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Chancellor Messages_In-Person Learning, Flexibility, and Personal Responsibility

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Matthew Revitt <matthew.revitt@maine.edu>

In-Person Learning, Flexibility, and Personal Responsibility

1 message

Chancellor Dannel Malloy <chancelloroffice@maine.edu>
Reply-To: chancelloroffice@maine.edu
To: matthew.revitt@maine.edu

Mon, Jan 10, 2022 at 11:30 AM

**January 10, 2022**

UMS Community:

I'm writing today because the pandemic is still with us, but it's changing. And we're going to change too. With our students coming back now to start our Spring 2022 semester, I wanted you to know our plans to work, teach, learn, and research together safely.

Classes Start Jan. 18 with In-Person Learning and Flexibility

The bottom line, as I explain more below, is that *we're going to safely start the semester with in-person learning and work*. Our faculty and students want and expect in-person teaching and learning for those classes already planned as such, and our science-based COVID protocols and highly vaccinated communities provide the safest environment possible for our work and learning to take place. At the same time, *for at least the first two weeks of the semester*, academic and HR leaders will work with faculty, staff, and students at our universities to determine the extent to which *remote and hybrid work and learning alternatives may be necessary to respond to temporary local conditions*, such as unusually high occurrences of COVID or individual faculty, staff, or students who might be at particular medical risk or are caring for family members, including adult learners home with children whose own schooling has become remote. Your campus leaders will have more information for you. We're also going to *ask our community members to exercise more personal responsibility for individual COVID cases* that may occur as we manage the current Omicron case surge.

The Changing Course of COVID-19

It's worth recounting our pandemic history here, which you know as well as I do, if we're going to rethink our approach to the pandemic. You deserve to understand why we're doing this.

In the beginning -- 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. 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.

It has persisted, of course, and stubbornly so.

But by this past fall, the wide availability of safe and effective COVID vaccines offered the promise that we could safely have more traditional in-person teaching and learning, work, research, and social interaction. The hope and desire for responsible normalcy drove our decisions to require COVID vaccines or an approved exemption for our students, and we reached similar agreements for the same for our faculty and staff. Our collective commitment to the health and safety of

our university communities resulted in *our campuses being one of the most highly vaccinated environments in the state*, with far lower case and test positivity rates than the state as a whole.

Changes for the Spring Semester

Even from last fall, though, the pandemic is different now, and so are we. While Omicron case counts fill the news and have us identifying more COVID cases than ever before, the medical and public health understanding of this particular variant suggests *we're at a turning point* in the pandemic. It has become *less practical -- unrealistic even -- to institutionally track, contact trace, isolate, and quarantine every single new or potential case*, particularly as more people are testing on their own with home test kits and others battle basic cold symptoms that may well be Omicron. This heightens the importance for each and every one of us to *embrace our personal responsibility and communal discipline to every other COVID mitigation protocol we still employ*: face coverings (and reducing the amount of time without them), vaccinations and boosters, reduced large gatherings, flexible online and remote learning and work options, and ongoing testing and self-isolation or quarantine to safely begin the coming semester based on the best practices we've learned and put to successful use throughout the pandemic so far.

We are committed to offering high quality, engaged in-person educational and work experiences, even as we are equally committed to the health and safety of our university communities. Balancing those commitments, along with knowing that most students learn best when they can experience the university in person as much as possible, *we are carefully moving forward to start the Spring 2022 semester in person as planned*.

This means we'll bring students back to our highly-vaccinated university campuses with all testing, prevention, and mitigation measures in place to limit virus transmission as much as possible. In addition to following our current vaccination, testing, face covering, and other COVID protocols, we'll also ask everyone to exercise discipline and personal responsibility to manage their own health when we can't, which means everyone should take it upon themselves to get vaccinated or boosted if they can but aren't, stay current with all UMS and university guidance (where we will do our best to follow changes to U.S. and Maine CDC public health guidance), and self-isolate or quarantine when they have symptoms or are exposed to others who do outside of our UMS testing protocols.

Prioritizing Student Support and Success

As for classes, we'll start the semester with the presumption that in-person learning can be safely offered, and in some cases is necessary given unique program requirements and the importance of an in-person student experience. At the same time, for at least the first two weeks – January 18 through January 31 – our university academic leaders at the college, school, and department levels will work with faculty and students to flexibly use remote and hybrid learning options as local conditions may require to accommodate individual medical risks or unusually high concentrations of cases. Faculty will continue to provide guidance to students through our Brightspace learning platforms on how to access all coursework, whether in person, hybrid, or remote. As always, the campus centers for teaching and learning across our system will be ready to assist.

And as we've always done, we'll let science and the evolving pandemic guide our future operations so that we can stay together safely. We'll continue to watch Omicron trends in other countries too, which offer the hope that Omicron cases may diminish as quickly as they spiked.

As a closing reflection, I think it's fair to acknowledge that a complete shut-down is not a long-term strategy. In our universities, we've learned that ongoing universal remote-only learning and work is too blunt and overwhelming a response, with too detrimental an impact on effective and engaged learning, work, and faculty-student interactions, to be a long-term and widely-employed strategy. Even still, and understanding that there may be no safer place in the coming month than in our highly vaccinated university communities, we'll proceed cautiously for the first two weeks, adjusting to local conditions flexibly and prudently.

Together with our University presidents and Maine Law's dean, I am grateful for and share your commitment to open our universities safely next week for the life-changing learning, work, and research that occurs across our System each semester. Thank you for doing your part to help make that possible.

Sincerely,



Chancellor
University of Maine System

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