

## CHANCELLOR'S MESSAGE

FROM JAY A. PERMAN



### **Back Together, After So Long Apart**

I'd been chancellor of the University System of Maryland (USM) less than two months when the world as we knew it changed, when the semester we'd planned became something else entirely, when we began putting in place those things we needed to be apart rather than together.

And so I'm grateful that we can approach this coming academic year as one remarkable *not* for how different it is from years past, but for how similar we hope it will be. We expect full campuses and classrooms, activities that engage learners in college life and community service, and rich interactions that have a way of making us better students, better scholars, and better people.

Of course, the pandemic isn't over, and we'll monitor public health guidance and local conditions, enforcing COVID protocols as needed to protect campus and community safety. In the meantime, we look forward to some "normal," after a year that was anything but.



***Projections show USM enrollment returning to a steady pattern of growth, exceeding 181,000 students by 2030.***

That normal includes planning for the USM's future. Our strategic planning process has begun, and we're engaging the system's many and diverse stakeholders in setting a course for the USM, identifying our assets and challenges, so that we can deliver on our mission to serve the people of Maryland, to improve their health and the quality of their lives, and to advance equity, opportunity, and justice.

We're fortunate to have so many signing onto this mission with us. After a year that saw college enrollment shrink nationally, the USM is expecting more than 169,000 students this fall. And over the next decade, we're preparing for gradual growth.

Of course, at the USM, *who* we educate is just as important as how many: 79 percent of all USM students are Marylanders; 58 percent are students of color. Serving the state matters to us; living our core values of diversity, equity, and inclusion matters to us. Persistence and degree completion matter to us: Our six-year graduation rate last spring was 72 percent, well above the national average and an all-time high for the University System.

We can build on these attributes. We can make the USM a place that better nurtures student success; that's more inviting of innovation and discovery; that more intentionally translates its expertise and influence into policies and programs that enrich communities, across the state and around the world.

If the last year of crisis has taught us anything, it's that the University System is strong, our students are resilient, our people are dedicated, and our mission is worthy. The only thing better than celebrating this strength is celebrating it *together*. I can't wait to see you this fall.

Sincerely,



Jay A. Perman  
Chancellor  
University System of Maryland



## AROUND THE USM

### Students Are (Still) Choosing the USM

In the weeks ahead, students, faculty, and staff will return in full to USM campuses—for the first time since spring 2020. And while higher education pundits nationwide have rightly forecasted the pandemic's heavy toll on college-going plans, the USM predicts rather steady enrollment at its institutions. According to early estimates, we'll welcome (and welcome back) roughly 169,300 students across the system this fall—fewer than 1,000 students shy of last year's enrollment total.

Of that group, it's projected that 132,000 students will be undergraduates, and just over 13,000 of them will begin as first-time, full-time freshmen. Over the next decade, we expect gradual enrollment growth, climbing 7.4 percent between now and 2030.

Of course, strong enrollment numbers come not just from attracting new students to the system, but retaining the ones we already serve, making sure our students get the academic, financial, and social supports they need to stay in school and finish their degree. And this focus on improving student retention and degree completion is bearing fruit: 72 percent of first-time, full-time USM freshmen enrolling in fall 2014 had graduated by spring 2020. That six-year graduation rate is an all-time high for the USM, and significantly higher than the national six-year rate of 62 percent. Eighty-seven percent of USM freshmen who entered in fall 2019 returned for their sophomore year, another USM high.

The system continues its proud tradition of serving Maryland learners. In-state enrollment is expected to hold steady this year, with nearly 80 percent of USM students coming from Maryland. Every region and county of the state is represented among the student population. Women and men are nearly evenly divided among all students, at 52 percent and 48 percent, respectively.

Students of color continue to make up the majority of students across the system, with 58 percent of all students, and 57 percent of undergraduate students, identifying as non-white or as non-U.S. citizens. This diversity is no accident. Over the past several years, we've intensified our work to ensure that a USM education is accessible to all, regardless of race, ethnicity, or national origin.

A years-long effort to boost enrollment in areas of key workforce need has also paid off: Nearly 40,000 students enrolled this fall are majoring in the STEM disciplines and another 10,000 students are majoring in the health professions.



*Fifty-eight percent of all USM students identify as non-white or non-U.S. citizens.*

There's no doubt that the pandemic has hurt U.S. college students. COVID—and strategies pivotal to containing its spread—have cost students financially, stressed them emotionally, and challenged them academically. And yet the strength of the USM's enrollment projections shows our learners' resilience. Supporting them to success—through a pandemic that's far from over—is our top priority going forward.



*Across the USM, nearly 80 percent of students are from Maryland, representing every county in the state.*



## A Plan For All Seasons

When Jay Perman assumed the chancellorship of the USM in January 2020, the system's existing strategic plan—*The USM through 2020: A Renewed Vision for Powering Maryland Forward*—was approaching the end of its lifespan. Just as work on a new plan was being initiated, COVID-19 hit. Over the next several months, addressing the challenges brought on by the pandemic became the system's No. 1 priority. Work on an updated strategic plan was paused.

In retrospect, the issues that COVID brought to the fore underscored not just the need for a new strategic plan, but for one that squarely takes on some unanticipated challenges.



