



OFFICE OF THE PRESIDENT

November 30, 2020

Dear UNE Community,

I would like to welcome you all back from what was hopefully a restful and happy Thanksgiving break. I know that for many of you, like with my own family, the holiday was not as you had envisioned, but I hope that you were able to connect with friends and loved ones and enjoy some peaceful days off.

As the fall semester winds down, I feel it is an auspicious time to reflect on our collective work of the past several months and to update you on our ongoing efforts to manage University operations during the pandemic. I want to begin by thanking the students, faculty, and professional staff who, together, made it possible for us to be on campus this semester. We made it through, and doing so truly took a village. You all deserve credit and congratulations for helping to get UNE to where it is now, and, in saying that, I don't simply refer to the date on the calendar. Yes, we made it through the semester, but we did far more than that. We moved the University forward despite the pandemic, making progress on the various priorities laid out in our strategic plan, and I thank you for your commitment and hard work.

There are multiple pandemic-related topics about which you likely have questions, and I want to take this opportunity to clarify those things that I am able to elucidate at this time.

POSITIVE CASES

While we have seen positive cases of COVID-19 within our community over the course of this semester, I am pleased to report that we were able to contain the virus to relatively small numbers. This is due, in no small part, to our team of contact tracers. These faculty and professional staff members underwent training and certification from Johns Hopkins University to learn the standards, protocols, and procedures involved in contact tracing. As soon as a positive case was identified in our community, they immediately began the contact tracing process to minimize spread. We took aggressive action to quarantine suspected close contacts, including, at one point, an entire dorm and, at another point, a varsity athletic team. Our contact tracers' dedication to this important work has been nothing short of outstanding, and we owe them a debt of gratitude for playing such a crucial part in our safety and wellbeing.

As the fall progressed and cases in Maine trended upward, we experienced a similar uptick of cases at UNE. However, we did not find evidence of community spread on our campuses. Rather, we found that COVID-19 was most likely to spread to our community members at off campus gatherings, oftentimes among small

groups of friends and family members. While we strive, of course, for zero incidence of the virus among the UNE family, the fact that we have avoided campus-based community spread underscores the safety of our campuses, and is a testament to the fact that our risk mitigation measures are working and that our community members are honoring the UNE Onward Promise to keep one another safe. For this we have each other to thank.

TESTING

As you will recall, at the start of the semester, we launched a successful initial testing program requiring all undergraduates, from all states – including Maine -- to present evidence of a negative viral test taken within the 72 hours preceding arrival on campus. They were then tested again upon arrival and given a bracelet to wear after receiving negative results of the on-campus test. This process worked exceptionally well, allowing us to identify positive cases early and to contain them. Therefore, we will repeat these protocols for undergraduate students for the spring semester, and we will also ask graduate students to provide evidence of a negative viral test upon their return to campus, in order to help ensure that we start the semester with a “clean slate.” The ongoing targeted surveillance testing in which we engaged this semester will continue throughout the spring, as will the availability of testing to any student who requests it.

Further information regarding testing, including on-campus test dates, location, scheduling, and how to submit results of off-campus tests will be forthcoming.

STUDY ABROAD

Unfortunately, we have made the difficult decision to cancel most study abroad experiences for spring, including semester-long programs in Morocco, France, and Spain as well as all short-term travel courses. We do have a small number of students continuing with plans to study in Iceland next semester, given the unique circumstances of that country. While I know that this is disappointing to those students who had hoped to travel, I hope you will understand that this decision was made with your health and safety as our top priority.

ATHLETICS

The presidents of the colleges and universities in the Commonwealth Coast Conference met on Nov. 9 to discuss the status of winter and spring sports. At that time, we made the decision to continue with plans to maintain the suspension of intercollegiate competition for the time being. We will meet again in late January to make a final determination about winter sports competition, to be announced no later than Feb. 1. We will continue monitoring the pandemic and will be prepared to begin competition if and when we can do so safely. We are hopeful that, in addition to some kind of limited winter sports competition, we will be able to provide a spring season that is as normal as possible. We also hope to be able to revisit some kind of competition of fall sports in the spring. Even while intercollegiate competition is not possible, our coaches and athletics staff are working hard to ensure meaningful experiences for our athletic teams, including inter-team scrimmages, and I thank all of our student-athletes for their patience and understanding as we navigate these challenging circumstances surrounding college athletics.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

As we enter the last few weeks of this difficult semester, I want to send my best wishes to the students who are now studying remotely. I also want to acknowledge those students who are still coming to campus to engage in important hands-on learning and research. No matter where you are, I hope that you will continue to be vigilant in adhering to CDC guidelines and protecting yourself and others against the spread of COVID-19. As we follow promising news of vaccine development, we know that it will be some time before that vaccine is widely available, and it is up to all of us to continue to wear masks, avoid gatherings, and practice good hand hygiene in order to keep one another healthy so that we can return for another successful semester on campus.

Collectively, we've learned a lot from the fall term about how to live with the virus, and, despite the recent surge, our experiences have positioned us well for the spring. With highly effective vaccines on the horizon, we can now begin to envision a time when the pandemic is behind us, when we will be able to gather in groups, dine together, work together, learn together, and play together. However, our success this spring is dependent upon the continuation of close adherence to the UNE Onward guidelines, both on and off campus. There is light at the end of the tunnel, but we must brave this last leg of the journey with the same spirit that we demonstrated in the fall. Come next Thanksgiving, we will all be grateful for the extra care and caution we exercise this spring during the final stretch of our road back to normalcy.

James D. Herbert
President