

Week of April 26

Trustees,

The week just ended was the last week of our Spring 2021 semester. It was busy, as they all are, and for me included a day spent at Maine Law with Dean Saufley, faculty, staff, students, and Maine Law Foundation leaders. With that visit, I've now completed my round of spring visits to every one of our campuses around the state. The week ahead will be busy too, as we'll be together for several of the Board's standing committee meetings, a reminder of your service and leadership for our students and State.

Now, many of our faculty and students are now preparing for a traditional exam period, or working to finish final projects or papers. Our university leaders are putting the finishing touches on commencement ceremonies with necessarily limited in-person elements and more virtual components than we wish were necessary. In that way, our commencements will mirror what our class and even work experiences have been through the whole of the pandemic-shaped 2020-2021 academic year -- limited in-person experiences, all socially distanced and masked, with hybrid remote connections to classmates and coworkers through the safety of a Zoom or related digital video link.

Since our teaching and learning, research, and service was so heavily influenced by the necessities of the COVID pandemic, let me start briefly and simply with some pandemic-related numbers.

In partnership with ConvenientMD and The Jackson Laboratory, we conducted more than 40,000 COVID tests to return to our campuses and stay safe together through the Fall 2020 semester. Our university testing leaders and student care and comfort teams safely managed 150 positive COVID cases through the end of 2020. With our university communities' discipline and commitment to our public health and safety protocols, we maintained a COVID test positivity rate of just one-third of one percent, far below the test positivity averages in the communities where our universities operate, in Maine, and in the nation (though of course we saw weekly fluctuations in that rate, as well as campus by campus).

With COVID surging around the country through the winter, we literally tripled our testing effort to return safely to our campuses at the end of this past January. We set up a mobile lab on the Orono campus in a new partnership with Shield T3, a testing services company using University of Illinois System research to provide highly accurate but low-cost saliva-based COVID PCR testing with results reporting typically in less than 24 hours. Since the end of January, we've asked our students, staff, and faculty who have in-person experiences on campus to test every week, resulting in nearly 122,000 additional COVID tests since that time, with nearly 10,000 tests in a single week at our peak. Through it all, with notable fluctuations by campus and by week, we maintained our overall one-third-of-one-percent positivity rate, leaving us with sufficient capacity, space, and resources to safely manage the roughly 450 new cases we did have.

To be sure, all of this came at great cost. Through the year, we've spent more than \$27 million to test our university communities, representing a sizable portion of the more than \$100 million in lost revenue and additional expenses we've tracked in working through the pandemic.

Though we were fortunate to recoup our fall testing and other COVID expenses from the State of Maine, operating safely through the ongoing COVID pandemic has been a heavy burden.

The advent of COVID vaccines gave us significant hope, of course, and with vaccine eligibility universal now among our adult populations, we've made [every effort to encourage members of our community to be vaccinated](#). With a decision by Maine public health authorities just this week that we could host vaccine clinics on campus for our students, staff, and faculty, we immediately [arranged a vaccine clinic](#) on campus at the University of Maine this past Wednesday in partnership with Penobscot Community Health Center and our own nursing students and faculty, and we have plans for [additional clinics](#) at Farmington, Fort Kent, and Presque Isle over the coming week. We marked the final day of classes this past Friday by [announcing](#) that fully vaccinated students, faculty and staff will be exempt from our asymptomatic COVID-19 testing going forward, while we will continue our weekly testing through the summer for all university community members participating in an on-campus experience who have not yet been fully vaccinated.

Even with the pandemic's shadow, late spring remains an inspirational time on our campuses.

On Wednesday, UMaine's Maine Day observance returned and the Machias campus launched its first. Both were a big success. In Orono, more than 500 volunteers were involved in over 40 service projects, followed by a grab-and-go lunch and activities on the campus Mall, all planned with health and safety protocols in mind. In Machias, students participated in a cleanup of the Outback Trail and Labyrinth, held an event to benefit a local animal shelter, and finished the day with a safe and socially distanced hot dog roast at the fire pits.