*Share your ideas on the USM's strategic plan: How can we deepen our value and amplify our impact?*

The pivot to remote instruction in spring 2020; the move to a hybrid model the following fall; financial hardship among low-income and first-generation students that the pandemic exacerbated; the reckoning on structural racism inside and outside our universities—the impact of all of these things needed to be incorporated into the strategic planning process from the very start.

Under the leadership of Chancellor Perman and Regent Geoff Gonella, chair of the USM Board of Regents Strategic Planning Working Group, the strategic planning process was revived in late 2020 with renewed urgency and vigor. An inclusive, participatory approach, engaging internal and external stakeholders, was begun with the goal of developing a visionary plan that not only supports student success but ultimately benefits all Marylanders.

The USM contracted with Huron, a leading higher education consulting group, in January 2021 to serve as an objective facilitator. Together, we initiated a four-phased approach to the strategic planning process.

> **Phase I, January–March**, consisted of data analysis and stakeholder engagement. Dozens of meetings and listening sessions with internal and external constituencies provided a baseline for the current state of the USM—our assets and opportunities; where we excel and where we can do better.

> **Phase II, March–May**, generated an environmental scan identifying trends in the higher education market and opportunities for new USM growth.

> **Phase III, concluding in August**, will produce a set of strategic options and actions for the chancellor and regents to review.

> **Phase IV ends in December** with the submission of the final plan. The plan will fully integrate the work of the Board of Regents Enrollment Workgroup and its Branding and

Marketing Taskforce.

While the process is ongoing, it's clear that the new plan is aimed at strengthening the USM's bedrock values of access and affordability, retention and completion, innovation and research, economic impact, and service. But these goals will be pursued with a sharper lens on equity, inclusion, and justice. Of course, no forward-looking plan can ignore new learning platforms, approaches, and strategies whose profile rose quickly during the pandemic. Without question, teaching and learning innovations will figure prominently in the plan. In these ways, ours will be a "both/and" plan—rather than an "either/or" plan—positioning the USM for long-term success while meeting our most immediate challenges.

The process and the plan will be made significantly better with more Marylanders sharing their perspectives. A [comment](#) page on our [Strategic Plan site](#) allows you to make your voice heard. As we look toward a "new normal" this fall, and new challenges throughout this decade, it will be this plan that sets our course and your ideas that shape the plan.

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## The "Now" Normal

Last year at this time, institutions across the USM were preparing for what became known as "a semester unlike any other." The work had begun months earlier, in the middle of the spring term. As institutions scrambled to safely return students home and pivot to emergency remote teaching, the groundwork was already being laid to create the conditions needed to bring them back to campus in fall 2020.



***USM universities look forward to welcoming 13,000 first-time, full-time freshmen to campus this fall.***

Of course, when students returned to campus last fall, they entered a new world: A hybrid model of instruction, with most classes taught online; reduced residence hall occupancy; grab-and-go meals and physical distancing; mandatory face coverings; extensive COVID testing and contact tracing; quarantine and isolation. These accommodations required enormous effort, and it was university leaders, faculty, and staff throughout the USM who pulled off this minor miracle. When the academic year ended, it was called a success.

A similar effort is now underway, an effort that likewise holds the safety of the USM's people as the top priority. This effort, however, has a vastly different goal: Make the upcoming semester as *ordinary* as possible. Success will be defined as providing the most authentic and robust educational experience possible for students, and an optimal work and research environment for students, faculty, and staff.

But, mid-pandemic, the challenges of providing for a more normal semester are nearly as steep as providing for an unprecedented one. The congregate nature of campus life means a heavy concentration of on- and off-campus housing, frequent interactions in the classroom, and just as many outside of it. College students live, learn, eat, and socialize in close quarters. And all these activities, which help create—even define—a meaningful college experience, bring a heightened risk of COVID-19 transmission.

Therefore, the USM's COVID Guidance Workgroup, coordinated by Senior Vice Chancellor Jo Boughman and Dr. Kate Tracy from the University of Maryland School of Medicine, was convened to provide the broad contours of a safe return-to-campus plan as well as evidence-informed recommendations. The universities, meanwhile, are implementing individualized plans tailored to the specific nature and needs of their own campuses.



*The USM's goal this fall? Make the upcoming semester as ordinary as possible.*

Without question, vaccination is by far the best tool available to combat COVID and its variants, both on campus and off. Widespread vaccination is the key to allowing the safe return of students and employees, while restoring the sense of connection and community that enrich higher education.

And so, earlier this year, the USM announced that all students, faculty, and staff must be vaccinated against COVID to be on campus, and each university has a mechanism for documenting proof of vaccination.

The universities have also developed processes for requesting medical or religious exemptions from the vaccination mandate. It's worth noting, however, that while appropriate exemptions will be granted, unvaccinated students and employees must comply with frequent testing and symptom monitoring to reduce the risk of contracting and spreading COVID.

Additionally, as the semester begins, our universities will collect baseline measures for infection control. Throughout the semester, they'll assess current conditions and update safety requirements, which may include, for instance, mandatory masking, limiting capacity at certain events, and symptom checks for campus visitors. Recognizing COVID's broader impacts, the universities will expand efforts to assure student access to mental health services and financial assistance.

From the beginning of the pandemic, the USM has taken decisive steps to protect campus and community safety. As we ready ourselves for a "return to normal," that commitment

remains. As does our belief that we can fully get back to what we do best—on campuses that joyfully bring us together after we've been apart for so long.



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