

Week of September 28

Trustees,

With the Maine foliage bursting into color around us, I hope your weekend included time outside as fall marches forward.

In the normal course, I've used these messages to reflect on the week just passed across the System. From that vantage point, I'll start with our virtual Board meeting last Monday, where we heard from a number of our former faculty and employees during citizen comment about concerns they have about upcoming changes to how the System funds its supplemental retiree health benefit offering.

What we heard loudly and clearly was that we need to communicate and support our retirees better through this transition. Board members were right to ask that our communications display empathy for the concerns shared, and that we demonstrate a "leave no retiree behind" approach to supporting them.

By day's end following the Board meeting, my office had received a letter of concern signed by a number of Maine legislators too. As a demonstration of my commitment to our retirees, as well as to transparency and responsiveness (and I should note too with the help of a number of System staff who gave their full and immediate attention to the effort), I responded in writing to the legislators' concerns within 48 hours.

I hope you'll observe from my letter that, although our supplemental retiree health care benefits are not a simple matter, the end result of this initiative will be significant savings for the System by moving from an evermore-costly and rigid group plan covering our small cohort of retirees to a funded Health Reimbursement Account that will give our retirees flexibility and choice among numerous plans on the national Medicare exchange that offer far more benefits at the same or lower costs. That's not to say the anxieties and concerns our retirees have expressed have no merit. Our support and communication to them needs to immediately improve. To that end, we are finalizing over this weekend a set of "Frequently Asked Questions," or "FAQs," to provide complete information to the questions and concerns most often shared with us thus far. We expect to mail the FAQs to our retirees by day's end tomorrow, and we'll share them with you as well so that you are prepared to answer any questions posed directly to you with the same information that our dedicated Human Resources staff is providing as well.

We will get this right. Our retirees committed their careers to us, and we will honor this commitment back to them now.

We worked through a full meeting agenda on Monday, of course, that included grants of tenure, changes to Board policy, approval of 6 academic program proposals, and a unified accreditation update. Each and every one of these actions is important, and I appreciate how seriously you

take your fiduciary responsibility in providing governance oversight for Maine's public university system with these actions and initiatives.

In the same vein, I take seriously my charge to continue moving UMS forward, transforming the way we organize ourselves in our work to meet our teaching, research, and public service mission in Maine. To that end, I shared two memos with our Presidents this week that call for:

- recommendations for academic program approval policy changes to ensure that any new academic program proposal considers the resources across the entire System in proposing how to offer our programs in the most efficient, affordable, and market-relevant manner possible; and

- concept papers, by November 6, from our Presidents on whether and, if so, how we might reimagine our academic structure and operation to take full advantage of the opportunities made possible by unified accreditation.

To use the obvious cliché, outside-the-box thinking is what we're looking for in this newly-charged work. We did not work to achieve unified accreditation to maintain the status quo, and I will be looking to our presidents, their provosts, and our faculty to provide substantial leadership in this necessary and important evolution.

A few other items of note from the week.

A number of System staff did important work on Early College matters. Kay Kimball, who began her retirement this week with your well-deserved recognition, worked literally to the end, meeting with UMS Early College Executive Director, Amy Hubbard, and EC campus leaders to begin the process of developing a system-wide strategic plan that would include input from various stakeholders, in an effort to create a shared program vision and goals. Meantime, Ryan Low, Samantha Warren, and Amy Hubbard met with DOE Commissioner and UMS Trustee Pender Makin and staff to strategize about what steps might need to be taken to adjust early college programming to meet current budget implications.

At week's end, I was honored to give one of several virtual welcomes to kick off UMaine's [2020 Student Symposium](#), an annual event that celebrates undergraduate and graduate student research and creative work. Students from a variety of disciplines presented their achievements with posters, oral talks and exhibits, and President Ferrini-Mundy introduced an inspirational keynote speech by Retired United States Army Staff Sergeant Travis Mills, a motivational speaker who, as a member of the 82 Airborne in Afghanistan in 2012, was critically injured by an IED (improvised explosive device) while on patrol, losing portions of both legs and both arms.

I should note too that our [UMS Scientific Advisory Board \(SAB\)](#) lead scientist Melissa Maginnis, an Associate Professor of Microbiology, helped to organize the Symposium in her role as Associate Director of the Center for Undergraduate Research at UMaine. Professor Maginnis led a discussion at the Symposium on the actual science behind the COVID-19 coronavirus,

and she and her SAB colleagues continue to provide critically important service and leadership to guide our ongoing pandemic operations. We owe them all our thanks for their important service to our System and its communities.

Just as the UMaine Student Symposium was virtual, so too are other services we're providing through the pandemic to support our students. Another example comes through our partnership with Education Design Labs, through which UMS students will have access to a virtual Career Fair sponsored by EDL that includes employers across the country.

Finally, maintaining our complete transparency in how we are staying together through the fall thus far, we [reported this weekend](#) that we are safely monitoring five active cases of COVID-19 in our universities. We continue our [Phase 3 random sample testing](#) and [additional amplified testing](#) to address localized virus concerns. We have no greater responsibility than preserving the public health and safety of our universities and their surrounding communities.

These and other examples demonstrate our dual commitment to maintaining our safe operations as we serve our students and Maine through the fall.

As always, thank you for your commitment to serving Maine's public universities, and best wishes for a productive week ahead.

Regards,  
Dan