



2020 2021

UTSYSTEM.EDU

THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS SYSTEM
Confronting the global pandemic:
January 2020 – June 2021



Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has taken a devastating toll on the U.S. and the world. As the state's largest public higher education and academic health care system, The University of Texas System continues to harness its expertise in playing a leadership role in the state's response and recovery efforts.

When the impact of the pandemic pushed all universities to remote learning in the middle of the Spring 2020 semester, UT institutions mobilized quickly. They educated more than 240,000 students through digitally-driven platforms, graduated more than 34,400 students in May, produced new discoveries and clinical trials that contributed to national vaccine development in record time, and provided medical care – ranging from intensive inpatient care to more than one million telemedicine visits – to the people of Texas.

The University of Texas System looks at 2021 as a year of opportunity to emphasize the growing importance of a postsecondary education, to complement current educational experiences with new credential paths based on better education-workforce alignment, to enhance student life engagement, to accelerate research and innovations, and to provide exceptional health care using more technology.

Getting through the Spring 2020 Semester

KEY ACTIVITIES

JANUARY

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention issued an advisory regarding an outbreak of disease in China. The UT System Office of Risk Management issued its first COVID-19 notice to risk and safety officers at the 14 UT institutions.

FEBRUARY

While COVID-19 was not yet a major issue in Texas and the United States during February, the UT System had many students, faculty, and researchers traveling abroad. Given the travel restrictions sparked by the pandemic, getting them home safely was a high priority and a challenge that required a great deal of time and effort. For example, 70 UT San Antonio students who were studying abroad in Italy had to return to the U.S. during the first week of March.

MARCH

The UT System established real-time information exchanges with institutions, local, state, and regional health authorities to put safety measures in place.

During a special called meeting, the UT System Board of Regents authorized the Chancellor to take any actions needed to protect the health and safety of UT students, faculty, staff, and the community and to maintain operations during the pandemic. Chancellor Milliken issued guidance to academic presidents, requiring that all instruction for the remainder of the semester take place online, spring gatherings such as commencement ceremonies be postponed, and reimbursements be made for unused portions of spring residence, dining, and parking fees.

UT institutions and the UT System established COVID-19 websites with real-time updates and FAQs to ensure all constituents were apprised of transitions. Chancellor Milliken convened multi-weekly meetings with all UT presidents to share information and develop appropriate protocols to ensure seamless transitions in education, patient care, and student and campus safety and security. He began providing timely and up-to-date briefings to the Board of Regents that continued regularly throughout the year.

Remote working arrangements were implemented with all UT System employees.

On March 27, the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act (or CARES Act) was passed by Congress and signed into law. While additional costs incurred and revenue lost by UT institutions far exceeded the funds distributed to them, the CARES Act provided significant relief in the early days of the pandemic.

APRIL

All UT academic institutions announced that summer courses would be offered entirely online, and they began the planning process for the fall semester.

Each institution also worked to address access to courses and the security and safety of students, implementing emergency student funding to address a variety of student hardships.

MAY

Despite the many challenges, the vast majority of students at UT institutions were able to persevere and continue their coursework. At virtual spring commencements, 34,466 UT scholars earned their degrees – an increase of 5% versus Spring 2019.



The Spring and Summer Pivot

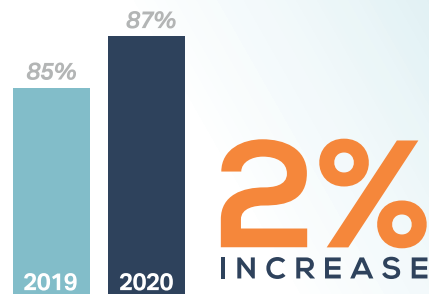
*Prior to the Spring 2020 semester, fewer than 20% of UT System faculty had taught online, and just 40% of students had taken a single course online. Almost overnight, **100% of both faculty and students had experienced fully online education.***



Enrollment and retention rates also increased:



Summer 2020 semester enrollment at UT institutions increased 23%, from 58,954 in 2019 to 72,721 in 2020.



UT institution spring-to-fall retention rates increased year-over-year. 87% of UT undergraduates who had been enrolled in the spring (and did not graduate) enrolled again in the fall – up from 85% in 2019.

UT HEALTH INSTITUTIONS: Challenges & Contributions

UT Graduates on the Front Lines

UT health institutions trained the physicians and health care professionals who continue to lead the fight against COVID-19.

Over the past 15 years, UT health and academic institutions have awarded nearly 120,000 health-related degrees, with approximately 12,000 awarded in 2019 alone. The majority of these graduates work in the health care and social assistance industry in Texas – and of those, more than 50,000 are employed in either general medical and surgical hospitals or physician offices. Many served – and continue to serve – on the front lines to treat COVID-19 patients.