Over the past week and into the coming week, graduates who feel comfortable doing so have had (or will yet have) the opportunity to attend commencement stage walks, a socially distanced way for graduates to ceremonially cross the graduation stage. By May 4, UMaine will have completed 18 commencement stage walks with nearly 1,000 undergraduate and graduate students (as well as some 2020 alumni). Machias's in-person stage walks will be May 8. At UMF last weekend, 186 graduates gathered in groups at UMF's Dearborn Gym; groups of 10 were led through the Emery Arts Center to the sound of bagpipes and brought to the Nordica Auditorium, where President Serna handed out diplomas. The socially-distanced procession was recorded and will be aired during UMF's virtual commencement ceremony on May 8. UMF's ceremony will also have live elements, with UMF Professor Emeritus of English Daniel Gunn providing a speech for the class of 2021, and Creative Writing and English major and 2021 graduate Billie Rose Newby providing a student address.

UMA will feature a commencement address from U.S. Senator Angus King for its virtual commencement exercises. USM is making plans for its May 8th commencement too, which will

be broadcast on YouTube-hosted video and feature a keynote address by bestselling author and national anti-racism thought leader Dr. Ibram X. Kendi, as well as a student address by Human Biology major Grace Muheto of Portland. In the lead-up to commencement, USM has also profiled the accomplishments of a number of soon-to-be graduates, including:

[Jennifer Yazwinski](#) ('21), who had lost her job and was diagnosed with breast cancer two months before matriculating at USM in 2017. Today, she is cancer-free — and at USM's 2021 Virtual Commencement she will receive her Master's in Occupational Therapy.

[Raul Gierbolini](#) ('21), who will receive his Bachelor of Science in Athletic Training on May 8; at that point he'll already be six classes into a USM graduate degree in Public Health. Along the way, the native of Puerto Rico and NCAA-All Region wrestler started the Latin American Student Alliance at USM and organized a successful fundraising campaign to help the victims of Hurricane Maria, the deadly Category 5 storm that devastated Puerto Rico and the region in 2017.

[Mary Swanson](#) ('21), whose path to USM was a winding one. She dropped out of high school at 16 and joined the U.S. Marine Corps at 17. Mary got her high school diploma and took some community college classes as her military career spanned the United States and Japan. Along the way she had two children as well. This spring, Swanson, now 29, will be a USM graduate with a Bachelor of Science in Psychology, with plans to attend law school and one day become a judge.

USM is also celebrating the accomplishments this week of a recent grad, [Julia Gustafson](#) ('20), who left USM last year bound for Galway, Ireland with a prestigious Government of Ireland International Education Scholarship in hand. The 30-year-old from Falmouth has now earned an even more prestigious honor -- a Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation Cambridge Scholarship that will pay her tuition and expenses for the four years it will take her to earn a doctorate at the University of Cambridge. The scholarship is one of the world's most selective. The application process takes months, and of the 20,000 semi-finalists from around the world chosen each year, only 300 are awarded the lucrative honor.

This is the best time of year in our universities -- a time to celebrate accomplishments, and stepping back, to take pride in what we do in higher education. In doing so, I'm reminded of portions of a poem I shared with the UMS community last year as the time for commencement approached -- the first commencements to be impacted by the worldwide pandemic. The poem was written by long-time British poet laureate John Masefield on the occasion of the 1946 inauguration of the Chancellor of the University of Sheffield in the aftermath of World War II. I'll close with a selected portion here, edited slightly for gender inclusiveness:

*There are few earthly things more splendid than a university.
In these days of broken frontiers and collapsing values, when every future looks somewhat grim
...
wherever a university stands, it stands and shines;*

*wherever it exists, the free minds of all, urged on to full and fair inquiry,
may still bring wisdom into human affairs.*

*There are few earthly things more beautiful than a university.
It is a place where those who hate ignorance may strive to know,
where those who perceive truth may strive to make others see;
where seekers and learners alike, banded together in the search for knowledge,
will honor thought in all its finer ways, will welcome thinkers in distress or in exile,
will uphold ever the dignity of thought and learning, and will exact standards in these things.
They give to the young in their impressionable years, the bond of a lofty purpose shared,
of a great corporate life whose links will not be loosed until they die.*

*There are few things more enduring than a university.
Religions may split into sect or heresy; dynasties may perish or be supplanted,
but for century after century the university will continue,
and the stream of life will pass through it, and the thinker
and the seeker will be bound together in the undying cause of bringing thought into the world.*

To be a member of these great societies must ever be a glad distinction.

Best wishes, particularly to those among our communities who will rightly celebrate their achievements in the week ahead.

Regards,
Dan