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Office of the President

Maine Memo – September 1

“The University of Maine in Fall 2020: Learning, Discovering, and Partnering with Inclusive Excellence as the Core”

September 1, 2020 [President's Messages](#)

Fall 2020 Convocation remarks

The University of Maine recognizes that it is located on Marsh Island in the homeland of the Penobscot Nation, where issues of water and territorial rights, and encroachment upon sacred sites, are ongoing. Penobscot homeland is connected to the other Wabanaki Tribal Nations — the Passamaquoddy, Maliseet, and Micmac — through kinship, alliances, and diplomacy. The university also recognizes that the Penobscot Nation and the other Wabanaki Tribal Nations are distinct, sovereign, legal and political entities with their own powers of self-governance and self-determination.

WELCOME

Welcome to everyone. Those who would have been with me in the Collins Center, all seated at our new well-ingrained 6-foot distance — thank you for your flexibility in participating instead by Zoom when we changed our plans. Most particularly, thank you to the members of the class of 2024 at the University of Maine and the University of Maine at Machias. Welcome, too, to other students, faculty and staff, and families and friends who are with us. Thank you for being here at the Fall Convocation to launch the 2020–2021 academic year — a year with its own set of firsts, challenges, and opportunities.

I would like to thank Chancellor Malloy for his welcoming remarks and recognize members of the UMS Board of Trustees, UMaine and UMM Boards of Visitors, and all alumni who have joined today.

And, I want to thank our students — the nearly 12,000 of you who are enrolled and have started fall 2020 with us. Almost 2,200 of you are first-year students, coming from 38 countries and 48 states. About one-fourth of you are the first in your families to attend college. And of those who reported race and ethnicity, 16% of you report being African American, Black, LatinX, Asian, Native American, or multi-ethnic.

You and your families have made the choice to pursue higher education, a choice that has profound consequences for the options you will have in your future, and that of your children and grandchildren. And you have chosen the University of Maine or our coastal campus, with our world-class faculty (Did you hear about the \$100 million investment made by international corporations this summer in our floating offshore wind technologies?), our nearly 100 different majors and programs, our frontier research and scholarly work happening in dozens of laboratories and facilities across the state of Maine — and, actually, around the world, (Did you know that UMaine faculty and students took part in the National Geographic and Rolex Perpetual Planet Everest Expedition last year, and that doctoral candidate Mariusz Potocki drilled and collected the highest ice core on the planet?), and our reputation for outstanding, caring instruction and exceptional research learning opportunities. You've made great choices — and I guarantee your time here will make you all the more sure those were the right choices.

I'm beginning my third year here as your president. Based on those three years of data I can tell you we might get one more spell of warmer weather. This is a caring, kind, and empathetic community that I know is already welcoming you.

I still have my notes from when people told about their favorite spots on campus to visit, their favorite places in Maine, and about where to see a moose (the first and only one I've seen was on the way to Machias). And after two years, I've added my own favorites to the list (For instance, go take a walk in the Littlefield Garden on Rangeley Road.) If you are new to Maine, you will find your own places and favorites, and if you have been here, I know you will help those who are new to get to know this beautiful and welcoming place.

I'm enjoying seeing what's happening on campus this week: the names of our first-year students scrolling on the scoreboard by the Alford Stadium, a preview of four years from now; students figuring out how to connect while wearing face coverings, taking a quiet moment at a picnic table under a beautiful Norway spruce, reading the lovely inscriptions on the fire pits at Machias, or checking out the bald eagles that fish along the Stillwater River. I can see you working to maintain 6-foot distance, and not gathering in crowds, while playing Frisbee or kicking around a soccer ball. I thank you for recognizing that following the Black Bear and Clippers pacts are every bit as vital now to your continued learning as it is to following your course syllabus. And it is critical to the success of our university communities this year in ways we don't yet even fully understand.

So, although none of your first day of school pictures (your parents and families still want those, you know) in the last several years, or ever, have you wearing a face covering, now they do — and you are breaking new ground, being university students in 2020.

CONTEXT

We come together at the beginning of this academic year with coronavirus among us in ways that pervade everything, from how we gather, how we teach and learn, how we stay healthy, and how we commit to taking care of one another. In less than six months, this deadly virus has forced us to transform our research and the way we do it, and to rethink the purposes of our partnerships in ways that are reshaping us as a university.

We come together at the beginning of this academic year amidst national waves of unrest and urgent demands for racial justice, in the wake of the deaths of Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, and George Floyd, and the shooting of Jacob Blake. The quest for racial justice, for dismantling structural racism in our educational institutions, and for taking actions now also pervade and reshape us as a university. If you didn't participate in the five-day online Racial Justice Challenge, I recommend it. It was offered by the UMaine Office for Diversity and Inclusion and the Fogler Library in August. You can find it at <https://libguides.library.umaine.edu/racial-justice>. It made me personally think very hard about some fundamental issues.

