

Week of February 22

Trustees,

It was a notable week for me personally. My wife Cathy and I received our first COVID-19 vaccines on Friday, and we met our third grandchild -- a granddaughter, Claire Marie Malloy, born Monday night -- this week as well. Both are incredible sources of optimism for us.

I find plenty of reasons for optimism across our universities as well -- even amidst all of the pandemic-related, financial, and cultural challenges we face together as a System.

First, a brief update on where things stand with COVID on our campuses.

Friday marked the end of week 5 of the January 25-May 8 Spring 2021 semester. UMS reported 29 known current COVID cases as of Friday, 11 of them among our residential student population. Roughly 95 percent of our quarantine and isolation spaces are currently available across the System. Our COVID testing leaders and staff, as well as our student care and support teams, continue to perform above and beyond the call of duty. With just 100 positive results among the 33,100 COVID tests we administered over the course of the month -- a positivity rate of under one-third of one percent -- it's apparent that the communal resilience and discipline of our university communities that has kept us safe together since we returned to our campuses last fall remains as robust as ever. Indeed, the most recent UMS 14-day positivity rate was just 0.25 percent as of February 25, representing 36 positive results among 14,222 tests during that two-week period. Considering that the nation's positivity rate was recently estimated at 4.8 percent, with Maine's most recent 7-day positivity rate at approximately 1.8 percent, it's not hyperbole to say that our university communities are, quite literally, among the safest places to be in the nation through the pandemic.

While we remain vigilant, and while science and the public health needs of our communities continue to be the guideposts for our decision-making, I want to pause and say again how grateful I am for everyone's commitment to our pandemic needs and response.

We can take pride in the innovation of our response as well. As I reported in my Week of January 11 message, the UMaine Collins Center for the Arts ticketing office was selected as an [Innovation of the Year award finalist](#) by Paciolan, the university's ticketing provider. The Paciolan citation invited the public to vote to recognize among its clients the best "Pandemic Pivot" of 2020 with an inspiring and creative innovation or program in response to the pandemic. As I told you then, at UMaine, with no large Collins Center events requiring ticketing services, Center Director Danny Williams repurposed his ticket staff and logistical resources to use its ticketing database to issue tickets to students for COVID testing. With testing done on a random basis last fall, those students who were randomly selected by the university for COVID testing were assigned a 'seat' and sent a mobile ticket with their testing date/time. University testing leaders were able to use their ticketing access control systems to scan students as they entered

the testing facility, and from that reports were developed that allowed UMaine testing officials to track those who attended and easily communicate to those who needed to be rescheduled.

UMaine President Joan Ferrini-Mundy and I are pleased to report now that UMaine's Collins Center for the Arts ticketing office and staff were [announced](#) as the recipient of Paciolan's Innovation of the Year award. Credit goes to Doug Meswarb, UMaine's manager of ticket operations, and the dozens of UMainers who supported and managed the logistics of repurposing the ticketing system to deliver mobile tickets with testing dates and times and report on testing attendance via scanned tickets. Doug's work is representative of what's happening not just at UMaine, but across the System, and it's among the reasons why all of our universities have been able to continue academic operations through the pandemic.

I alerted our university presidents this week to a request I received from Maine Community College System President Dave Daigler to further expand our efforts to grow the number of nurses in Maine. Our leading healthcare providers continue to report critical nursing shortages, requiring us to do everything possible to further grow our nursing enrollments. Given the requests, I wanted you to be aware of efforts already underway across our System.

Many of you will recall that we pledged to use as much as \$12 million from the \$49 million general obligation bond passed by Maine voters in 2018 to expand our nursing program capacity around the state. In the Maine University Nursing Workforce Plan we developed then -- attached for your context and reference -- we committed to working to double the capacity and throughput of our nursing programs through a combination of initiatives, including by expanding access to pre-licensure nursing education in high-need regions; providing free nursing education (tuition and mandatory fees covered) for first degree, pre-licensure Maine nursing students with the greatest financial need; and creating new pathways and opportunities to explore and advance Maine healthcare careers for Maine high school students, career-transitioning working adults, and Maine healthcare professionals.

