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Joan Ferrini-Mundy

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Maine Memo — July 7

1 message

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To: UM-EMPLOYEES@lists.maine.edu

Tue, Jul 7, 2020 at 7:51 AM



MAINE MEMO



From Joan Ferrini-Mundy

President of the University of Maine and the University of Maine at Machias

I hope that all have had a restful and renewing weekend, and that you have taken time to look through all of the communications from the [University of Maine System](#), [UMaine](#), and [UMaine Machias](#) leaders about our plans for a safe reopening. There is a wealth of information there, and I urge you to watch all three sites for ongoing updates.

We reached a turning point on July 1 with the UMS-wide announcement about our intentions to come back together on campus this fall. Even so, there is considerable uncertainty about the details and how things will work, and that will continue. One thing is certain: As a university, our reason for existing is to educate the next generations. As we move through the summer and prepare for fall, we are focusing on everything from safe behaviors to COVID-19 testing to determining how many can be in a classroom at suitable distances. We are creating campus compacts for building public health commitment, launching deep cleaning in residence halls, and doing so much more. Preparing for our instructional program in the fall has its own very complex set of activities, not only the planning and scheduling to harmonize faculty preferences for the style and modality in which they will teach, course registrations, room size, and available technology, but also the very individual work that faculty are doing to plan their own teaching — all with the goal of meeting our students where they are and providing the best possible experiences.

I have received some very thoughtful notes and queries from faculty, raising issues that assure me our faculty are thinking about their students, including:

- Which courses have to be face-to-face to achieve the learning outcomes?
- Many students won't be able to attend the online-only synchronous classes on Zoom or hyflex classes with remote students teleconferencing into a face-to-face class — how do we plan?
- Do we all agree on what is meant by online, remote, hybrid, or even face-to-face, and what quality looks like in each case?
- Must I change to Brightspace?
- Are lectures and active learning opposite ends of some continuum?
- How can a lab class possibly be taught remotely or online?
- How can I share what I know about doing a flipped classroom in online teaching with my colleagues?
- How do I get help to be ready to take my in-person class to a remote version at any time?
- Will my students learn what I hope they will learn?

We are having an unanticipated and very important campuswide conversation about teaching and learning. It is a time for renewed commitment to enriching learning.

Last fall I announced that teaching and learning would be a theme for us this year. In the Fall Convocation last September, I proposed that we work, through the year, on the following questions:

- Do we foster learner success in all of the ways we can, to ensure the success of today's learners in their endeavors for tomorrow?
- What are our measures of learner success?
- Is our land, sea, and space grant mission well integrated in our instructional programming?
- Is our research and scholarly activity integrated into our instructional offerings?

At that time, I anticipated a planned, sequenced, orchestrated set of conversations and gatherings, but not what a pandemic would require of us. Indeed, some of that orderly and traditional conversation happened in the fall and winter under the great leadership of our provost, deans, and the Center for Innovation in Teaching and Learning (CITL). But what we are doing now is organic, born of necessity, very rich — and the beginnings of something that I hope is here to stay. I have been amazed at the examples I have heard from faculty who are solving these challenges and creating the best possible instructional environments for our students — those that offer flexibility, ways to engage students in meaningful experiences to promote their learning. And I also am hearing from students about what they think of our remote and online instruction, and their ideas about how it can better serve them as learners.

Often in universities when we discuss teaching, we focus on what faculty do in their classrooms. And yet in the education literature in recent years, in many fields, the discussion of teaching and learning has moved toward one that is about learning. “Teaching does not cause learning — learners do the work of learning,” noted Deborah Loewenberg Ball in a [plenary address at the 13th International Congress on Mathematical Education](#) in 2016. What does the teaching that we do at this university enable our students to take away from their experiences in learning settings here — classrooms, studios, clinical settings, research experiences? Have we met goals for learning? Our accreditor, the New England Commission of Higher Education, requires that we focus on student learning outcomes. See Standard 8.3: “Assessment of learning is based on verifiable statements of what students are expected to gain, achieve, demonstrate, or know by the time they complete their academic program. The process of understanding what and how students are learning focuses on the course, competency, program, and institutional level.” And, in addition, NECHE focuses on teaching in 6.17: “The institution endeavors to enhance the quality of teaching and learning wherever and however courses and programs are offered. It encourages experimentation to improve instruction”

Our learning and teaching have involved — and continue to include — experimentation, and examples abound of our successes and challenges in the past several months and now, as we prepare for fall. We are preparing with the hope of a fall semester that brings students safely back to campus for on-site learning, tempered by the reality of needing to be ready for online learning, hybrid offerings, and remote learning even by those who plan to teach primarily face-to-face. In all modes of delivery, I encourage a continued focus on learning. We have a great start in the [Strategic Vision and Values Framework](#), where we focus on fostering learner success: “The university is committed to fostering learning for all. We provide access and opportunity in and out of the classroom to prepare students for success in college, career, and civic engagement. Our faculty and staff create relevant opportunities for lifelong learning through excellence in teaching and co-curricular activity. Our inclusive community welcomes all learners and strives to sustain an enriching environment in which they can flourish and succeed. We recognize that the best learning occurs when a diversity of perspectives, experiences, and ideas are valued and promoted.”

For me, the experience of the last several months — both the coronavirus pandemic, and the national awakening to the urgency of addressing racial injustice and structural, systemic racism in our colleges and universities — have shaped my thinking about learning. Learning at the University of Maine is about meeting each and every one of our students where they are and designing our instruction based on where they are. It means committing, in every classroom, every laboratory, every field site, to the perspective that every one of our learners brings valuable experience, perspectives, and strengths to the setting — an asset model of learning, and a model that places inclusion at the core.

It means not just acknowledging the diversity in our institution, particularly racial and ethnic diversity; it means making that diversity core to our curricula and our instruction. It means, too, caring about what our students hope to achieve — a path to “purposeful work” ([Center for Purposeful Work, Bates College](#)), opportunities to be prepared to make a difference in their town or region, and gaining the knowledge needed to help others, to be leaders, to be innovators. This focus is deeply tied to our emphasis on research learning, as we explore how we can, by fall 2021, assure every entering student that during the first two years they will have an opportunity to participate in an authentic research learning experience. We know about the importance of engagement and connection in helping students succeed.

And, now that we have experienced pandemic teaching, how do we go from there to building, testing, refining, supporting, and then publicizing our new models for learning? I know that many of our faculty and staff are thinking about and working on these important questions, made even more timely as we move forward in our [newly approved unified accreditation](#).

Watch later this summer for plans for a UMaine/UMM summit on learning to include faculty, staff, and students, and to highlight our experiences, our experiments, and our learning results.