

Week of August 23

Trustees,

Without intending unnecessary hyperbole or tempting fate, I think we are on the cusp of something unprecedented. We are about to begin a near-normal academic year even as the pandemic continues. I might go so far as to say we are learning to live and work with the pandemic. I would call our plan and actions a *responsible* return to normalcy. Some might call it the "new normal," though we are not thinking of it just that way. I think of it, rather, as a *responsible* normal, where our responsibility lies in the balance we've successfully maintained from the beginning of the pandemic: protecting public and community health while ensuring we meet our teaching, research, and service missions to our students and the state.

In the beginning of the pandemic -- before we understood COVID's nature and how it spreads, before we understood the efficacy of masking, group limitations, and social distancing, before we had the logistical capacity for accurate high-volume, quick response testing, and long before the advent of safe and effective vaccines -- we had no choice but to empty our residence halls and offices and continue nearly all teaching and learning, work, and research remotely. By doing so, we protected public health and safely maintained our teaching, research, and public service, [awarding nearly 4,600 degrees](#) last spring as 98.5 percent of our students completed the first pandemic term with [an academic persistence rate](#) that even slightly exceeded the previous year's pre-pandemic rates. But we also knew that our mostly-empty campuses, with most teaching, learning, work, research, and social interactions occurring only digitally, were not a long-term solution if the pandemic persisted.

So we invested in [classroom technology upgrades](#), chartered a multi-campus [Science Advisory Board](#), [led a statewide higher education coalition](#) to prepare pandemic return-to-campus guidelines for last fall, developed our own innovative wastewater COVID testing system, and, in a true public health public-private partnership, contracted with private testing and laboratory partners [to provide for COVID PCR testing](#) on all of our campuses. Along with masking and group size limitations, all of this together allowed us to announce that we would [return last fall](#) with smaller socially-distanced hybrid classes with students and faculty both in-person and online together, with reduced but still significant on-campus residential populations. We maintained our enrollments and academic and research progress, safely together under our COVID public health protocols to maintain COVID testing positivity rates through the entire academic year barely one-third of Maine's already low statewide COVID positivity rates. As the academic year drew to a close, COVID vaccines became widely available, and we began our ["This is Our Shot, Maine!"](#) push to encourage COVID vaccination for everyone who could obtain it. We awarded [more than 4,900 degrees](#) to a class of students that surmounted unprecedented challenges with unequalled resilience.

And yet, we knew our new and returning students, faculty, and staff wanted to be safely back together, with the wide availability of safe and effective COVID vaccines offering the promise that we could safely have more traditional in-person teaching and learning, work, research, and

social interaction. This hope and desire for responsible normalcy is what's driving our recent decisions to [require COVID vaccines](#) or an approved exemption for our students (as we work to finalize agreements for the same for our faculty and staff) and [return temporarily to indoor masking](#) -- the undisputable science of the current state of the COVID pandemic, driven notably by the highly transmissible Delta variant, tells us this is necessary at present, but also gives us reasonable confidence that fidelity to these measures will allow us to start a responsibly normal fall semester this week.

As of this past Friday evening, on the cusp of beginning our fall term together, nearly 20,000 in our UMS community have confirmed their COVID vaccination through our online portal, including essentially 80 percent of our full-time employees and nearly 92 percent of residential students. Our universities are actively following up with students expecting to be on campus this fall who have yet to provide proof of vaccination or request exemptions, and we hope to finalize agreements with our labor partners shortly for our faculty and staff.

In sum, we're as ready as we can be for a responsibly normal fall semester and academic year ahead. We'll be starting our strategic planning effort, continuing work to revise and finalize our NECHE self study for unified accreditation, searching for a new UMA president, and confirming our commitment to diversity, equity, inclusion, and social justice as we work to advance the Harold Alfond Foundation-funded student success, Maine Center, Maine College of Engineering, Computing, and Information Science, and Division 1 Athletics initiatives. Amidst all this, we'll follow the science and continue to adjust to the pandemic as we must to maintain our commitment to public and community health, beginning a new academic year bearing witness to the power of higher education to transform lives.

Looking ahead, I expect to take a break from providing this update over next weekend's Labor Day holiday. I'll write next here on Sunday, September 12. In the meantime, enjoy the rest of your weekend and have a good start to the week ahead.

Regards,
Dan