

Week of March 22

Trustees,

I've said it before: The time you commit to serving the State of Maine by serving as a Trustee for our public university system is significant and important. Once again, this past week proved that more than ever, with your full day regular meeting on Monday and another full day Friday for the first review of our FY22 budgets for Trustees on the Finance, Facilities, and Technology Committee -- not to mention the many hours of reading time you devoted to reviewing the posted agenda materials in order to come to each meeting prepared to hold us accountable to our students and the people of Maine.

Let me start first with our students.

As you know, Congress has passed a number of pandemic-related relief packages over the last year. Even though one such package -- known as the Coronavirus Response and Relief Supplemental Appropriations Act -- was enacted late last December, the \$8.6 million in financial relief the legislation allocated to students at our universities is literally just arriving, and I wanted you to know of our plans for supporting our students with it across the System.

Based on plans developed by our universities, with support from UMS Vice Chancellor for Finance and Administration Ryan Low, UMS Director of Community and Government Relations Samantha Warren, and others, more than 13,700 students will receive automatic payments ranging from \$125 to \$525 and hundreds more with demonstrated exceptional need may receive up to \$4,000. Automatic payments will be disbursed to undergraduate and graduate students at the University of Maine, University of Maine at Augusta, University of Maine at Fort Kent, University of Maine at Machias, and University of Maine at Presque, with checks already in the mail for many. These automatic aid payments will be largely based on financial need, tiered by the number of credit hours currently being taken by each student, and distributed to all eligible degree-seeking students enrolled this spring semester. Further funds will be available by application to students at those universities with demonstrated exceptional need.

At the University of Maine at Farmington, the University of Southern Maine, and the University of Maine School of Law, all relief will be available by application starting in April and will be targeted toward students with the greatest financial hardships. Awards could be as large as \$4,000 at UMF and \$2,000 at USM, again depending on need.

Consistent with federal guidance, students can receive direct payments or have the aid applied to their university accounts if they have outstanding balances for education expenses like tuition, fees, housing and dining.

With discipline and commitment to our students, faculty, and staff so far, we've been able to avoid imposing the pandemic's \$100 million financial burden on them through tuition increases or employment layoffs. But as Trustees saw from our FY22 budget presentations at Friday's

FFT Committee meeting, this has only been possible because of a combination of federal emergency aid in the relief packages to date, our own emergency expense reductions, System and university reserve-draining transfers, and the State of Maine's generous reimbursement of some pandemic-related costs (most notably so far for our COVID testing expenses through the end of last year). To be perfectly blunt, this is not strategic budget planning, but rather crisis management. We've kept our universities stable and safe throughout the pandemic so far because of tremendous planning, effort, and hard work, discipline, and commitment from literally thousands of faculty, staff, students, and academic and administrative leaders at both the university and System level.

We all want the pandemic to end, especially with the promise of better weather through the spring and early summer ahead and the impact of increasing numbers of people around us getting COVID vaccinations. But our hard work and discipline simply must continue for the time being. You may have read an article in Friday's Portland Press Herald about [higher numbers of COVID cases](#) across the System over the last few weeks. While the upward trend of late has been concerning, and every positive COVID case or close contact represents an individual in our community who needs our support through the necessary period of isolation or quarantine, at the same time we are confident we can safely continue our operations because our positive test rate is now falling again (at 0.34 percent across the System as a whole, well below the state average), and our wastewater testing suggests the rate of increase over the last few weeks has been arrested. As of mid-day yesterday, we had recorded 29 positive results from our own testing this week versus 51 positive results last week. We were down to 71 known active cases (across all testing sources) from the recent peak of 95 on March 25 that was reported in the PPH article. The case count of 71 matches our lowest daily active case count over the last 9 days -- still elevated relative to the semester as a whole, but importantly on a downward trend.

Vaccine news is positive too. There has been some question of late as to whether our out-of-state and international students who are present in Maine because of their enrollment at our universities would be able to receive a vaccine when Maine drops any age-based thresholds for eligibility for adults. With increasing vaccine availability expected in Maine over the next month, we've been advised by our public health partners that all University of Maine System community members over the age of 16 who are living in Maine because of their status as a student, staff or faculty member will be eligible for vaccination in Maine when planned age-based eligibility expansion occurs, which is currently scheduled for April 19, 2021. As we've already begun doing, with our goal to become [Maine's most vaccinated workforce](#) and [removing barriers](#) to our faculty and staff for scheduling vaccinations during work time, we will continue urging all students, staff and faculty to voluntarily participate in Maine's vaccination campaign and schedule an appointment with a Maine vaccination site as soon as Maine's eligibility criteria permit.

Beyond COVID, there is much more worthy of attention than I can adequately cover here except in summary fashion. On Tuesday we announced a [major gift and grant](#) that will count toward our \$7.5 million match obligation for the [University of Maine Graduate & Professional Center](#) and support the expansion of rural and telehealth opportunities throughout the state. On Thursday

University of Southern Maine President Glenn Cummings hosted me and Jim Thelen (UMS Vice Chancellor for Strategic Initiatives and Chief Legal Officer), Jeff St. John (Associate Vice Chancellor for Accreditation and Strategic Initiatives), and Kim Jenkins (UMS Director of Organizational Effectiveness) for a visit to USM's Portland campus. Over the course of the day we heard from faculty, staff, students, BOV members, and university leaders about the challenges and opportunities of collaborating more often and more strategically in the unified accreditation environment.

And finally, we look ahead through our work on long-range planning, work that will lay out a road map for greater educational efficiency, stability for our universities, and targeted investment and growth within our System where we can most advance your strategic priorities and best serve our students and State.

Best wishes for a good week ahead.

Regards,  
Dan