

Week of September 7

Trustees,

We've completed two weeks of classes now -- two weeks that thus far confirm that our months of Safe Return planning were not in vain.

As I've repeatedly acknowledged to you, that's not to say we can let our guard down. To the contrary, with UMS Chief General Services Officer Chip Gavin continuing to lead the System's Emergency Operations Center (EOC) and coordinate our university-based Incident Command/EOC structure, we monitor more than 20 different metrics and public health data points on a daily basis to inform our planning and decision-making about ongoing testing, adjustments to our health and safety strategies, and the relative safety and risk of continuing the modified in-person teaching, learning, and working underway. Just this week, we announced the conclusion of two rounds of asymptomatic testing for returning out-of-state and residential students and special populations -- more than 14,000 tests in all, through which we identified and safely isolated or quarantined 13 individuals with positive COVID tests. As of yesterday, only three individuals remained in isolation.

We continue to be fortunate in Maine. While the highly-publicized Millinocket wedding outbreak and spread from there merits our continued attention and caution, and is an important reminder of the virus's stealthy transmissibility, Maine's overall experience with limiting and containing the virus mirrors our own experience to date. While we have some cases, to the best of our knowledge and ability to identify and track them, we've been able to contain them so far and have not experienced the kind of campus outbreaks [reported widely elsewhere around the country](#).

To maintain our vigilance, [we announced Thursday](#) that we will begin several rounds of required random sample testing tomorrow. Each testing round will include 2,000 tests occurring over a period of approximately ten days. The number of tests are apportioned to UMS universities based on their percentage of the approximately 22,000 students, faculty, and staff participating in some form of on-campus activity in the Fall 2020 semester. The final round of the asymptomatic testing is expected to conclude the week before the Thanksgiving-break transition to remote instruction. With our Scientific Advisory Board and UMaine statisticians, we will use results from this testing to model virus prevalence rates across the System, and, considering the additional local and state data and metrics we continue to track, adjust our health and safety strategies as necessary.

Finally, for now, acknowledging both the current concerns in York County and the possibility of additional similar localized outbreaks going forward, we've developed an amplified testing strategy to target additional testing where localized data suggests higher risk for one part of our System than may be true elsewhere. Here, considering Maine CDC data showing that the York County positivity rate is approximately four times the state average, with new cases-per-capita exceeding other regions of the state, we will deploy additional asymptomatic screening and enhance our outreach, support, and safety messaging for students and employees at our university facilities in that region, which includes the University of Southern Maine's campuses in Gorham and Portland, the University of Maine at Augusta's Saco center, and the University of Maine's extension office in Springvale.

With the Board's Academic and Student Affairs Committee meeting tomorrow, many of us will turn attention back to our more traditional academic strategy, planning, and work. Tomorrow's ASA agenda includes six academic program proposals advanced by four of our universities. While our nascent work to date and the longer term goals of unified accreditation need not stand in the way of any UMS university bringing forward new academic programs that can be properly resourced to meet student demand and state needs, our academic program approval process going forward must be infused with the principles of unified accreditation. That is, any university seeking to offer a new program or modify or expand an existing program must consider whether the resources to do so already exist at another System university and how resource sharing and collaboration with any one or more of our other System universities can enhance program depth, quality, efficiency, and access to better serve our students and state.

These principles are behind the new effort, led by Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs Robert Placido and in coordination with university-level academic program leaders, to develop Statewide Strategic Program Plans, two of which you'll hear about at the ASA meeting tomorrow (for UMS nursing and education programs). The principles seem simple and straightforward, and an obvious outcome for unified accreditation. But realizing them in the near and longer term will require an ongoing commitment from our Presidents and university academic leaders to embrace the true collaboration embodied in unified accreditation, and as Chancellor my work is focused on ensuring we meet these goals together.

Our unified accreditation work also includes ongoing planning and interaction with the New England Commission of Higher Education (NECHE), which is planning for a review visit to UMS next spring, followed by a comprehensive evaluation in Fall 2022 to consider the Self Study report we will prepare over the next 18-20 months of how our universities are operating together with unified accreditation. We're in the process now of structuring the working, planning, and leadership groups that will carry on this work, and I'll report to you on how we will manage this significant initiative when our staffing and management plan is finalized.

I'll close this morning's weekend update with a reminder that we will be prepared to discuss our ongoing work with the Harold Alfond Foundation in greater detail in executive session at the upcoming Board meeting in two weeks. The prospect of transformative new investments by the Alfond Foundation in the University of Maine System is proof that we can and will be the most important driver of educational, civic, economic, and research progress in the state in the years to come.

Best wishes for a healthy and productive week.

Regards,
Dan