Adjusting quickly to address COVID-19

To build capacity among its health care professionals and preserve hospital beds, equipment, supplies, and personal protective equipment in response to Governor Abbott's executive order in March 2020, UT health institutions, medical schools, hospitals, clinics, and physician groups suspended all research not related to the pandemic. They also suspended all elective and non-emergency procedures and hospital admissions.

In addition to opening up a significant portion of overall bed capacity to treat COVID-19 patients, UT health institutions:

- Dramatically increased the use of telemedicine, with expanded state authorization.
- Ramped up testing capacity.
- Evaluated options for discharging patients if their hospitals became full (such as using hotels and motels for non-infectious patients who needed more time to fully recover).
- Implemented new staffing patterns to provide health care:
 - Different staffing patterns for nurses on wards.
 - Changing the role of medical students and residents.

In late Spring 2020, Governor Abbott loosened health care delivery restrictions, and UT health institutions began to prudently open up their facilities to allow elective procedures for non-COVID patients. This benefitted the patients in need of care and enabled UT health institutions to begin recovering the revenue lost from treatments that had been canceled or postponed.



Testing and Treatment

UT institutions have been deeply engaged in delivering COVID-19 testing and treatment to the people of Texas. As of April 2021, UT and UT-affiliated hospitals had processed more than 1.2 million COVID-19 tests, nearly 6% (5.78%) of all COVID-19 viral tests in the state.

Millions of Texans rely on UT health institutions and UT-affiliated hospitals for their medical needs, and in addition to providing immediate care for those infected with COVID-19, several UT health institutions developed rehabilitation clinics to treat patients suffering longer-term complications from the disease.

Prior to the pandemic, telemedicine was limited in scope and use. With various waivers executed by Governor Abbott, the use of telemedicine expanded in number and reach, and it contributed greatly to the continuity of care at all UT institutions as they observed best practices to limit the spread of COVID-19.



MORE THAN
1,000,000
TELEMEDICINE VISITS
WERE CONDUCTED BY
UT INSTITUTIONS BETWEEN
MARCH 1 AND DECEMBER 31, 2020.

During the same period in 2019, approximately 1,000 such appointments were conducted.

Fall 2020 Semester

The Opening Imperative

While the spring/summer pivot to online education was successful in keeping most UT students on track, it was not always smooth or satisfactory for students or faculty.

In considering the Fall 2020 semester, the UT System was concerned that if campuses remained closed to any in-person experience, a large number of students might never reach their potential. Public higher education is the engine of social and economic mobility in this country. However, remote learning is not always a feasible or effective way to learn for a large number of students, especially low-income and first-generation students.

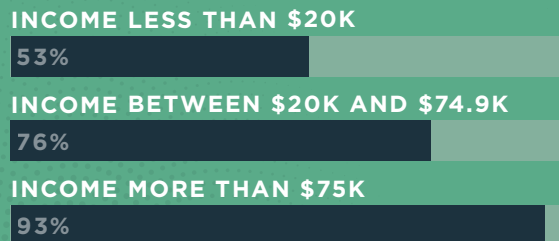
The Digital Divide

The pivot to remote learning magnified the challenges Texas and the nation faced with availability of Internet access, whether because of broadband limitations, subscription costs, or hardware ownership.

Nationally, just 45% of students from low-income families have home environments supportive of remote learning, compared to 64% of high-income students. In Texas, 1.6 million households lack reliable Internet service. This includes the homes of approximately one in five UT institution undergraduates.

Students from low-income families were far less likely to have high-speed Internet and computers at home

Estimated % of households with broadband Internet (UT undergraduates):



Estimated % of households without a computer (UT undergraduates):



UT institutions distributed laptops, tablets, hotspots, and service carrier gift cards to thousands of students who otherwise would not have had the ability to pivot to online learning. Still, for many students – especially those from low-income families – the shift to remote learning presented an additional obstacle between them and a degree. Nearly 80,000 UT undergraduates (45% of total) are eligible for federal Pell Grants (reserved for those with exceptional financial need). The UT System believed it had an obligation to plan for a Fall 2020 semester with a campus presence, albeit much different than any in the past.

Fall 2020 Plans & Execution

Based on UT institution differences in location, residential population, and other factors, Fall 2020 semester plans and execution were modestly different from campus to campus. But each UT institution offered completely online courses, face-to-face courses, and hybrid or combined online and face-to-face courses. The general approach across all institutions was to start the semester in late August and finish in-person activities for most students by Thanksgiving, which reduced the risk of COVID spread on campuses, given the high probability of student and faculty holiday travel.

