# CHANCELLOR'S MESSAGE
## FROM JAY A. PERMAN

**UNIVERSITY SYSTEM of MARYLAND**

## A Year That's Tested Us All: COVID and the Challenges of Leadership

When I took on the USM chancellorship in January, there was no way to know my tenure would, in less than two months' time, become consumed with one challenge above all others. COVID-19 has upended everything we do in higher education.

Midway through the spring semester, we scrambled to safely return students home, adapt our courses to online delivery, and support students and employees through a crisis that was clearly taking a toll on their mental health and financial well-being. We'd barely completed this spring transition when we had to begin preparing for a fall that would look far different from any other.

### NOVEMBER 2020

**A Fall Semester Unlike Any Other**

**USM *OnTrack*: Providing Robust Online Learning Experiences**

**Taking the USM's COVID-19 Response to the Next Level**

Colleges and universities nationwide had to decide whether to continue online-only instruction into the new academic year or, instead, attempt some on-campus teaching. The fact that there was no dearth of articles—certainly no dearth of quick opinions—on which choice was the right one belied the decision's immense complexity. And the public narrative forming around "online" vs. "on-campus" positioned the two approaches as mutually exclusive, when, of course, they're not.

For us, "returning to campus" never meant that everyone would come back. While we *wish* our universities were teeming with students, the fact is that less than half our total student population is on campus this fall. The majority of classes aren't taught in a traditional face-to-face format. Some are remote or online-only; some are hybrid, with face-to-face sessions supplementing online work. This "de-densifying" of our campuses—together with a regimen of COVID testing, symptom monitoring, and disease prevention protocols—is central to our ability to control virus spread.

Understanding the extraordinary amount of effort this approach requires, it's reasonable to ask why we did it at all. The answer comes down to the nature of the work we do, and who we do it *for*.

First, some of our teaching does require in-person interaction or demonstration, in-person performance or observation. To become a nurse, a speech-language pathologist, a dancer, a cellist, there must be some in-person work. Lab courses, studio courses, clinical rotations, practicums, experiential learning of all kinds—they require some face-to-face hours.

Then, too, some of our students need the intensive support and sense of belonging that a campus provides: students with nowhere else to go; students who are unsafe or stressed financially; students without access to technology or connectivity or even a quiet place to study. On-campus supports are especially critical to those hit hardest by the COVID crisis, those we most fear we'll lose and maybe never get back—low-income students, first-generation students, among them, students of color.

*I took a walk around the beautiful Bowie State University campus last month with President Aminta Breaux. I look forward to seeing BSU bustling again.*

I'm not arguing that we can't accomplish our educational mission while we're apart. We've spent months innovating instructional design, adapting courses to distance delivery, and helping faculty strengthen their online teaching skills. And yet still, we believe that fulfilling our mission, that serving our students, is easier when we're connected.

So far, things are going as well as things can go in the age of coronavirus. We understood from the outset that our campuses wouldn't be COVID-free—and they're not. And yet cases are being managed. Positivity rates are mostly down. Regular reporting keeps students, faculty, staff, and neighbors apprised of disease prevalence and risk. Students who want to maintain the privilege of an on-campus experience are, by and large, following the rules we've laid down for doing so. And, through it all, state and local health departments have been our constant collaborators and guides.

Across the System, our research—already a $1.5 billion enterprise—has risen to the COVID challenge. Faculty are leading dozens of R&D projects to prevent COVID infection, inhibit disease transmission, and develop more effective treatments. The USM's COVID Research & Innovation Taskforce is working with government, business, and industry to battle pandemics present and future.

For all of these bright spots in an otherwise dark time, this is *not* my "mission accomplished" moment. Far from it. I can't see the future, and I don't know whether our best efforts in this fight against COVID will be enough. Already, some of our universities have had to adjust their approaches in response to climbing cases.

But right now, I'm glad we've tried. I'm glad we've tried hard to fulfill our obligations in education, research, and service; to maintain quality and continuity in our instruction; to help the students who most need our support; and to keep our people safe when the very concept of safety feels elusive.