As a result of new nursing lab facilities and partnerships between our universities -- for example, expanded facilities and technologies at UMPI, UMA, and USM; the growth of UMFK's nursing program offered at UMPI; new pipelines for RN-to-BSN to Master of Science programs in Nursing Education or Nursing Administration and Leadership from UMFK to USM; and access to UMA's nursing programs to residential students at UMF -- as well as Early College nursing pathways and the expansion of online program opportunities (see more on that attached as well), we can report overall growth in nursing enrollment of 12 percent over the last five years.

More is needed. We already know how committed the UMS nursing community is, as more than 250 of our nursing faculty and students have [thrown themselves into the pandemic fight](#) by volunteering thousands of hours of service to ensure Mainers can get COVID vaccines. But an ongoing challenge for our UMS Schools of Nursing to further expand is the continuing struggle to fill vacant faculty positions while simultaneously trying to expand program enrollments and also balance the confines of clinical placements. The success and further expansion of our Master of Science programs in Nursing Education or Nursing Administration and Leadership

and our Doctor of Nurse Practice program will be crucial to expanding our stable of faculty nurse educators to, in turn, further grow our nursing enrollments. More partnerships and collaboration with our high schools, community college, and health care providers will be key to expanding the academic pipeline and pathway to nursing careers in Maine.

Online program access will be vital to the success of these efforts, not just to the graduate programs I mention above, but more broadly across the state as well. To that end, I'm happy to report that UMS learned this week that it will be awarded \$1 million in funding from the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Distance Learning and Telemedicine initiative. The UMS proposal, entitled *21st Century Connections: Meeting Higher Education, Healthcare and Workforce Challenges in Rural Maine*, proposes funding to substantially upgrade classroom technology at all seven UMS campuses, including the University of Maine School of Law.

University of Maine School of Law Dean Leigh Saufley recently reminded us of the view that Maine does best when its rural communities thrive. This grant presents the opportunity for UMS to make just such an impact. The funding will help our universities expand their engagement with rural communities, better support rural students, and expand access to a wide-range of academic programs, certificates and credentials that were previously tethered to Maine's urban population centers in greater Portland and Bangor.

In addition to delivering academic and professional programming, the grant award presents an opportunity to greatly expand access to the considerable expertise of UMS faculty and staff in areas such as clinical education and training, telemedicine and public health administration and policy. Through programming, outreach to individual practitioners, and partnerships with Penobscot Community Health Center and Northern Light Health, with more than 40 primary care locations in many of Maine's most rural counties, UMS will be able to connect its resources to front-line healthcare workers.

Most notable about this work is that it will include all seven UMS universities (including the University of Maine School of Law and the University of Maine Graduate and Professional Center's consortium of graduate law, public policy and health, and business programs), Penobscot Community Health Center and Northern Light Health. It will link hubs in Portland and Bangor with end-users in rural Aroostook, Washington, Hancock, Piscataquis, Oxford, Somerset and Franklin counties, among others. More importantly, it creates a vibrant, collaborative, interactive network of academics, clinicians, employers, policymakers and learners working together to raise educational attainment, improve public health policy and clinical training, expand access to justice, support workforce development and revitalize rural communities.

It was a busy week from a Trustee perspective too, with Trustee approval Wednesday for the USM Portland Commons and Student Success Center capital projects to finally move forward, new Trustee confirmations late Thursday, and a first-read preview of university FY22 budget proposals that will come before the Board's Finance, Facilities, and Technology Committee on March 26.

As I alluded to in my opening above, I believe we work best when we embrace the optimism that rightly comes from the opportunities we have to innovate and better serve Maine and its learners and citizens, while prudently acknowledging the challenges of that work through an ongoing pandemic and the heavy weight of our fiscal constraints. I'm scheduling spring visits now to each of our universities over the next two months, and we'll be starting labor negotiations with our union partners over that time too. In the coming weeks, I'll be speaking more in these messages to the strategic vision and themes that I expect to share with our university communities through that work.

Best wishes for a good week ahead.

Thanks,  
Dan