And we come together at the beginning of this academic year as our planet faces the ongoing threats of climate change. Hotter temperatures, rising sea levels, extreme weather, and the effects of all of these on some of the world's most vulnerable people must be part of the conversation. I hope you know that University of Maine research to better understand climate change and its impacts is internationally acclaimed and reshaping our world. Learn about the work of the Climate Change Institute, and look at the great data available in their Climate Reanalyzer.

Class of 2024, welcome to a momentous time — for the world, the nation, the state of Maine, Orono and Machias, and for you as a class and as individuals. Know that, through your experiences here at UMaine, YOU can make a difference. YOU can be part of the solution. And yes, YOU can enjoy college and thrive here at the University of Maine. And I'll offer some ideas about how.

CONVOCATION/TRADITIONS

A convocation is “a group of people formally assembled for a special purpose” Convocations in universities are an established academic tradition dating back centuries. The occasion is both ceremonial and celebratory — and, of course, how we conduct ceremonies, and what and how we celebrate, change with time and context. At UMaine, convocation is meant to focus on the richness of academic life — and it says on the website: “Attendance by all new students is expected.”

“Your academic life” will have some features never before experienced in the college life of generations of Black Bears and Clippers before you (except for those here in 1918 during the H1N1 virus of that time, who did attend athletic events wearing masks at UMaine). And when we say “attendance is expected” today, it means we hope you are here, watching online, either synchronously or asynchronously.

This is a good time to remind you that you should stay at home if you have COVID-19 symptoms:

- Fever or chills
- Cough
- Shortness of breath or difficulty breathing
- Fatigue
- Muscle or body aches
- Headache
- New loss of taste or smell
- Sore throat
- Congestion or runny nose
- Nausea or vomiting
- Diarrhea

This is possibly the first-ever UMaine convocation speech to list disease symptoms.

UNIVERSITIES/UNIVERSITY OF MAINE, TODAY

I can't imagine any place to work that is more rewarding, more engaging, and more energizing than a university — and, yes, a university in the fall of 2020. For one thing, every year brings newness, a reset, and a freshness that inspire and motivate us.

The bold, innovative Arizona State University president Michael Crow said “COVID is just a sign of global complexity, a sign of global interconnectedness ... a chance for public universities to truly democratize access to higher education.”

At UMaine, this interconnectedness — among all in our community, with the state of Maine, and beyond — is core to what we do. We are able to be back here because people came together — experts in public health, immunologists, custodians, facilities crews, public safety folks, university administrators, system leaders, financial aid staff, professors, local landlords, and town leaders — and now, all of you.

And for me, interconnectedness means we must live, not just talk about, our core of inclusive excellence — all day, every day. We can't democratize higher education, as Crow reminds us we must do, without understanding that talent and potential are everywhere and we must be a place of diversity. We can't claim to be about social empowerment if not all in the community are empowered to do their work well and to reach for their dreams, unfettered by structural racism, and the invisible and visible barriers that it creates.

So we, coming together so much as a community in part because of COVID, we need to look past our face coverings and look more closely than 6 feet to be sure, consistent, and constant in our commitment to valuing what each person brings to this educational enterprise. This rich array of our collective experiences is the major asset for our collective learning.

Both the University of Maine and the University of Maine at Machias have special places in the history of Maine that relate to the message of inclusive excellence and connectedness.

UMaine Machias was established in 1909 as Washington State Normal School, and it had a mission of preparing teachers for Washington County. Preparing teachers meant providing education for the children and young people of Washington County. You can't be more focused on inclusive excellence than that.

The University of Maine came into existence earlier, through the Morrill Act, as the Maine State College of Agriculture and the Mechanic Arts, in 1866–67. The goal of the nation's new “land grant” universities was to “promote the liberal and practical education of the industrial classes.” Today, the University of Maine, Maine's research university, is a land, sea and space grant institution.

And, as we express in our land acknowledgment, it is central to our history and central today that the University of Maine is also home of the Penobscot Nation, and the University of Maine at Machias is close to the Passamaquoddy Nation. The voices and leadership of native faculty, staff, students, and community members must be core at the University of Maine. My special gratitude to Ambassador (and UMaine alumna!) Maulian Dana for taking the time to be with us today.

So, from the beginnings, the existential reason for the University of Maine has been to serve the state of Maine and to educate its people for the social empowerment that comes with education in public universities.

