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Chancellor Messages_An Important Update for UMS Employees

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June 18, 2021

UMS Community,

Despite the frustrating unevenness of our country's reckoning with a racist past, progress is possible and should be celebrated. I therefore write briefly today to mark one aspect of that progress -- both our state and nation will now recognize Juneteenth as an official American holiday.

One year ago, I wrote to you to acknowledge and call attention to Juneteenth, an important milestone in history on the path to ending the wretched stain of slavery. Long recognized in Black communities, Juneteenth was too-long unknown or even ignored in broader American society. As leaders in higher education, we have a responsibility to root out ignorance, to fight bias with understanding and inclusiveness, and to fill in the knowledge gaps in our history and curriculum. This is a good start. And I take pride in being in a university system and state that has previously recognized the significance of this day.

The federal holiday was enacted in time for Juneteenth to be celebrated for the first time today. Maine's official holiday will be recognized for the first time in June 2022, though the date has been acknowledged informally for a number of years already. Within UMS, we will follow suit with Maine's state government, and also begin discussions with our students, faculty, and staff and their representatives to make sure our calendars, policies, and collective bargaining agreements are in alignment.

I promised to be brief, so I'll close with this reflection.

Measured in many ways -- whether by race, socio-economic status, or cultural, ethnic, or religious beliefs and origins, among numerous other factors -- we live in a diverse society. Our diversity -- the many ways in which we are both similar and different -- offers rich benefits to all in our community who are open to them. In our current society, that very diversity means we have different life experiences, share in the benefits unequally, and have to honestly work to understand and trust each other. I am an older white male. My life experiences have been different than those of individuals in our BIPOC communities, and I cannot claim to fully understand the deep personal significance that state and federal recognition of Juneteenth as a holiday may have to our Black community. I can at least say, with humility and advocacy, that I hope that these official actions by our state and nation help our Black communities start to feel that their history is as important as any other that's already been recognized in American history and society.

Helping our society move in this way is a core element of the Diversity, Equity and Inclusion work to which we've committed in the University of Maine System. In that spirit, I hope we can all take pride today that Juneteenth is no longer just a Black holiday -- it is now and forever more an American holiday.

Sincerely,