

Week of January 4, 2021

Trustees -

I feel compelled to start by briefly acknowledging the national trauma we shared this past week. We watched our United States Capitol attacked by a lawless mob intent on disrupting or stopping altogether one of our country's most sacred democratic and constitutional processes. Before this past November's election, these largely ceremonial events have barely garnered attention in nearly 150 years because Americans perhaps take for granted that presidential power should peacefully transfer from one citizen to another following a lawful election and our states' certification of their votes.

In our twice-weekly Zoom meeting of university and System leaders to stay coordinated in our academic and operational planning through the pandemic, a strong feeling emerged Thursday that we should speak to the perilous moment, and in doing so make clear the intersection of our mission with the need for an educated individual's civic engagement in our democracy and society. Our Presidents agreed, and we therefore issued a single [statement](#) to speak for the System as a whole and all of its universities, recommitting ourselves and our universities to meeting that mission. (I note that Maine Law Dean Leigh Saufley issued a separate statement for the law school, which the country's law school deans were encouraged to do given their special role in preparing lawyers to respect the rule of law and its foundational place in American democratic society. Dean Saufley's statement had our full support as well.)

Following a well-deserved holiday break, during which several among us continued their hard work to prepare for the January 25 start of the Spring 2021 semester, we returned this week with several Board committee meetings that previewed or reported on a number of important issues.

Trustees who were able to attend this past Monday's Academic and Student Affairs Board committee meeting will recall a presentation by Rosa Redonnett, our Associate Vice Chancellor for Student Success and Credential Attainment, and Erin Doyle Lastowka, a Strategic Leader for Student Success at EAB, which has helped our universities roll out, over the last two years, the EAB Navigate tool. As you would have noted from the presentation materials, the Navigate tool is EAB's Student Success Management System, an enterprise-level technology that links academic administrators, advisors, deans, faculty, other staff, and students in a Coordinated Care Network designed to help us proactively manage student success and thereby make a meaningful impact on student persistence and retention. As Rosa and Erin noted, taking advantage of Navigate's early alerts and more direct student engagement and support tools pays off, with several of our universities showing material gains in fall-to-spring and spring-to-the-next fall persistence/retention.

In addition to the EAB Navigate deployment and use, we [reported over the holidays](#) the continued apparent success of our Make the Grade initiative, the opportunity (started last year) for students to retake at no cost a course they failed as long as they commit to targeted advising

and student support. To be sure, many factors have contributed to our recent improvements in retention: intrusive student advising, increased student support, billing modifications, the dedication and innovation of faculty and staff, and the student success focus of our pandemic response have all played a role. Beyond the obvious importance to keeping our students on track to life-changing credentials, there is real bottom-line impact as well. Increasing our retention overall by just one percent has a \$1.4 million revenue impact, which compounds to \$7 million over five years for every additional year we can maintain the improved retention.

Later in the week, at the Board's Facilities, Finance, and Technology committee meeting, attending Trustees heard a brief report from University of Maine President Joan Ferrini-Mundy, chair of our [recently formed](#) UMS Vaccine Planning and Partnership Task Force, which includes UMS Chief General Services Officer Chip Gavin, UMS Chief of Staff and General Counsel Jim Thelen, and UMS Executive Director of Public Affairs Dan Demeritt. The task force is charged with expanding and facilitating the use of university resources to assist with vaccine distribution in Maine (as our campuses could serve as points of distribution), recommending needed changes to UMS immunization requirements, and contributing to student and public awareness about the efficacy and safety of FDA-approved vaccines.

More to the point, as you might imagine, there is great interest in our communities -- not only among our faculty, staff, and students, but among the civic leaders where our universities are based -- in when we can expect university populations to be eligible to receive vaccination. With reports indicating that Phase 1B of the State of Maine's vaccination plan could begin as early as February, and with a listing of "teachers, police officers, grocery store clerks, and postal workers among others" as frontline essential workers to be vaccinated in that phase, we've gotten questions about whether university employees, including faculty teaching in face-to-face settings, are part of this population of frontline essential workers. Similarly, we are being asked whether traditional-age higher education students -- our estimates are that there could be as many as 16,000 of these individuals across UMS in Maine this spring, with many living in the congregate setting of our residence halls -- are not scheduled to be vaccinated until Phase 3 of Maine's vaccination plan as previously understood, or are now eligible for earlier vaccination. President Ferrini-Mundy has begun a dialogue on these and other issues with State of Maine Commissioner of Health and Human Services, Jeanne Lambrew, and our ongoing work on this front will continue to be in close concert with state health officials.

Coupled with that work will be our ongoing COVID testing, which will necessarily be significantly more robust than our Fall 2020 semester testing plan. The pandemic's ongoing spread requires as much for us to safely manage the levels of in-person/on-campus instruction, research, and work this spring that we safely managed this past fall. As I [informed the UMS community on Friday](#), we will be requiring two rounds of return-to-campus testing for out-of-state and residential students and other special on-campus populations to ensure we do not introduce COVID to our university communities. This will also ensure our ability to conduct contact tracing and appropriately support any people who require isolation or quarantine before they can safely engage in-person with our university communities.

We will soon publicly announce a new COVID testing contract and partnership with Shield T3, an independent company formed to provide mobile COVID testing laboratory services using a fast-response saliva test developed by University of Illinois researchers. We expect to have the Shield T3 mobile testing laboratory on site in Maine this month and in use early in the semester, which will allow UMS staff and our T3 testing partner to more quickly process our own COVID saliva test results from all of our universities, in much higher numbers and at up to less than a quarter of our fall per-test cost. Thanks to additional resources authorized by Governor Mills, we will be in a position to test and report results promptly for every member of our on-campus communities every week – a testing schedule that we believe is critical to maximizing everyone’s safety while maintaining our academic operations through the current state of the pandemic. Researchers and public health officials agree that the quick turnaround time for test results is a key in curbing the virus, allowing isolation early enough to limit spread of the infection as well as narrowing down past exposure to allow more effective contact tracing. It also identifies and isolates people with asymptomatic cases more quickly, who would otherwise spread the virus unknowingly.

As I pledged to our university communities, there are several factors that I continue to consider to be *absolutes* in our planning and decision-making:

-- We will continue to respect and follow State of Maine civil emergency and public health guidance.

-- We will closely monitor the incidence of COVID in and around our communities, as well as our own capacity, resources, and staffing to safely manage it.

-- We will always make the health or safety of every member of our university community, as well as the communities in which we teach, learn, work, research, and serve, our top priority.

I'll close with important news that you may have seen by now regarding Governor Mills's proposed FY21 supplemental budget and FY22-23 biennial budget for the state. I'm happy and relieved to note that, despite early projections that we could possibly face significant E&G reductions of up to ten percent -- as much as \$23 million annually -- Governor Mills proposed keeping all UMS lines funded at pre-curtaiment levels. If enacted as proposed, this budget would result in a modest E&G increase over the amounts we've been using for our own FY22 internal budget planning. The budget proposals also include two other important initiatives -- a \$2.5 million increase in Early College funding included in the FY21 Supplemental Budget, as well as statutory language that would provide some much-needed relief to the System's borrowing cap by not including debt for which the State of Maine or a third party is obligated to pay the debt service.

It bears mention, of course, that these are still just proposals. They will need to go through months of hearings and deliberations before we will have the certainty of enactment. But it is certainly a positive start to the budget season, and I've [publicly stated my gratitude](#) to Governor Mills and her team for making higher education funding stability a priority in her budgets.

I remain grateful to lead this important work and am proud of the effort and contributions of every UMS community member who makes it possible.

Regards,  
Dan