

Week of April 5

Trustees,

I'd like to start this morning by acknowledging Friday's sudden and [unexpected passing](#) of UMaine head men's ice hockey coach Dennis "Red" Gendron. We remember Red as a true champion not only from his days as an assistant coach on Shawn Walsh's staff when UMaine captured the 1993 NCAA national title, but at all levels of his career, from high school hockey state championships in Vermont, NCAA championships with both Maine and Yale, and NHL Stanley Cup championships with the New Jersey Devils. As UMaine President Joan Ferrini-Mundy noted in a community message Friday afternoon, Red was a force in UMaine Athletics and in the legacy of UMaine's men's ice hockey program. He'll be remembered far beyond his coaching as a mentor, colleague, and friend.

The past week demonstrates how much we rely on communicating with our university communities to create a foundation for success for our various initiatives. I offer a few examples here to both illustrate and give you a sense of the breadth of issues we manage on a regular basis.

Following your March 22 regular Board meeting, at which you charged me to establish a UMS Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Steering Committee, I prepared a UMS-wide message to inform our university communities of your charge and my leadership commitment to the importance of the work. [My April 5 message](#) referenced back to my June 5, 2020 [Imperative for Change](#) message that first laid out in a comprehensive way how we would examine our academic and employment practices to ensure we could identify and root out all forms of structural racism that may exist. As I communicated in my message this week, our DEI work going forward will be broader, focusing on all aspects of diversity, equity, inclusiveness, anti-oppression, and social justice of our university communities. Messages such as these make clear that our UMS communities will never need to question our commitment to this work.

We communicate regularly with the Legislature and Governor's office too, most notably through Samantha Warren, our hard-working Director of Government and Community Relations. This week, however, we formally transmitted to Senate President Troy Jackson and House Speaker Ryan Fecteau a video presentation of my "State of the University" report, which is traditionally presented to the Maine Legislature in person at the State House in the early spring of the first year of each biennial legislative session. As the former legislators now serving on our Board well know, the biennial State of the University address is a chance to highlight not only our key strategic priorities and accomplishments, but also our needs and imperatives. In my [video address](#) released this week, which included comments from UMaine President and Vice Chancellor for Research and Innovation Joan Ferrini-Mundy, Maine Law Dean Leigh Saufley, and University of Southern Maine nursing student and Winslow native Monique Belisle, I highlighted a number of accomplishments, including our pandemic service to the state and the opportunities of both unified accreditation and the Harold Alfond Foundation's \$240 million grant, but also honestly laid out our critical infrastructure needs, which exceed \$1 billion in

imminent need and deferred maintenance. We will rely on the messages communicated in my State of the University address over and over in the coming weeks as we continue to make our case for further State investment.

Finally, we communicate regularly with our university communities and the people of Maine about our work through the pandemic. With stellar work from UMS Executive Director of Public Affairs Dan Demeritt to foster our media relationships and external messaging, along with Crompton "Hub" Burton, our Internal Communications Manager, and a number of university-based marketing and communications leaders who help get our messages out across the System, we're able to bring critical attention to our current campaign to encourage everyone who can to get a COVID vaccine. These vital UMS staff worked together in recent weeks to launch our ["This is Our Shot, Maine!"](#) vaccine awareness campaign -- the importance of this effort goes without saying, and we will devote significant effort to it to encourage as many of our faculty, staff, and students to be vaccinated as possible before many in our communities disperse after the end of our spring term.

Our management through the pandemic has many elements, of course. The incredible efforts and commitment of hundreds of our staff across our universities, along with the discipline and commitment to public health shared by all students, faculty, and staff, are collectively behind our relatively low and manageable case numbers in our System even as COVID continues to spread in Maine and the country. We're looking ahead, too. We've already [announced](#) our expectation to return to some measure of normalcy this coming fall, and doing so means we need to be prepared to welcome back our faculty and staff to working in person on our campuses as long as it is safe to do so.

There's a lot to consider. Many of our colleagues continued working on site at our universities and centers across Maine through the entire pandemic -- the nature of their jobs required that they do so, and they have been our front-line workers throughout. Others have worked remotely through the pandemic -- with technology connection problems at times, Zoom fatigue, child care challenges, and the blurring of lines between home and work. Some surely can't wait to return to an office and our university campuses, while others, who may have found flexibility and perhaps even heightened productivity working from home, would prefer to keep working remotely. Some among us have been unable to work at all.

As much as we want to return to normal this fall, or as normal as can be while still keeping in place whatever public health protocols are necessary to ensure our health and safety together, no one expects that we'll all simply return to the way things were before the pandemic. Through an ad hoc Return to Work Advisory Committee that we launched this week, headed by UMS Chief General Services Officer Chip Gavin and UMS Chief Human Resources Officer Carol Corcoran, we will be considering all of the lessons we can learn from our work through the pandemic thus far, and with the committee's input and guidance in the coming weeks, we'll develop the strategies necessary to adjust our remote and on-site work expectations and policies to return to work at our universities safely and best serve our students and State.

Amidst all of the above, I traveled north this week, continuing my spring campus visits at Fort Kent on Wednesday and at Presque Isle on Thursday. Along with Jim Thelen, Jeff St. John, and Kim Jenkins, who are traveling with me for all of our campus visits, I met with faculty and staff, students, BOV members, and campus leaders to talk about faculty collaboration and our effort to develop a system-wide unified academic catalog by Fall 2022 (which I first reported and explained to you in my [Week of February 8 message](#)). Having this time with our university communities is both invigorating and reassuring, as it's clear to me from my meetings that our faculty want to collaborate and want unified accreditation to succeed. We owe it to both them and our students to keep tearing down the walls between our universities, in both the figurative and administrative sense, to make sure the best of our System is available to all of our students no matter where they might be, all the while making sure to use our limited public resources as efficiently as possible.

Best wishes for a good and healthy week ahead.

Regards,

Dan