



TO: James B. Milliken, Chancellor, U. T. System Administration

FROM: The U. T. System Student Advisory Council COVID-19 Committee

DATE: May 18, 2021

RE: Communication with Students During the COVID-19 Crisis

The U. T. System Student Advisory Council recommends that institutions communicate regularly and consistently with students in times of crisis. During a pandemic—or any major crisis impacting students—regular communication is not only critical but necessary. Students understand that, in a time of crisis, and especially during a pandemic, recommendations from governing bodies and health authorities are constantly changing, making it difficult to provide definite information and answers to questions. However, it is imperative for institutions to adopt a transparent and predictable communication strategy with students. Doing so will promote peace of mind and wellbeing among the student body.

With the uncertainty surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic, it is well understood that the campus reopening plans are fluid and highly dependent on federal, state and regional public health guidance and directives. However, The U. T. System Student Advisory Council's COVID-19 Committee is concerned that students across the System are learning of new campus policies and procedures with short notice via email, leaving students to adjust with little to no warning.

In unpredictable times, it is especially important to keep a constant flow of communication between administration and students. Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, the timeliness, frequency, and quality of information communicated to students varied greatly across U. T. System institutions. We believe that adopting certain minimum standards would enable a more informed, satisfactory, and reassured student experience. The Council has identified four solutions that will help to facilitate a satisfactory experience for students. While these strategies are written within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, they should also be applied in other times of crisis (e.g., major weather events, etc.)

1. We encourage each U. T. institution to make relevant information about COVID-19 cases accessible to its students, staff, and faculty. In addition to campus and community resources and guidelines, this should include a snapshot of prevalence and incidents within the campus community. We suggest that the COVID-19 dashboard by U. T. Austin (<https://coronavirus.utexas.edu/ut-austin-covid-19-dashboard>) be used as a model for other U. T. System institutions. The goal of having such a tool is to promote transparency and heartsease for the U. T. community. By creating a localized place for students to receive information about

the current volume of COVID-19 cases in their community, students can make judgments on their daily interactions via a single source of information. This information is useful to students for daily decision-making regarding their level of contact with external environments and choosing to visit the physical campus. Additionally, a dashboard would help build students' trust in university administration by demonstrating a commitment to transparency. Appendix A includes our suggestions for data elements to be included in a dashboard, depending on data and resource availability.

2. We recommend that institutions send a regular weekly communication to students. Because of the changing nature of the pandemic, it is important for students to remain actively updated regarding university operations, academic policies, and expectations of students. This weekly communication can be done by posting regular COVID-19 updates through an institution blog post or news publication.
3. We encourage each institution to adopt a process by which students can submit questions regarding school policies and requirements during the pandemic with responses published/distributed in a timely manner. Because it is likely that many students have similar questions, routinely updating an FAQ webpage can help ease anxiety and uncertainty during this unique situation. U. T. Southwestern, for example, distributed a survey in which students were able to submit questions and, subsequently, provided answers to student questions in a weekly email communication with other relevant updates.
4. We recommend involving students in the planning process to return-to-normal operations post-pandemic. For campuses with formal reopening committees, we suggest including at least two student representatives, one undergraduate and one graduate student, where applicable. Student involvement in the planning process will help to ensure that students' concerns are being addressed. Furthermore, this decision will facilitate increased communication with the student body, removing misinformation and improving the chances of a successful transition back to fully in-person instruction.

Thank you for your consideration.

Appendix A

The list below includes critical data elements that are seen in existing dashboards across the U. T. System. For instance, U. T. Rio Grande Valley's dashboard includes several factors from the following three categories, including pertinent county information, weekly cases in tabular form, and total cumulative cases. U. T. Austin's dashboard contains all the recommended factors.

Ideal:

Persons in quarantine
Persons in isolation
Pertinent county(ies) known cases
Area hospitalizations and 7-day moving averages

Recommended:

Student cases per day [plot]
Staff/Faculty cases per day [plot]
Positive daily or weekly tests*
Estimated active cases*
7-day moving average positivity rate [plot]*

Minimum:

Cumulative cases
Total daily/weekly testing*
Positive %*

*if the institution is running their own testing

Current data/dashboard resources from U. T. academic institutions:

U. T. Arlington:

- <https://www.uta.edu/announcements/coronavirus/confirmed-cases>

U. T. Austin:

- <https://coronavirus.utexas.edu/ut-austin-covid-19-dashboard>

U. T. Dallas:

- <https://utdallas.edu/covid/response/confirmed-cases/>

U. T. El Paso:

- <https://www.utep.edu/resuming-campus-operations/dashboard/>

U. T. Permian Basin:

- <https://www.utep.edu/resuming-campus-operations/dashboard/>

U. T. Rio Grande Valley:

- <https://www.utrgv.edu/coronavirus/confirmed-cases/index.htm>

U. T. San Antonio:

- <https://www.utsa.edu/roadmap/pandemic-management-plan/cases.html>

U. T. Tyler:

- <https://www.uttyler.edu/coronavirus/>