I'm glad I put my faith in the System's faculty and staff, who've worked so hard to provide an education worthy of the USM's name. And I'm glad for the trust of our students, who remind us every day why we took on this work in the first place.


Sincerely,

*Jay A Perman*

Jay A. Perman
Chancellor, University System of Maryland

## A Fall Semester Unlike Any Other

This past spring, as the COVID-19 pandemic forced colleges across the country to transition to remote instruction, leadership from the University System of Maryland began the challenging process of determining the conditions that needed to be in place to ensure a safe return to campus in the fall. This effort was driven by an understanding that a safe and responsible return to campus was in the best interest of the System's students and vitally important to the communities that USM institutions serve.

The Return to Campus Advisory Group—a group of individuals from across the USM representing university-based academic and administrative operations, as well as key constituencies—was established so that individual campus decisions were guided by a common set of considerations, as well as federal, state, and local public health guidance. This return was envisioned as a hybrid model, with some in-person instruction, but with most classes conducted online. From the very beginning, the health of students, faculty, and staff was established as the top priority.

An extraordinary amount of work took place leading up to the fall semester. Institutional leaders worked around the clock. Professionals in admissions, registration, financial aid, and student services worked intensively and creatively to enroll, orient, retain, and support students. There were virtual recruitment events and campus tours. Early advising for new and transfer students—tailored to respond to the unique challenges they face this year—also went virtual. Laptops, tablets, and hotspots were provided to students without access to adequate technology. Financial aid was increased, and student emergency funds were expanded to meet the climbing need. Faculty members put in long hours to keep students actively engaged and achieving.

*University of Maryland, College Park President Darryll Pines took me on a tour of classrooms, dining halls, and housing so I could see firsthand how the university is keeping everyone safe.*



Of course, even as this work was taking place, USM leadership acknowledged the reality of the situation. This crisis—and the way it has affected higher education—is unprecedented. Conditions are changing constantly, and guidance is being revised accordingly. And so the USM's fall plans were designed to be nimble, able to respond to data in real time, and quickly adjusted as conditions require.

This commitment to flexibility has been a decisive factor in the USM's efforts this fall. Understanding the unique missions of each institution, the differences in student populations, and the diverse regions in which our universities are located, it was clear that a one-size-fits-all solution would never be practical.

And as anticipated, different institutions have taken different paths as needed. The University of Maryland, College Park kept classes completely online for the first two weeks of school. Confronting a number of positive cases among students that contact tracing couldn't explain, Towson University pivoted to an online-only semester. When Salisbury University saw an escalation in cases, university officials notified the campus and the community and, with the Wicomico County Health Department, began intensive efforts to contain the spread. Other USM institutions, while ready to adapt if needed, are progressing with the semester as originally envisioned, with a mix of online and in-person instruction.

The challenges are by no means over; the COVID-19 pandemic will persist for the foreseeable future. But the USM, with its commitment to a deliberate, thoughtful, and adaptive approach, is well-positioned and ready to act.

## USM *OnTrack*:
## Providing Robust Online Learning Experiences For All Students

This past spring, colleges and universities across the country were forced to make an immediate transition to what has been dubbed "emergency remote teaching." While necessary in the short-term given the unprecedented circumstances, this approach—marked by recorded lectures, Zoom classes, and the like—would not work as a long-term solution. It was clear, however, that a significant portion of fall 2020 instruction would still need to be carried out online. To meet that challenge, USM institutions had to improve both their technology infrastructure and their teaching methods in order to create a more effective and engaging online learning environment.

Over the past several months, the USM has worked diligently to support and improve online educational capabilities, and today students are indeed taking online classes that are more engaging and fulfilling.

A critical component of this progress is USM *OnTrack*, a $2.6 million partnership between the University of Maryland Global Campus (UMGC), one of the world's leading online learning institutions, and the USM's William E. Kirwan Center for Academic Innovation, a national leader in higher education transformation. Capitalizing on UMGC's expertise and the Kirwan Center's leadership, USM *OnTrack* has been working since June with provosts, teaching and learning center directors, instructional designers, technology professionals, and others to facilitate high-quality online learning across the USM.

