

Special USM Board of Regents Meeting
Update on COVID-19 Preparations and Guidance
Statement by USM Chancellor Jay A. Perman
March 16, 2020

COMMUNICATION/STANDING MEETINGS

I first want to echo Chair Gooden's point that frequent and open communication is absolutely essential to effectively managing instruction and operations during this period of COVID-19 threat. We must ensure that our institutions are acting in concert with System guidelines, with state and federal mandates, and with one another.

To that end, I have a standing phone call with all university presidents and regional center directors every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday—so that we can update each other on our implementation of the recommendations and share any issues that arise. We also share, in real time, all of the communications that we're issuing to our respective communities.

In addition, the System's senior leaders are in constant contact with their university counterparts to ensure that everyone is on the same page with regard to policies and protocols. And the System's leadership team, itself, has a standing phone call every morning to identify and close any gaps we see in implementation.

As you know, circumstances are changing rapidly, as leaders at the state and national levels take more dramatic precautions to inhibit spread of the virus. And we've been responding in kind.

USM AS A PUBLIC GOOD

Before I update you on the actions we're taking, I do want to make a statement regarding the fundamental nature of the University System and its role in Maryland. Specifically, I want to affirm that the institutions within the University System are a **public good**.

Part of our role as a public good means keeping our students, faculty, and staff as safe as we can. That does, indeed, entail keeping them away from one another—as much as is possible. We have a special obligation to those who are at highest risk from COVID-19: people over age 60, those with chronic health conditions, and those who are immunocompromised.

However, keeping in mind our obligations to student and employee safety, USM institutions will remain open—to the degree possible—so that we can carry out our public missions in education, research, and service.

Specifically, some campus facilities and personnel services will be needed to prepare students and faculty for distance-learning and to support operations through this period of remote instruction. We'll need to maintain our research capabilities, especially as they relate to

improving and safeguarding the human condition for the duration of this COVID-19 crisis, and to protecting our national security interests. We will continue to provide essential patient and client services for those who rely on our care and counseling. And we will continue to provide housing, dining, and other vital services for those students who remain on our campuses without any reasonable way to go home.

DISTANCE-LEARNING

Our biggest advantage right now in containing the spread of COVID-19 is the fact that most of our students are off campus and on spring break. You'll recall that students will remain off campus for at least two weeks following spring break as we implement distance-learning. We're realistic that this timeframe could be extended as new guidance is issued, and as we learn more about the rate of infection and our effectiveness in mitigating the spread.

We realize that large-scale distance-learning isn't how most of our institutions typically provide instruction, and we've circulated resources to the universities to optimize learning in this online environment. We've reminded them, as well, to work with their ADA offices to provide accommodations for all students who need them.

ROOM & BOARD

We know that an extended period of distance-learning has implications for the money that families spend on room and board. We hear the concerns of families, and this week we'll have guidance on how we can honor our responsibilities to them.

Clearly, it's tough to make decisions before we know, with any degree of certainty, the length of time that students will be off campus. But our financial officers have top-of-mind this obligation to compensate students and families for services that are going unused. They'll be developing and disseminating models this week—again, based on some unknowns—to see what can be done.

COUNSELING SERVICES

We're also mindful of our students who receive mental and behavioral health counseling services—and of the potential disruption in those services for students who've returned home. The universities' student affairs deans and counseling center directors are working with the System Office and with the national associations to urge the relaxation of practice rules so that we can continue to support students across state lines.

TELEWORK

In addition to mandating distance-learning, last Thursday I asked all USM universities to move their employees to a telework environment, meaning that all non-essential employees approved for telework should already be working remotely, or preparing to do so immediately. We shared guidance with the presidents temporarily relaxing some of our telework policies so that we can be sure we have as many employees as possible working off campus. It's worth noting that our

telework protocols and recommendations are consistent with the guidance issued by DBM for state employees.

In an inventory of USM presidents, we're seeing that most institutions now have 80 percent or more of their employees working remotely. Obviously, some staff will *not* be able to work remotely—for instance, those providing services for students who remain on campus, and those essential to maintaining our facilities, our technology infrastructure, and certain administrative functions. For these employees, we will follow all state and federal health protocols, including cleaning and sanitizing campus facilities, limiting the number of people who may congregate in one place, and implementing social distancing.

Today, we issued guidance for employees who are not able to telework but meet one of the CDC's high-risk criteria—again, that's older adults; people with underlying medical conditions; and those with compromised immune systems. To protect their health and safety, we're asking them to work with their HR offices to use available leave or to request an excused absence with pay.

GATHERINGS

As you know, yesterday the CDC issued revised guidance on gatherings, reducing the recommended number of people allowed to congregate to just 50. Hours ago, President Trump further reduced that guidance to 10. Our Governor has been bold in his actions to curb large gatherings—today closing bars, clubs, restaurants, movie theaters, and gyms.

Obviously, this guidance applies to all on-campus gatherings as well. And frankly, with our students and employees learning and working remotely (for the most part), I can't imagine there would be many opportunities for gatherings to approach—much less exceed—50 people. Ten people seems well within a realistic range.

I know that universities that still have a small number of students on campus are implementing practices—like grab-and-go lunches—that discourage the clustering of students. And, once again, any time people are gathered on campus, I expect that they will practice social distancing.

Additionally, the USM presidents are reminding students of their obligations to be prudent when getting together *off* campus, to limit the size of their gatherings, to practice social distancing, and to keep top-of-mind that we *all* have a civic responsibility to protect the safety of those whose health is more compromised than our own.

STUDY ABROAD AND INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

In light of increasingly restrictive travel guidance from President Trump and the leaders of other nations, I've asked our USM universities to recall all students studying abroad—irrespective of the country or continent hosting the program. The universities have been in contact with one another so that, where possible, they might coordinate getting students home.

I've also asked universities to strongly discourage their international students from traveling to their home countries over spring break, given the significant possibility that return to the U.S. will be severely limited—and could be for some time. This guidance, too, applies to international students from all countries.

EMPLOYEE TRAVEL

I've advised all universities to prohibit out-of-state, work-related travel for their faculty and staff. This is guidance that's rather resolving itself in real time, given that virtually all national, regional, and state meetings have been canceled, postponed, or taken to an online platform.

WEB RESOURCES

I understand that this is a lot of information to take in. Fortunately, our website is updated continually with the guidance we're issuing. The website is usmd.edu/coronavirus, and I urge you to visit it regularly for the latest information. Thank you; this concludes my update.

###