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Direction Package Kick Off Speech - September 24, 2013

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Direction Package Kick Off

September 24, 2013

What are we doing here today? It's the first step toward a major initiative. Namely, 'How will we re-craft USM in a way that the University will survive and thrive.?' I don't think it is an overstatement that this is our challenge and this is our goal.

This is not a time to hunker down and do business as usual. Now is the time to be collaborative, intentional, efficient and aligned across our university. Alignment is key, because what we are doing now is not as effective as it needs to be.

Don't take my word for it. Let's look together at the facts.

In spite of pockets of excellence, overall, every year we are losing students. Our enrollment declined 6.2 percent from 2008 to 2012, and we're projecting that we'll be down another 4 to 5.5 percent between 2012 and 2013. Our retention rate is not as good as our peers. Our rate hovers in the mid-60s; our goal is to be in the mid 70s. Every year new students are not choosing USM in large enough numbers. They are going to our competition. We need a different, revitalized program mix of offerings students actually will choose, and they have to do it in sufficient numbers. We need both competitive costs and financial aid so that our state support and tuition revenue will sustain us. And we need more consistent, effective policies and practices of putting students at the center and serving their needs.

Why do we have to do this now? Why not just wait for the good times to come back? There is nothing that gives us any confidence they will come back. We're living through a disruptive change. We're the frog in the hot water and if we don't jump, at some point soon we will cross over from alive to boiled.

Where does the disruptive change come from?

Demographics. You've all seen the numbers. The Maine Compact for Higher Education reports that Maine's population of 15 to 24-year-olds—traditional-age high school and college

students—is projected to decline by 20% over the next decade. Traditional-aged students are not there in the numbers we've seen in the past. Meaning: increasingly intense competition for fewer students.

Funding. Flat tuition, flat state appropriation at best. National concern that college costs too much. And on the expense side, rising costs. Health care, personnel costs, government mandates for accountability. This means that every year if enrollment were stable, we'd still have to make cuts. But the cuts would be manageable. If enrollment could be counted on to increase, no problem. But in the context we actually have, falling student enrollment just makes the situation unsustainable.

Competition. Local, regional and web-based institutions are offering more attractive, cheaper, more convenient programs. Students don't have to choose USM anymore, and they are not. Higher education is now a commodity, not a monopoly. If students are not accepting what we are offering, we need to change, not wait for them to come to us anyway. They aren't and it is not likely they will unless we change.

So there are the disruptive change factors. And it's not like we have not been paying attention. We have done some good things: admission has been working on recruitment effectively and according to national best practice. We've reallocated \$2.2 million to financial aid over the last two years.

But here is the scariest pattern. Applications, good. Acceptances, good. Our people and systems are getting prospective students to the door. But actual enrollments, non-sustainably low. Our yield rate has gone down, worst in the System. The students are at our door but they are not coming through it. While I do think there are multiple reasons why this is happening, one thing this says to me that we don't have the program mix that students are looking for today. The competition is eating our lunch. Plus we don't have the financial aid packages of our competitors.

Or we're driving them away/not attracting them for other reasons. We need to fix these things.

USM is not the only institution confronting this reality. One prediction by author Nathan Harden, published earlier this year in “The American Interest,” has it that of the 4,500 colleges and universities currently in existence, probably half won’t be here in 50 years. I wouldn’t bank on a prediction 50 years out, but there is a sea change sweeping American public higher education.

There are sobering trends out there. Here are some current statistics from the D.C.-based Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, as reported in this week’s Maine Sunday Telegram: The University of California system consolidated or eliminated more than 180 programs; Arizona consolidated or eliminated 182 colleges, schools, programs and departments; the University System of Louisiana cut 217 academic programs.

We have an opportunity here to work together to continue to serve the people and our communities, state, region, nation and world. That is our charge and our charter and our mission. We have a job to do. Our students, present and future, need us. We have to be a significant economic, cultural and civic driver for Maine and beyond. If we get ourselves aligned within and with our communities, if we can use our resources way more effectively than we are now, we can be more powerful and successful than we ever dreamed.

But we have to do it together and we have to start now.

We are called upon to embark together on this voyage into a better future. We need all of us to stop defending the past and the current state, and start creating new ways to serve our students and our community. We need all of us to do this work, students, faculty, staff, community partners, legislators, alumni, everybody. We can do it!

And we need to do this now, with the first planning phase lasting just until mid-December, because meanwhile the work of bringing this institution into line with budget realities, and at the same time imagining, investing in, and building the future state of USM, has to continue every day.

