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Maine's higher education leaders propose principles for safe fall reopening

June 4, 2020

Maine's higher education leaders have collaborated on a statement of principles for safely reopening their campuses this fall that summarizes the $4.5 billion impact and essential functions of the state's 38 colleges and universities. The Framework for Reopening Maine's Colleges and Universities in Fall 2020 includes strategies and practices that can be implemented in partnership with civil and public health leaders to improve safety on campus and limit the spread of COVID-19.

Maine's colleges and universities acted swiftly in March to protect their 76,200 students, 20,000 regular and student employees, and their partner communities as COVID-19 was declared a global pandemic.

"Our colleges and universities put student and community health first this spring, sending students home and finishing the semester at a distance to help flatten the curve of COVID-19 infection," said University of Maine System Chancellor Dannel Malloy. "Higher education is essential to Maine and its future. The priorities and best practices we have included in our reopening principles are tools our institutions will pursue in their planning to improve safety, manage incidents of infection, and flexibly adhere to civil authority guidance that must continue to adapt to protect public health."

The framework serves as a guide for decision making by institutions and for informing collaboration with state and public health partners. It includes six guiding principles for the safe reopening of Maine institutions of higher education as well as detailed topics and factors for further consideration.

The framework has been shared with U.S. Sen. Susan Collins in advance of today's U.S. Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions hearing, COVID-19: Going Back to College Safely.

"One day soon science will develop a vaccine for COVID-19. Until that vaccine is proven effective and widely available, public and student health have to be a daily priority for college leaders," said James Dlugos, President, Saint Joseph's College and President of the Maine Independent College Association.

"The reopening framework captures our best thinking on prevention strategies and sets expectations about how campus life will have to be different so we can operate safely and respond swiftly to the evolving COVID-19 threat."

The framework commits Maine's colleges and universities to periodic consultation and collaboration across the sector and with public partners.

"We look forward to working together with Governor Mills and public health experts as we address the range of considerations required for safely welcoming students back to Maine's campuses this fall," said Clayton Spencer, President of Bates College. "While teaching and learning in residence is the very essence of our educational model, our first concern is protecting the health of our campuses and communities."

The framework for reopening also includes a set of recommendations and conclusions to further prepare the state and its colleges and universities for the fall. Items for consideration include partnerships around screening and testing; cooperation around the establishment of guidelines appropriate to campus environments; and higher-education adjustments around quarantine protocols for out-of-state visitors contingent on sufficient testing protocols.

"Faculty and staff worked creatively and tirelessly this spring at all of our institutions to meet our educational commitment to our students at a distance, but society looks to us for more than the successful delivery of courses and credit hours," said Joan Ferrini-Mundy, President of the University of Maine and its regional campus, the University of Maine at Machias.

"Our research function and support for Maine industries, cultural enrichment initiatives, experiential learning, and the work we do to fight injustice and promote inclusion, diversity, and tolerance require us to bring people together. With the same selflessness and commonsense that have guided our response to COVID-19's spread, we can manage its risk and be sure our campuses are open this fall fulfilling functions in and beyond the classroom that are critical to Maine's future."

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