantine space and 97 percent of university-administered isolation space is currently available.

We continue our aggressive surveillance testing plans, with 2,000 individuals who are known to participate in at least some on-campus/in-person interaction selected for testing every 10 days, along with situational and targeted amplified testing used whenever public health data suggests elevated risk of COVID-19 transmission in a particular locale or community. While we've been engaged with the Maine Emergency Management Agency and Maine CDC, along with the Maine Department of Health and Human Services and other agencies, throughout the pandemic, we've begun talks more recently with DHHS Commissioner Lambrew and Maine CDC Director Dr. Shah to explore working together more closely on surveillance testing, including through the Maine Health and Environmental Testing Laboratory (HETL) in Augusta and with the State's "swab-and-send" mobile testing sites, which has the potential to both lower our testing costs and increase the public health understanding of COVID's transmission in Maine. UMaine President Joan Ferrini-Mundy, UMS Chief General Services Officer Chip Gavin, and our Scientific Advisory Board and others are connected with Commissioner Lambrew, Dr. Shah, and their state counterparts for these promising discussions.

The outcomes we are seeing are the best we could have hoped for at this point in the semester amidst the realities of the ongoing pandemic. We knew we'd have cases -- we've managed them safely so far, with no serious consequences to anyone involved. We knew this semester would be different -- but we've made it as engaging as possible for those who wanted in-person experiences. We owe a tremendous debt of gratitude to our students, faculty, and staff for their resilience through this point in a semester unlike any other we've ever had, as well as to our scientists, pandemic response teams, and even Maine's civic and public health leaders, who've guided our universities' and state response so ably thus far.

But there's a sober reality to the pandemic's impacts that we are tracking and taking steps to address.

While we present our full fall enrollment report at your regular November Board meeting, we are already analyzing our fall census enrollment numbers as we present our final revised FY21 budget this coming week and seek to understand enrollment and application trends that require attention and new strategies. Overall, system enrollments are down less than one percent compared to last year. There are some areas of significant local growth in undergraduate enrollment (UMPI), and combined graduate enrollments are up over 8 percent at UMaine and USM.

Our overall enrollment numbers are more positive than has been the case nationally, with the majority of four-year institutions showing a decrease and community college enrollments being down nearly 10 percent nationally -- and it was reported this week that enrollment in Maine's community colleges are [down roughly 8 percent this fall](#). UMS is among just four percent of institutions nation-wide that have experienced either flat or increased enrollments this fall.

Though there is some positive news, our first-year in-state full-time undergraduate count is concerning. While enrollments were trending ahead of projections before the onslaught of the pandemic, a significant percentage of students have deferred to a later start date. Enrollment for the first-time full-time in-state student population is down 12 percent when deferrals are considered (though the number drops to 3 percent if deferrals aren't considered).

More concerning is the early data and trends for applications for Fall '21 enrollment among Maine high school seniors.

The pandemic's disruptions that began last spring have upended the traditional college search and application process. Our partners at the Finance Authority of Maine report that the number of Free Applications for Federal Student Aid -- known as the "FAFSA" form, which indicates a future college student's desire to seek federal aid to matriculate at an institution of higher education -- are down 12 percent this fall, and our own count of applications for admission to a UMS university for Fall '21 are down significantly at this point compared to previous years.

College fairs have been canceled or moved on-line and the campus tours and high school visits our admissions counselors use to engage prospective students have been severely limited or

rendered completely unavailable. There are new demands on the limited resources our local schools have to support students with their career and post-secondary planning.

The demographic and workforce challenges confronting our state will be even worse if the pandemic delays or prevents qualified students from pursuing a post-secondary education. We are moving quickly and decisively to engage our local schools, students, and their families with an expedited path to college admission and financial aid awards.

But first we need to address a practice that for too long has put us behind the competition.

Our universities have traditionally started packaging financial aid for new students in March and April. Our review of practices by private and other public universities shows that they determined their offers of aid as early as November and December, putting us months behind in terms of engaging admitted students with the offers of financial assistance that make pursuing college a possibility for nearly three-quarters of our students.

Our spring timeline for offering and confirming aid leaves our universities at a competitive disadvantage and deprives Maine students and their families of the opportunity to make an early, financially-informed comparison among multiple offers of admission. At the urging of Jared Cash, the Vice President of Enrollment Management and Marketing at USM, I tasked Dan Demeritt with leading a working group of financial aid and enrollment management staff and leaders to come up with a plan to expedite our financial aid offers. In just over a week, the group has already developed draft consensus criteria that will allow our financial aid offices to begin packaging aid to admitted students as early as December 1.

With that barrier to responsiveness removed, our admissions teams will be working together and with local schools to create a faster and easier pathway into affordable public higher education for Maine students. Starting in December the [UMS Maine Values You](#) campaign will host and promote a series of virtual, on-the-spot acceptance events featuring all of our universities and the Finance Authority of Maine. We will reach every Maine high school with events that offer students a first-ever opportunity to receive admission decisions from all of our institutions simultaneously, complete the FAFSA form, and include a commitment that financial aid offers from the schools they want to attend are on the way.

As you can see here, we will continue to prudently manage our operations through the pandemic, and we have good cause for optimism that we will make it through the fall as planned.

And we must relentlessly attack the status quo when it's apparent that not doing so puts our universities at a competitive disadvantage.

I look forward to seeing you for our Committee and Board meetings this coming week.

Regards,
Dan