You have your job to do. Educate and support our students. I have mine. To make sure you have the tools and resources and environment to be successful. But I also have one more task on my plate. That is a budget that must be met on the black side of the ledger, not the red side. And so,

this dialog is critical to our success. Together we have to plan, imagine, execute and create accountability to our students, community, taxpayers and each other.

You know that this has been going on since well before I arrived here last year. We have done a lot of streamlining in the last year. We have eliminated positions and reorganized services and programs to reallocate funds to other key priorities and keep a tight focus on service to students, our highest of all priorities.

This work, though necessary, comes at a high cost in pain and morale. This process is designed to explore all options and choose the best course of action.

We have much more to do, to bring USM structures, processes and policies in line with the realities we live in now. This work will go on. But the work of re-imagining has to go into high gear starting today. So we owe it to each other, I owe it to you, to craft and enunciate the principles that form the basis of this work. Both the streamlining and the re-imagining.

So we are going to start with absolute basics today. We are going to talk about values, vision, charter, mission and strategies today. I'm going to outline these for you, get your immediate reactions. There will be a live website after the presentations today are completed, and I hope that you will study it.

I have no doubt that we've missed something. Tell us so we can consider it. I hope that you individually, and groups, such as departments, governance groups, advisory boards, legislators, and especially student groups, will weigh in. Please share your ideas. All your comments will be considered carefully!

What we have to share with you today may spark some ideas or suggestions that don't quite fit into any of the boxes we have provided. Just figure out a way to let us know in spite of that.

Again, though, I have to emphasize "preliminary work." Values, vision, charter, mission, and strategies. And PLEASE remember where these are coming from. All the material you'll see today came from a synthesis of studies, plans and other documents created over time by members of the USM community, put in the context of the external situation today.

If you came here expecting to see a detailed plan, you will be very disappointed. What we are doing together in the next couple of months is to gain a clear awareness and understanding of where this university needs to be heading. We will not necessarily achieve consensus. But we ought to all understand our direction. And start the process of getting ourselves into better alignment so we can use our many resources more effectively.

Awareness and alignment could make a huge difference. Think about it. This university, in one form or another, dates back to 1878. But in another sense, we're a young institution, known as the University of Southern Maine only over the last 35 years. In terms of the lifecycle of a university, we're adolescent. We're in a transitional phase, with a search for identity and all the uncertainty that comes with it. And now in the midst of disruptive change.

And like adolescents, we have great potential. As I mentioned at last month's Opening Breakfast, we have a tremendous range of assets—location, our wonderful mix of students. Our alumni, all 46,000 of them, 85 percent of whom stay in Maine – they're in more places than we know or imagine, making tremendous contributions to their professions and their communities. These students and alumni are testaments to the work of our faculty and staff. We can –and, in fact, are - doing it together. You are key and we can do it!

We're making progress. I'll mention just a few things that illustrate some of the ways USM is creating meaningful change in our communities.

Faculty Commons. The virtual and physical space for faculty to come together and build a community around teaching, service, research and creative activity. It's off and running, thanks to the leadership of Judy Spross and others. The need for this type of community-building was cited in earlier planning documents, and over this last year Judy and her team have developed robust programming.

Cyber-security. Faculty in Computer Science and other disciplines, coordinated by Glenn Wilson, have been collaborating with off-campus partners to develop new programming in this rapidly developing field. Current and future students, and our region's economic development, will benefit.

Maine Economic Improvement Fund. This summer it was announced that four teams of USM faculty from the sciences, technology, arts and humanities – let me repeat that: the sciences, technology, arts and humanities - have come together with external partners to conduct research on such topics as how chronic illnesses can be managed better through the use of information technology. These teams are supported through awards of \$150,000 each over two years.

And finally, earlier this summer, three USM students addressed the 23rd regular session of the UN Human Rights Conference in Geneva, Switzerland. They were part of the study abroad program, “Human Rights in International Law with Study in The Hague and Geneva,” led by Julia Edwards, lecturer in political science.

There are many, many more examples of the exciting, innovative work going on at this university. It’s why I believe we have the potential to come out of this period of disruptive change and realignment stronger, more clearly focused on our students, and more integrally connected with the community.

No one individual or group is responsible for the situation we find ourselves in, but it’s our collective responsibility to find our way out of it. We are here and there’s nobody to help us but ourselves. We need to re-craft USM to continue through disruptive change and keep providing transformational educational experiences for our students, steward our resources sustainably, and become widely recognized as the intellectual, cultural and economic resource for Maine.

To introduce this process, I’m going to ask Dave Stevens to join me. Dave is the organizational development person who helped the System design and carry out its various strategic planning activities of the past year. He has been very helpful in laying the groundwork for us. I am happy to introduce him now.