

Week of May 10

Trustees,

With the primary work of the 2020-2021 academic year concluding this past weekend, this week just past finally allowed many of our UMS colleagues to begin taking perhaps the most well-deserved breather in their professional careers. The 2020-2021 academic year could rightly be called one of the most challenging in the history of higher education, for our students of course, but also for our dedicated faculty and staff. Our communities were tested in ways not experienced in more than a century, requiring an unparalleled resilience to learn, work, and research.

I have been inspired by everyone's commitment to learning, resolve in the face of great challenges, and adaptive strength since the global pandemic first forced us to change how and where we connect and engage as a community of learners and researchers. And I'm immensely proud of the many ways our colleagues helped lead our universities and state forward in a time of great student and public challenge.

We can and should take great pride in what we've accomplished. As I sometimes do, I invite you to consider some numbers:

*We kept working, learning, and interacting through the pandemic -- digitally*

Love it or hate it, Zoom kept us going through the pandemic during the academic year. Nearly 20,000 in our UMS community used it regularly, convening more than 1 million Zoom sessions for work, class, or research. Over that number of meetings, Zoom hosted nearly 4.46 million meeting participants and filled nearly 4 million hours of our collective time together. Along with other digital applications, we were able to provide 79 percent of our credit hours last fall through a digital remote modality, and that number increased to 83 percent this past spring.

(I would be remiss if I didn't acknowledge that many of our faculty and particularly many of our staff continued to work in person through the pandemic, and students continued to attend class in-person. Their resilience and respect for our health and safety protocols through the pandemic kept us going as much and more so than any technology could.)

*We tested to stay together safely*

You know these numbers already. We conducted nearly 40,000 COVID tests last fall. We understood we'd need to do more to be safe together this past spring, and more than tripled our testing to more than 132,000 tests, nearly 46,000 in March alone. Coupled with the communal discipline our students, faculty and staff showed for our public health protocols -- masking, distancing, and group limitations primary among them -- we actually stayed safe together, completing each semester according to plan without any material disruption, with far lower test positivity rates than the state and country saw as a whole.

*We maintained our enrollment*

While higher education institutions nationally saw a [3.3 percent total enrollment decline last fall, with a similar 2.9 percent decline this spring](#), UMS declined only 0.6 percent and 0.1 percent, respectively. In each instance, UMS experienced strong graduate enrollment -- up 9.6 percent in the fall and 18.6 percent in the spring -- to overcome slight declines in overall undergraduate enrollment.

By processing applications and packaging financial aid more quickly, and by aggressively reaching out to potential students wherever they might be through our *On Track for College* campaign, we're helping students overcome pandemic disruptions to the college search process -- and [our efforts are paying off](#), with matriculations for the coming fall 15 percent ahead of this week last year.

#### *We maintained our employment*

A [February 2021 Chronicle of Higher Education report](#) detailed the pandemic's "brutal" impact on employment in higher education: a stunning 13 percent drop, or 650,000 employees, from the nearly 4.75 million people employed in higher education just before the pandemic. To be sure, public institutions have been able to maintain their workforces more than privates, and the beneficence of state and federal governments through a variety of COVID relief has made a tremendous difference, including at UMS. While our employment levels are down slightly, and we're carefully managing the approval of all hiring across the System, our relatively stable enrollment and careful budget management has allowed us to avoid the disruptions of major layoffs or retrenchment anywhere in our System -- indeed, we were even able to honor our pre-pandemic commitments to wage and salary increases last summer.

This is not to say we are not pursuing educational efficiency or that we don't take seriously our commitment to use unified accreditation to share resources and make the most efficient use of our public support. It's merely to say that, when Maine families needed us most, [we found ways](#) to not let the pandemic, in and of itself, force our hands and disrupt our workforce.

#### *We want to return to normal this fall*

With the Governor's [announcement](#) this week relaxing social distancing requirements and mask requirements for those who are fully vaccinated, our [previously announced plan to return to normalcy this coming fall](#) took a step closer to reality. There is much yet to consider, though.

We continue to take a cautious approach to the question of a vaccine mandate.

No doubt you're aware of, and closely following, the [national attention](#) given over the last few months as colleges and universities around the country announce their intentions for requiring COVID vaccines this coming fall. As you know, our dual focus so far has been on (i) [encouraging](#) all eligible UMS community members to be vaccinated as soon as they can if they are able and (ii) [reducing](#) barriers to doing so.

With some Maine institutions [announcing](#) plans to mandate vaccines, but others not yet, we've not yet changed our UMS stance. We will continue to monitor the regulatory approval process for COVID vaccines and consult with our [Science Advisory Board](#) to understand best public health and safety practices for our university communities as we look ahead to fall -- all to make the best informed decisions for the health and safety of our campus communities. I want to be clear though that, if a COVID vaccine were to receive full regulatory approval in the near future, we would expect to consider requiring it for anyone who lives, studies, or works on our campuses this fall.

Our approach to work will change as well. While some of our faculty and staff had no choice but to continue working on campus and in person, many more have been fully remote through the pandemic. With the pandemic's grip lessening and vaccination expanding, our students will expect more in-person engagement, services, and community, and our faculty and staff will step up. We need to meet their expectations, while honoring the evolution of work-life balance and family dynamics that have been the consequence of our shift to far greater remote work through the pandemic. With Chief General Services Officer Chip Gavin, Chief Human Resources Officer Carol Corcoran, and Vice Chancellor for Strategic Initiatives and Chief Legal Officer Jim Thelen in the lead, an ad hoc working group of Presidents, system and university administrators, and representatives from student affairs, labor, HR, and risk and safety management have prepared a report of considerations for our return to work as the pandemic continues to ease. The report will guide our thinking in the coming months as we prepare for the fall.

As I close these thoughts above, I want to acknowledge the most significant work of the week just past -- a successful two-day virtual visit by a two-person NECHE review team whose charge was to assess how our initial work with unified accreditation is progressing. As I previewed for you in last weekend's message, the visit this week included meetings with our System leadership, all Presidents and Chief Academic Officers, our Faculty Governance Council, faculty engaged in collaborative multi-campus academic programs, and open sessions for any faculty, staff, and students who wanted to attend. I can report preliminarily that the visit was a success. Our dialogue with the NECHE reviewers was robust and honest, and will serve as a constructive foundation for the unified accreditation work ahead. We all owe a debt of gratitude to Jeff St. John, Associate Vice Chancellor for Accreditation and Strategic Initiatives, who led our preparation for the successful visit (and provided a helpful educational session for Trustees on Friday morning on our self-study plans and accreditation generally).

We have more strategic planning ahead of us, both to learn from our pandemic experiences and to put unified accreditation to work for our students and the people of Maine. It's rewarding work, and I'm grateful to have the opportunity to lead it.

Regards,

Dan