USM *OnTrack* supports five primary avenues of success.

Institutions were provided the option of temporarily adopting off-the-shelf UMGC courses for their students this fall. This "friction-free" approach has the advantage of providing institutions with immediate access to online courses that have been proved effective, while still allowing students to register at their host institution. While no USM university took advantage of this option for the fall semester, it will remain available for the spring.

For institutions embracing more of a "do-it-yourself" approach, *OnTrack*—in conjunction with private instructional design service provider iDesign—is supporting online course conversion. This option features resources for faculty on the fundamentals of instructional design, access to best practices for online teaching, online orientation materials for students, and other support. To date, USM universities have received more than 750 hours of instructional design support to help adapt classroom-based courses for effective online delivery.

Institutions interested in a middle ground between these two approaches have the option of expanding the use of adaptive courseware. Adaptive courseware—paired with faculty training workshops—can improve the student and faculty experience by "flipping" the classroom, creating a more interactive platform for content delivery and interaction with faculty. More than 400 faculty members—from all 12 USM institutions—have been exploring these tools.

Working with Labster, the world's leading provider of virtual science labs, the USM is providing training and interinstitutional coordination for virtual reality technologies that provide students high-fidelity lab simulations. More than 72 courses offered by universities throughout the USM are using these virtual science labs, impacting more than 1,500 students.

Finally, all these initiatives are being supported with expanded and enhanced professional development to help faculty strengthen their online teaching strategies and skills. Through USM *OnTrack*, hundreds of faculty members from institutions across the USM participated in more than 90 workshops over the summer and into the fall, with additional workshops being planned for January 2021.
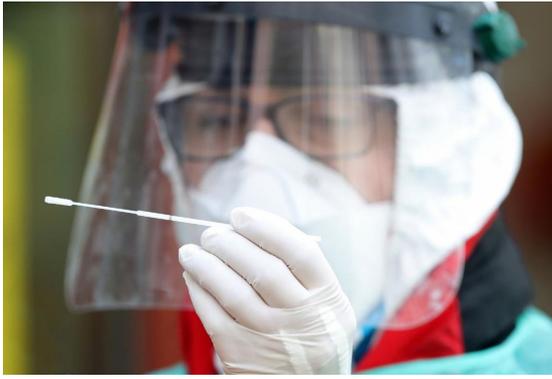
## Taking USM's COVID-19 Response to the Next Level

From the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, the USM's medical, engineering, and research enterprises have been focused on innovating ways to inhibit disease transmission and develop more effective treatments. This work requires focus, expertise, and coordination, and it's exactly the kind of work the University System of Maryland was built to do.

As part of this effort, USM Chancellor Jay A. Perman assembled the System's COVID Research & Innovation Task Force. The task force draws on the collective strength of the USM's 12 institutions and the innovation capacity of its three major research universities: the University of Maryland, Baltimore; the University of Maryland, College Park; and the University of Maryland, Baltimore County. As it works to develop and deploy Systemwide research that deepens our understanding of COVID-19 and advances our fight against it, the task force engages with policymakers, business, industry, and the entrepreneurial community to exchange ideas and move collaborative solutions into the marketplace.

The task force began by taking a full inventory of the USM's assets, capabilities, and talent engaged in the fight against COVID-19 in an effort to raise regional and national awareness of the System's work. The group has since been able to connect USM experts to local and state leaders to offer policy guidance, enhance protective measures, and advise businesses and civic organizations on how to safely return to their onsite work and service missions. The task force has brought new partners to the table, broadening the group's reach and catalyzing the development of adaptive technologies, medical devices, detection and testing methods, therapeutic approaches, and direct support to communities throughout the USM and the state.

This summer, in partnership with IBM, the task force sponsored a statewide App Challenge, in which teams of USM-affiliated students, faculty, staff, and entrepreneurs developed mobile applications addressing specific COVID challenges.

To amplify the System's impact over the long term, the task force is also exploring a more unified research effort to predict and prepare for future pandemics. As envisioned, this new partnership would conduct critical research and analyses enabling leaders across the U.S. to launch early and robust responses to future infectious disease outbreaks.



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