Each institution implemented a multifaceted, comprehensive plan for all aspects of campus operations. Elements included:

- phased and limited return of the workforce, with staggered arrival and departure times;
- remote work where possible;
- extended hours of building use with density and pedestrian flow restrictions;
- mandatory masks and physical distancing;
- testing protocols, isolation requirements, and contact tracing;
- increased thorough cleaning and disinfecting regimens campus-wide;
- signage on movement and physical distancing within buildings and on campus grounds;
- physical barriers in offices, classrooms, and buildings (typically plexiglass);
- appropriate ventilation;
- housing and dining restrictions;
- minimizing campus visitors;
- limiting large gatherings;
- regulating athletic practices and events; and
- preparing for mental and emotional health issues.

Fall 2020 Enrollment

UT System student enrollment defied the national trend. While undergraduate enrollment was down nearly 2% at public four-year institutions nationally – driven by a drop in freshmen enrollment – **six of the eight UT academic institutions enrolled larger freshman classes than the year before.** Four of those six – UT Permian Basin, UT Rio Grande Valley, UT San Antonio, and UT Tyler – reported double-digit increases.

Bucking the national enrollment trend

While student enrollment decreased nationally, UT institutions experienced a collective enrollment increase of 2 percent.

FALL 2019 ENROLLMENT: 239,312

FALL 2020 ENROLLMENT: 244,172



COVID-19 on Campus

By executing the plans they designed during Summer 2020, UT institutions were able to make their campuses among the safest places in the state. However, UT students, faculty, and staff were not immune to COVID-19 as it continued to spread throughout Texas during the Fall 2020 semester.

Each institution dedicated dorm rooms and/or contracted hotel room capacity to house students who needed to be quarantined. System-wide, more than 800 beds were available, though only a fraction of that number was ever in use at one time.

UT institutions conducted more than 100,000 COVID-19 tests on students during the Fall 2020 semester, and reported a positivity rate of approximately 3.1%. The institutions reported approximately 3,700 diagnosed cases, which included students who self-reported.

The institutions conducted more than 25,000 COVID-19 tests on faculty and staff, with a positivity rate of approximately 1.7%. They reported about 700 faculty and staff diagnosed cases, which included cases that were self-reported.

The number of COVID-19 cases and the percentage of students, faculty, or staff testing positive for the virus fluctuated week-by-week and institution-by-institution. But in general, the prevalence of the virus on UT campuses was less than that found in the community as a whole.

Some breakouts or spikes in cases were related to off-campus gatherings, and some to athletics. Persevering through the fall semester was a challenge for every athletic department. Some programs were suspended, either temporarily or for the season. The UT Austin football team completed a 10-game season with one game canceled. UT San Antonio also had one football game canceled, while UT El Paso had three. UT Permian Basin's fall football season was canceled by its conference.

Academic Life

Across the UT academic institutions, most instruction (usually between 85% and 90%) took place online. During the Fall 2020 semester, relative to the other universities, UT Permian Basin and UT Tyler offered a higher proportion (30% to 40%) of in-person classes. The hard-earned lessons and innovations of the spring and summer semesters – and a lot of time and resources devoted to faculty and staff training – paid off in high quality remote education and virtual service delivery.

But the semester took a tremendous toll on students, faculty, and staff, who in addition to learning a new way to give/receive instruction were confronted in their daily lives by the same pressures as all Americans. Many students lost jobs, were forced into family caregiver roles, or became sick themselves. Caring and accounting for the mental health of every member of the campus community was, and remains, a major challenge. Despite the hardships for undergraduates who first started college in Fall 2020, more than 90% re-enrolled in Spring 2021.



December Graduations

Although the Fall 2020 semester was unprecedented in a number of ways, and commencement ceremonies were held online or postponed, graduations brought an element of continuity. Approximately 22,000 UT institution students earned a degree in December – a slight increase from the year before.

Financial Stress and Government Relief

In the early days of the pandemic, UT health institutions experienced significant financial losses because of requirements to curtail non-essential procedures. UT academic institutions also experienced significant challenges – such as refunding housing, dining, and parking fees, and preparing for budget reductions from the state.

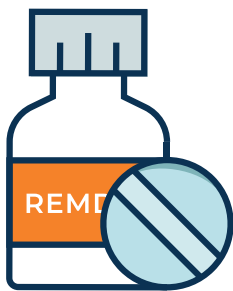
UT institution presidents and System Administration moved quickly to reduce expenses wherever possible. Among other things, they froze hiring except for essential positions, eliminated across-the-board raises, and delayed purchases.