What does serving the state look like in this moment? And how can you be a part of it? Well, one strong lesson for me in the past six months is that universities — and, specifically, this university — are ever-changing, responsive and proactive institutions, driven by the people that comprise them. Universities carry on the centuries-old traditions of building new knowledge and passing that knowledge on to new generations who will then build their own new knowledge. But, at the same time, this university has done far more. We have built new knowledge in real time to address the needs of this state as they are unfolding. We have helped with the advanced manufacturing needs for PPE, to GIS mapping for coastal communities for coping with flooding, to helping farmers connect to those who need their products, to making Maine a leader in renewable energy through floating offshore wind technologies. What has been most rewarding to watch, and you will see it soon if you haven't already, is the way that our university enfolds its work in learning, leading, and partnering into the complexities and needs of the times. Many of your professors are engaged in this work and you will have the chance to engage with them.

UMaine scientists and their students have shaped how this re-opening is happening, using their knowledge of virology, epidemiology, statistics, and mathematical modeling to work on one of the most interdisciplinary, urgent, and relevant problems ever. What does the science tell us about face coverings? About distancing? About frequency and type of testing and retesting? Check out the work of the UMS Scientific Advisory Board on my Office of the President website.

UMaine historians have drawn on the scholarly practices of their disciplines to help a UMaine committee make recommendations about the renaming of C.C. Little Hall, and how that renaming becomes a chance to use history to better understand the present. See the committee's report, also on my website.

UMaine faculty and staff in the performing arts have found new ways to bring us music, dance, and theater, and to be sure that we don't leave out a class or a generation experiencing this critical part of our human experience. Take some time to watch the performances of the 10 finalists in the Maine Talent Showcase, available on the Collins Center for the Arts website.

There are UMaine faculty members who did everything from finishing their book manuscripts, to writing successful grant proposals they hadn't planned to write, to learning how to teach with new technologies, to helping create new companies, to analyzing the state's economy, to redesigning courses so that students can gather their data where they are. There are UMaine staff who have created and provided everything from hand sanitizer stations to space analyses of our classrooms, to reviews of hundreds of safe reopening plans for elements of our operations. Students participated in conversations about what “COVID literacy” should look like, in a roundtable on race that I hosted, in the Maine Hello welcome and the testing processes, and in designing new, safe experiences in student life. This is a vibrant place.

Experts in research-based teaching and learning have been working with faculty all summer to help them design, refine, and create learning experiences for all of you, that will meet you where you are, while at the same time staying focused on learning goals and providing the highest-

quality education for which we are known.

This is a place that is about connectedness, about community, and about excellence in including everyone.

And now we have had two days to begin to see how it works. Students and faculty, I am so eager to hear how this unfolds for you. I know that faculty are fully committed to being compassionate and being flexible — students, I hope that you can see that.

I plan to visit classrooms in the coming weeks to see firsthand what these hybrid deliveries, new face-to-face, and online and remote approaches look like. Students, we need to hear from you, because this is all really about you. Be in touch with your professors, your advisors, faculty in your departments, counselors, residence life folks — and let them know what all of us can do to make it better. Be in touch with me at umpresident@maine.edu. Or sign up to talk with me during my office hours. I will do my part in making our community strong, with your help.

In last year's fall convocation I offered four messages. I'd like to edit them a bit for today.

1. Create new adventures and learn from them — safely; and as the Black Bear and Clipper pacts say, protect yourself.
2. Seek out people who are different from you and learn with them — and do your part to break down the barriers that prevent inclusive excellence and that promote systemic racism.
3. Define what success in this experience will mean for you and let us know — this is a moment for creating new ways of learning and being in college and you need to do your part.
4. Don't overthink it, make a difference, and have fun — safely.

This is a time that demands creativity, new solutions, and commitment to change and transformation by all of us. And to make those solutions work, to transform our university for these times, demands that we do this, together, with new models for interconnectedness. Another university president whom I have admired for many years, Freeman Hrabowski at the University of Maryland Baltimore County, recently said “when people feel they are part of a community, they have the support they need to make it through. It gives them hope.”

Being a community, making it through, and having hope are what we are all about. Be well, and join together in creating a new “richness of academic life” at the University of Maine and the University of Maine at Machias. You can change today and define tomorrow.

Thank you for taking the time today to be part of a continuing tradition in academia. Let me express my gratitude to Dr. Kimberly Whitehead, UMaine Vice President and Chief of Staff, and the full planning committee for putting together this event with creativity and resourcefulness. Thanks, too, to all who have helped in making this event happen. To those providing technical support, to all people making remarks today in any form, and to our outstanding musicians — I thank you.

Black Bears and Clippers — have a wonderful academic year!