March 23, 2020

Dear Colleagues,

Like our counterparts around the world, the University of Massachusetts finds itself thrust into a moment of almost unimaginable challenge, but as we move forward to confront the COVID-19 pandemic, I have been heartened and inspired by all that I see in the UMass community's energetic, compassionate, multifaceted response.

As the crisis set in, our first challenge was to protect students, faculty and staff on our densely populated campuses. The dangers posed by clustering nearly 100,000 people together on five campuses quickly became apparent, and the chancellors and their teams, working with state and federal public-health officials, did a remarkable job in taking the steps needed to protect the well-being of their communities. The logistics of moving and keeping people off campus are tremendously challenging, but campus leaders performed in exemplary fashion. Students, faculty, and staff understood what was at stake and joined together to accomplish this epic feat.

Although our campuses are unusually quiet, the wheels of teaching and learning are still spinning, thanks to the expertise and ingenuity on each campus and throughout the UMass system. As the commonwealth's public research university, UMass has a special obligation to preserve the state's social and economic well-being. Therefore, it is particularly important that we, to the fullest extent possible, maintain our academic programs and meet the educational needs of our 75,000 students – who in turn will meet the state's future needs and keep Massachusetts moving forward.

We need to educate and innovate -- and play a major role in the commonwealth's return to full greatness. We must be the University OF Massachusetts, and the University FOR Massachusetts.

There are many activities across the system that are demonstrating our collective ability to move UMass and Massachusetts forward. Here are just a few examples:

- Remote learning classes are underway at all the UMass campuses. This required a tremendous amount of work and creativity by all involved, from our system IT professionals to UMassOnline to dedicated faculty and staff on each campus. Twenty years of experience in delivering quality online learning has positioned us to succeed as we roll out a broader remote learning initiative. There is no doubt that quality online learning opportunities will be a big part of our future.
- A limited number of students who need shelter remain in the campus residence halls, with decisions being made on a case-by-case basis.
- System and campus finance leaders continue to study all of the financial questions posed by the crisis, including the issue of adjusting some of the room and board fees paid by students.
- Nearly all of the university’s 18,000 faculty and staff are working remotely at least through April 3.
- UMass Medical and UMass Lowell have made donations of personal protective equipment (masks, gloves, etc.) to local hospitals to supplement dwindling supplies.
UMass Boston has launched a fundraising campaign for its student emergency fund, as well as a campaign to purchase laptops for students who need them for remote learning.

UMass Dartmouth re-commissioned 200 laptops so students could continue their classes remotely.

UMass Amherst Professor Nicholas Reich, director of the Flu Forecasting Center of Excellence, joined 20 of the world’s leading infectious disease and pandemic modelers for a White House-organized online forum.

By any measure, we find ourselves confronting circumstances that few of us ever could have imagined. States of emergency exist at the state and federal levels. Many of us are leading lives that would have seemed unrecognizable just weeks ago. And, this could just be the beginning. The beginning of a redefined world that will last how long? No one knows.

But, we are a resilient community, and this is our defining hour. Our mission is to keep this great institution and its people safe and strong. From what I have seen, we are off to a very good start.

Sincerely,

Martin T. Meehan
President, University of Massachusetts

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