

Week of February 8

Trustees -

I hope this Valentine's Day and Presidents' Day weekend finds you home safe and healthy with loved ones.

I'm relieved to start my weekend message by noting that our successful pandemic operations through this past week's third week of the Spring Semester do not require me to report news of any heightened concern.

Our COVID testing continues to expand and, thanks to incredibly hard work by our university testing and System IT leaders, is now conducted across the System [far more smoothly](#) than in previous weeks. Over just the first half of February, we've conducted more tests -- [nearly 11,400](#) -- than in any previous month as a whole, and by the end of the month, if things continue to go smoothly, may nearly triple that total. As of earlier today, we've recorded only 47 positive results in our February testing thus far, a positivity rate of less than one-half of one percent. We're tracking 50 UMS community members with active cases across the System (which includes positive results members of our community have reported outside of our own testing), 24 of whom are residential students. Our capacity to manage the necessary isolation for COVID-positive UMS community members and quarantine for their close contacts remains strong, and our System and university leaders, faculty, and staff involved in testing, continued emergency-oriented operations, facilities management, and student care and support all continue to perform above and beyond the call of duty.

As we all continue to bear the weight of the pandemic and our necessary expanded testing together, we've sometimes reached for levity. With so many of us now reporting weekly to our testing stations to produce to required amount of saliva, some of our university testing leaders have been brainstorming creative ways to encourage saliva production, with UMaine testing leaders considering piping in the smell of fried bacon or fresh popcorn and USM testing leaders considering opening jars of pickles. I applaud their innovative thinking -- though want to be clear these ideas haven't been put into practice.

The above isn't to say we don't continue to confront the challenges of trying to carry on our academic and intercollegiate athletic operations through the pandemic. The University of Maine Men's Basketball team, after several weeks of suspended practices and competition due to COVID exposures, [decided on its own this week](#) to opt out of the remainder of its competitive season, while the womens' basketball and ice hockey teams [were able to resume competition](#). And looking ahead, to give our students and their families and friends as much notice as possible, our universities have announced that they do not expect to be able to hold traditional in-person commencement ceremonies in early May.

I'd like to briefly speak to that initial decision, as it has caused understandable disappointment among our students, which has been registered publicly by [state-wide](#) and [student](#) media

outlets and even inspired a [Change.org petition](#) that's generated more than 1,500 online signatures in support of in-person commencement exercises at UMaine. We all want the pandemic to end -- we all want to resume traditional commencement ceremonies too! But our simple reality continues to be that the pandemic is still with us, and more to the point, so is our responsibility to protect public health and follow Maine civil directives on social distancing, face coverings, and group gathering limitations. With all of that in mind, we cannot responsibly plan large in-person events knowing that may induce families to make travel arrangements to attend events that we cannot ensure, at this point, would be lawful or safe to hold in early May.

Still, I should be clear: Although we cannot responsibly commit to and plan the traditional large in-person gatherings of commencements past, I expect that, in the coming weeks, our presidents and academic leaders will engage their students to determine whether smaller ceremonies can be planned that meaningfully commemorate the Class of 2021's resilient accomplishments while maintaining appropriate public health and safety amidst the uncertainties of the pandemic.

On Friday of this week, I hosted a Zoom meeting of our labor union partners and their bargaining teams along with my own senior team and the collective bargaining leadership team we described for you during our labor update at your January 25, 2021 meeting. The purpose of our meeting was to define what we believe to be the common ground on which we stand headed into our upcoming labor negotiations with our six employee bargaining units. The centerpiece of that common ground is our current financial situation, exacerbated by the pandemic's far-reaching impact of course, and Vice Chancellor for Finance and Administration Ryan Low reviewed the current state budget picture (with flat-funding likely to be our best-case scenario), our own challenged budget progress for FY21 and planning for FY22, and how we intend to use federal relief dollars to fill as many of the pandemic's financial gaps as possible. At the same time, in my own comments to our labor partners, I asked that, as we recover from the pandemic in the months and years ahead, we look for opportunities in our collective bargaining to build into our labor contracts the flexibility that we've used through the pandemic in the classroom and workplace so we can work more efficiently as our resources become more constrained. I challenged our labor units to find common ground with us that opens the door to more collaboration and resource-sharing between our universities, because, as I told them, it's not too much to say that some of our smaller universities' survivals may depend on it.

I spoke as well about unified accreditation. As I've expressed to you many times now, with NECHE's confirmation of unified accreditation last July, we've broken down the most significant barrier to our universities working together to share limited resources and offer cutting edge academic programs between them. In our labor partner meeting, I challenged our AFUM faculty partners to ensure that the AFUM contract is forward-looking and open to the opportunities that unified accreditation provides. At its best, unified accreditation unlocks creativity and innovation for our faculty to reach across university boundaries to find new program and research partners to better serve our students and the State of Maine. But we need to be realistic too -- unified accreditation also gives us options and opportunities to save under-resourced programs at our smaller universities, and avoid program and faculty retrenchments, by finding new ways to offer

stronger programs collaboratively between our universities -- and make them accessible to our students no matter where they are.

I'd like to close this week on that final point of student access.

While we are hard at work with the process of unified accreditation now -- preparing a report and schedule for NECHE's May 11-12, 2021 virtual visit to review our unified accreditation progress and populating self study teams from across the System to write a comprehensive assessment by next year of how we are meeting [NECHE's accreditation standards](#) as a unified System -- I think we need a clear stake in the ground for what we intend to do with unified accreditation to work together more efficiently to serve our students and state. It was with this in mind that I called on our Presidents this week, at our regularly monthly Presidents' Council meeting with my senior System staff, to achieve the goal of a common unified academic catalog across the System by Fall 2022. I can think of no greater way to demonstrate that our resolve to use unified accreditation to better serve our students -- to truly make all of our life-changing degree and credential programs accessible to qualified students no matter where they may matriculate in our System -- is both real and meaningful.

That's not to say the work will be easy. If anything, to paraphrase President John F. Kennedy speaking to a Rice University gathering in September 1962, we undertake this work not because it will be easy, but because it will be hard -- because this goal will serve to organize and measure the best of our energies and skills, because this challenge is one we must be willing to accept, one we cannot postpone, and one which we intend to achieve.

But building a unified, System-wide academic catalog won't be the only work necessary. Our faculty across the System, including through our unified accreditation Faculty Governance Council, and our university and System academic leaders will need to determine curricular and program details and the conditions on which students from across the System will access courses throughout the System. But I am setting us on this path now because I believe it represents the best of what we can achieve with unified accreditation, and I believe we cannot miss this opportunity to take bold strides forward.

I'm confident we can do it, and I'm confident it will better serve our students and state. That's enough for me to launch us on this path, and I'm pleased to report that our Presidents are supportive of the effort too.

Best wishes for a healthy and productive week ahead.

Regards,
Dan