



MONTANA UNIVERSITY SYSTEM
OFFICE OF COMMISSIONER OF HIGHER EDUCATION

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To: Montana Board of Regents; Montana University System Chief Executive Officers;
Montana Community College Presidents; Governor Steve Bullock

From: Clayton T. Christian, Commissioner of Higher Education

Date: November 23, 2020

Subject: **COVID-19 UPDATE | Giving Thanks and Looking Ahead**

While every meeting of the Board of Regents offers an opportunity to take stock of the important work happening throughout the Montana University System, last week's meeting left a particularly strong impression on me. As we near the end of a semester unlike any other for the Montana University System, I want to send a clear and direct message to you and every student and employee on your campus: your unshakable, unending commitment to teaching, learning, research, service - *and to each other* - has changed lives for the better and produced a positive impact on Montana's communities and economy that will be felt for generations.

As I learn more about the way in which faculty and staff have gone out of their way to support success for all students, or the statewide research that is helping Montana – and the world – effectively combat the COVID-19 pandemic, there is no doubt in my mind that your efforts have made these past months the most inspiring of my professional life. I know it has not been easy. Thank you.

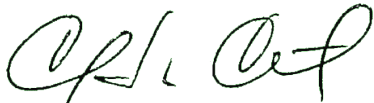
As we look beyond the current semester, my office continues to partner with the MUS Board of Regents, campus leadership, state and local public health authorities, and other statewide authorities to develop direction that prioritizes health, safety, and a high quality experience for our students and employees. I write today with guidance for MUS campuses regarding the upcoming winter break, the Spring 2021 Semester, and plans for the 2021-2022 Academic Year.

1. **Engaging Students During Winter Break.** Campuses should continue their laser focus on student engagement throughout the holiday season. Whether it is through "Wintermester" academic programming, easily accessible mental health supports for students and employees, enhanced communication from campus academic advisors, social media campaigns, or other specialized strategies, campuses should make every effort possible to maximize student engagement, mental health, and retention during this extended break between fall and spring semesters. **Campuses should also clearly, frequently, and widely communicate their expectations for students with respect minimizing risk from Covid-19 during the winter break and particularly in advance of their return to campuses in January.**
2. **Spring 2021 Instruction and Campus Life.** Campuses should continue planning for a spring semester that looks largely like the current fall semester: mostly in-person instruction and student life, with enhanced quality of online, video, and blended learning opportunities. Faculty should continue to be prepared to transition their courses to video and/or online delivery if necessary, with minimal disruption to course learning and schedules. As communicated in my memorandum earlier this fall, the Spring Break period should be used as an instructional period.

In all instances, in-person meetings should continue to meet or exceed standards for social distancing, mask wearing, and hygiene.

3. **Planning for Academic Year 2021-2022.** While it is not too early to begin some planning for the next academic year, there is still too much long term uncertainty about the COVID-19 pandemic to offer any direct guidance to campuses regarding academic calendars, instructional approaches, or student life for the 2021-2022 Academic Year. At this point, my office is encouraging campuses retain as much flexibility and patience as possible, and to coordinate with my office before publicly announcing, publishing, or otherwise advertising specific plans beyond the Spring 2021 semester. As we learn more about vaccines, therapeutics, testing capacity, and the virus itself, it will become possible for OCHE to offer more definitive direction to campuses.

With Thanksgiving just around the corner, I feel a special gratitude for the MUS community to which we belong. I am so very proud to count you all as colleagues. While we have much hard work in front of us, we will tackle it together and emerge, successful, as part of one Montana University System.



Clayton T. Christian
Commissioner of Higher Education