

Week of April 12

Trustees -

Let me first acknowledge and report that the University of Maine has issued a series of alerts over the last 12 hours or so about a social media threat being investigated by UMaine's police department and other local, state, and federal law enforcement. The subject is a New Hampshire resident who does not appear to have any direct connection to UMaine. President Ferrini-Mundy and I will continue to monitor the situation and report any developments to you as appropriate.

The past week was busy with new Trustee orientation this past Monday, my spring campus visit to Farmington on Wednesday, and our diligent, ever-present work to manage our pandemic operations and encourage everyone in our university communities who can to get vaccinated as soon as possible. We also look ahead now to the Board's April 22 executive session to discuss the overall framework and goals we will follow in developing our unified accreditation self study report. Doing so will position us for the Fall 2022 comprehensive evaluation of the University of Maine System under unified accreditation and the longer range planning we can do once NECHE has confirmed the quality of our compliance with institutional accreditation standards as a unified system of universities working together in the best interest of our students and state.

Before turning to academic and governance matters, as [news grows](#) of COVID case increases among younger populations in Maine, I can report that, as of this weekend, we're carefully monitoring an increase in positive COVID tests among students at the University of Maine, while there is very little known incidence of COVID elsewhere in the System. Most new cases are among students, split between residential (on campus) and non-residential (off campus) students. UMaine's isolation and quarantine space capacity to deal with the new cases remains strong, and we are able to manage the care and comfort of impacted students as well. UMaine is stepping up its engagement with student government, student life, the Greek student community, and off-campus apartment residents to stress the importance of fighting pandemic fatigue and maintaining discipline and commitment to the basic public health protocols that continue to keep us safe together -- masking, social distancing, and good hygiene practices.

While you may see news that some colleges have started to announce that they will require students to be vaccinated for this coming fall, including [announcements](#) this week from Bowdoin College and the Maine Community College System, we are maintaining our focus on [encouraging voluntary vaccination](#) by the end of this semester while vaccines continue to be administered based on federal emergency use authorization only.

Beyond the pandemic, we look ahead to the incoming classes we can now reasonably begin to expect for the fall. Not surprisingly, COVID-19 upended the traditional college search process and placed unprecedented demands on local educators and parents. Early application activity at our universities was down more than 15 percent last fall. We responded by engaging with the

Finance Authority of Maine, the Maine Department of Education, and local education partners to develop an expedited, pandemic pathway to post-secondary education for Maine students.

Perhaps the most significant element of our work included expediting the processing of applications and financial aid awards. Last October, I charged a working group on Financial Aid to reach consensus on issuing financial aid awards by December 1, 2020, months ahead of what had been our traditional practices. As a result of this work, UMPI issued its first aid offer in early November and processed 117 student aid packages before January 1, 2021. UMaine began processing aid before Thanksgiving and sent nearly 3,000 financial aid offers to families by the end of 2020, two weeks before the first offer had been made in the prior admissions cycle. USM sent over 1,800 aid offers out by the end of January this year, compared to its first aid offer going out in February in the last cycle.

With months to go before the start of fall classes, it's of course too early yet to make predictions on enrollment levels and class sizes. Financial aid and enrollment opportunities continue to be available at all of our universities, where advisors will be working throughout the spring and summer to serve students and families. But our diligent work has clearly made a difference. While the overall number of applications we've received is still down slightly, our deposits and matriculations -- specific indications of a commitment to enroll this fall at one of our universities -- are up significantly. This gives us reason for hope that our enrollment will remain stable if not slightly improved through the pandemic's storm. If so, it will be in no small part due to our willingness to act more boldly, and sooner, than we have in years past to build our incoming classes.

In closing for this Patriots' Day weekend, I'll return to our work with the Board. My thanks first to new Trustees Katz, Dobson, Rotundo, and Neal for spending their day with us this past Monday for new Trustee orientation meetings with nearly two dozen System and university leaders. For my part of the meetings, which I shared with Vice Chancellors Jim Thelen (Strategic Initiatives) and Joan Ferrini-Mundy (Research and Innovation), we had a probing conversation about the meaning, impact, and opportunity of our unified accreditation and faculty buy-in with it. I expect we'll build fruitfully on these discussions with the full Board at your April 22 meeting this coming week. I hope our new Trustees found the remainder of the day as engaging as I did our first meeting together.

And finally, as we prepare for our time together this coming Thursday, I thought you might want to see the report we submitted to the New England Commission of Higher Education (NECHE) earlier this week. When UMS was granted unified accreditation for all of its universities last summer, NECHE asked that we submit a report on progress this spring in advance of a two-person visit in May to review our initial work together in our unified accreditation model. This report focuses, among other things, on how we're implementing the initial planning and work with unified accreditation, how our faculty leaders across the System are working to develop multi-university academic governance and program review processes, and how we'll engage with the U.S. Department of Education to manage federal financial aid and university data reporting. The report also provides updates on professional and program accreditation, general

education, assessment, and policy development. You'll see from a schedule of the two-day May visit provided here that all university, faculty, and System leaders will meet with the NECHE review team (via Zoom) to discuss our progress to date.

A larger effort is underway to plan and begin drafting the first self study for UMS with unified accreditation. As NECHE's own guidelines explain, because accreditation is a process of self-regulation, it requires that higher education institutions engage periodically in a comprehensive and candid self-study of their own strengths and weaknesses within the framework of the accreditation standards. A comprehensive effort to develop a written self study report is therefore at the heart of accreditation, fostering quality assurance for the public and state and federal regulators as well as institutional improvement through the rigorous self-analysis undertaken. The written self study report also provides a basis for the first comprehensive evaluation UMS will undergo next fall in accordance with its Standards for Accreditation.

Our work together this coming Thursday will help shape the framework we expect to follow in drafting the self study over the next year, so it comes at a good time. Our System and university leadership looks forward to a healthy dialog with Board members about it.

Best wishes for a productive and healthy week ahead.

Regards,
Dan