Funding from the CARES Act provided some vital early relief, but it fell short of making UT institutions whole. On December 27, a second relief bill – The Coronavirus Response and Relief Supplemental Appropriations Act – was signed into law, followed by the American Rescue Plan Act in May. All three bills included funding for the Higher Education Emergency Relief Fund, which helped UT institutions recover some of the revenue they had lost and provided direct aid to students. The CARES Act also included funding for qualified providers of health care, services, and support through the Provider Relief Fund for payments for healthcare-related expenses or lost revenue due to COVID-19. Certain UT institutions were eligible for these funds.

UT institutions continue to monitor the financial impact of the federal relief bills in offsetting expenses related to the pandemic.

UT Research and a Light at the End of the Tunnel

In early 2020, the UT System engaged its research enterprise to lead in the fight against COVID-19. This emphasis enabled multiple UT institutions to concentrate fully on the science of understanding the virus to generate effective medical treatments and vaccines.



UT institutions launched hundreds of COVID-19 related studies, with more than 100 focused on therapies and dozens more on vaccine development. UT Health San Antonio was deeply involved in clinical trials involving Remdesivir, a treatment that was approved for emergency use authorization by the Food and Drug Administration.

At UT Austin, the research of Dr. Jason McLellan and his team was foundational to four of the major vaccine efforts. In mid-November, Pfizer announced that early data showed its vaccine was more than 90% effective. The vaccine's development was much faster than typical, thanks in part to McLellan and his team, who co-designed the spike protein that was used in the Pfizer and Moderna vaccines (and others).



Other institutions helped speed the development of the vaccines along as well. Scientists at UT Medical Branch developed a way to evaluate the vaccine more quickly. UTMB's Sealy Institute for Vaccine Sciences was one of the sites involved in clinical trials for the Pfizer vaccine. UTHealth engaged in an AstraZeneca vaccine trial.

In late December, the UT health-related institutions, including the UT Rio Grande Valley and UT Austin medical schools, received and began administering tens of thousands of vaccines to frontline healthcare workers. Each institution prepared extensively for this extraordinary event and each was exemplary in execution. UT institutions and UT-affiliated medical providers served as vaccination clinics, helping to ensure that as many Texans as possible were vaccinated as quickly as possible.

As of May 2021, UT System health care providers and partners had administered approximately 1.2 million vaccines – more than 10% of the first-dose vaccines administered in Texas.

Spring 2021 Semester and Beyond

The educational journeys of more than 240,000 students continued, with the institutions delivering roughly the same mix of in-person, online and hybrid education that they did in Fall 2020.

Despite the national trend of declining student enrollment, UT institutions reported continued increases. Enrollment at the eight academic institutions grew from 209,703 in Spring 2020 to 213,848 this spring, an increase of almost 2 percent. By comparison, nationwide, college enrollment dropped about 2.9% compared to last spring.

UT health institutions remain on the front lines of the COVID-19 fights, providing patient care, testing, and best of all, vaccinations to the people of Texas.

Many institutions held safe (mostly outdoor, socially distanced, masked) spring commencement exercises in May 2021 to confer 33,814 degrees across the System, according to preliminary data. This compares to 34,126 degrees awarded in Spring 2020 and 32,486 degrees awarded in Spring 2019.

The Texas Legislature wrapped up its 87th session at the end of May. We are grateful that legislators voted to fund higher education formulas and incorporate enrollment growth, which will result in more than \$180 million in new funding for UT institutions in the 2022-2023 biennium.

Some of the changes of the past year (e.g., the dramatic growth and improvement in remote learning and health care delivery) are likely to endure, to continue to reach broader populations, and perhaps to pick up speed when the global pandemic is behind us. Some innovations made necessary by COVID-19 will enable UT institutions to better serve our state's growing population in the years to come.

But while the UT System, and higher education generally, are forever changed, the recent declines in COVID-19 cases, hospitalizations and deaths, and the quickening pace of vaccinations provide hope that UT institutions will soon return to a level of normalcy not seen since early 2020. Preparations have begun for a Fall 2021 semester that we hope and expect will look more like 2019 than 2020.

UT institutions, students, staff, and faculty showed extraordinary resilience, ingenuity, and determination in meeting the challenges of 2020 and early 2021. This is reflected by the almost 90,000 students who earned degrees from UT institutions since the beginning of the pandemic, as well as the patients treated and discoveries made.

Through a year marked by unprecedented changes and challenges, UT institutions continued to make a positive impact in their communities, Texas, and beyond.

