

COVID-19 Changed How We Teach and Learn in 2020—Texas Southern University

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HISTORY OF TEXAS SOUTHERN UNIVERSITY AND COVID-19

This essay traces Texas Southern University's (TSU) 2020 COVID-19 preparations and experiences. The essay begins with a brief history of TSU and continues with a depiction of the University's COVID-19 preparations and responses beginning in the Spring 2020 semester to the Fall 2020 semester. TSU was founded in 1927 as Houston Colored Junior College and has become one of the nation's largest historically Black universities. The University has produced distinguished African American students including the late U.S. Congresswoman Barbara Jordan and U.S. Congressman George "Mickey" Leland. TSU is accredited by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools and offers over 100 undergraduate and graduate programs and concentrations. Current enrollment exceeds 9,500 students.

In March 2020, grave concerns about what would come to be known as COVID-19 began to emerge. Institutions of higher education monitored the evolving threat landscape as did all realms of civil society. On March 9, TSU announced that the University community was not directly affected as it had no confirmed cases of COVID-19 and would remain open. This decision was made in consultation with the Harris County Public Health Department. On March 11, the week before the traditional Spring break, the University announced that face-to-face (F2F) classes would continue until the upcoming Spring break. On the same day, the City of Houston and Harris County officials shut down the Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo in response to a single confirmed COVID-19 case. In the interim, the University assembled a task force to address all matters related to the then-rapidly evolving mega crisis.

The task force developed plans to ensure the safest academic experience for all members of the TSU community, including remote learning, campus hygiene, student housing, campus transportation, and travel. All Spring classes and examinations were moved to TSU's learning management system, Blackboard (Bb). On March 13, TSU suspended all Spring classes and commenced a campus-wide sanitization program that focused on high-traffic areas and high-touch surfaces such as classrooms and restrooms. The campus remained open, but all large on-campus events were cancelled. Faculty and staff were required to fulfill their office hours and service obligations to the extent possible, but students were encouraged to stay at home. University housing and dining services remained open for students who could not leave the campus immediately.

On March 18, in compliance with Texas public health guidance and executive orders that limited public gatherings, TSU decided to deliver all remaining Spring 2020 classes remotely. Although TSU did not have any confirmed COVID-19 cases, all students that had remained on campus

were instructed to vacate their dorms by March 28 and all students were instructed to not return to campus until further notice. The University remained open for essential services but closed its doors on March 23 after the first confirmed COVID-19 case of a University community member. All faculty were instructed to work remotely until further notice. Faculty needing access to their offices were required to request permission from school administrators to limit person-to-person contact. The University provided additional guidelines for employees to work from home using the TSU Office of Information Technology system. In addition, TSU created a COVID-email helpline.

Recognizing that some students as well as faculty would need help transitioning to online (OL) learning platforms, the University provided Bb webinars, informationals, toolkits, and other resources as well as encouraging peer-to-peer instruction. TSU recognized that some students would not have regular access to personal computers and/or Wi-Fi and planned on providing those and other resources in on-campus computer labs, office spaces, and the library. On March 31st, those plans were shuttled by Harris County and City of Houston stay home-work safe orders that prohibited such gatherings. TSU provided laptops and access to Wi-Fi to students on a case-by-case basis. In addition, the University modified their grading policy allowing students to choose between a traditional letter grade or a Pass/No Pass option for the Spring and Summer 2020 semesters. The Pass and No Pass grades were not calculated into students' cumulative GPAs. While the Spring 2020 commencement ceremony was cancelled, On May 9th, the University honored Spring graduates in a video message and read their names aloud on the University radio.

SUMMER SEMESTER 2020

All Summer 2020 classes were delivered remotely and student fees including the Student Center fee, the Recreational Facility fee, and the International Education fees were waived. All faculty and all but critical staff worked remotely throughout the summer. All but essential University telephones were set to auto response and voice mails. Additionally, on July 27, the Southern Athletic Association announced that it had cancelled all sporting contests for the Fall 2020 semester leaving all TSU sports teams, the Tigers without a Fall season.

FALL 2020: THE PLEDGE

The University's COVID-19 Task Force galvanized the feedback and expertise of TSU's community to deliver guidelines that would provide the safest experience for the community. The Task Force's recommendations provided ample room for circumstances that would require adjustments as necessary. Most noteworthy was that the Task Force asked TSU community members to take the Tigers Care Pledge:

As a member of the Texas Southern University family, I pledge to take personal responsibility for my health, behavior, and academic achievement. I seek to respect and understand my fellow students, faculty, and staff. I recognize that I am my brother and sister's keeper. As a fellow Tiger, I will exemplify the Tigers Care

motto by being mindful of the impact of my actions on others and be considerate of my Tiger family at all times. (Texas Southern University, 2020)

On May 18, TSU announced that the University would reopen the campus in three strategic phases: Phase-1 Remote Operations (May 18-June 14); Phase-2 Transition to Normal Operations (June 15 to August 9); and Phase-3 Return to Normal Operations (August 10-19). COVID-19 spikes and shifting governmental public health policy, however, altered the timelines. TSU prepared for every contingency including teaching all classes remotely. TSU modified the Fall semester from 16 to 13 weeks to end the semester prior to the traditional Thanksgiving break. Regular classes were scheduled to start on Wednesday, August 19, with final examinations from November 14-19, and Fall commencement on Saturday, November 21. Classes were scheduled in four formats: F2F (with social distancing requirement), OL-synchronous, OL-asynchronous, and hybrid (F2F and OL). The length of class periods was extended to fulfill the requisite number of contact hours.

Phase 2 was postponed ensuring that all safety precautions and procedures were within standards. All employees were required to complete COVID-19 safety training, which focused on personal accountability and the four Cs: cover (wear a face mask), clean (wash hands regularly), contain (do not come to work if you are sick), and call (notify the TSU COVID-19 hotline if you have or know of a confirmed COVID-19 case). Moreover, TSU underwent a hygiene-sanitation makeover. Using the guidelines recommended by national, state, and local agencies/authorities, TSU instituted heightened cleaning protocols, including frequent cleaning and disinfecting of high-traffic and-high touch areas. On July 27, TSU moved all Fall classes OL until September 14 due to the increases in the number of COVID-19 cases in the Houston area. On September 7, the decision was made to hold all remaining Fall classes OL. This was due in part to nationwide COVID-19 spikes as well as students' concerns and reluctance to attend F2F classes.

LONG TERM IMPLICATIONS FOR COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES

TSU's COVID-19 planning and experiences thus far demonstrate that colleges and universities can deliver nearly all of their courses entirely remotely, at least in the short term. This is not to say that the days of traditional bricks and mortar F2F teaching are over. Rather, higher education institutions should assess the overall COVID-19-induced teaching and learning experiences to gauge the utility of OL learning in the future.

The long-term implications of the COVID-19 pandemic on institutions of higher education are not fully known at this time. Assessments of student learning, achievement, and psychological well-being as well as the performance of colleges and universities in preparation of and actions taken during and after the COVID-19 pandemic will provide insights and ways forward for OL learning.

One rapidly evolving concern that has been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic should be addressed in the short term as well as in the long term is future enrollments. Already beset by diminishing enrollments, colleges and universities struggling to stay afloat have been

exacerbated by the pandemic. Marketing and recruitment programs are key to future enrollments. Institutions of higher education will have to find alternate means of recruiting traditional and non-traditional students. College fairs, once the norm of secondary schools and workplace ancillary activities, have been replaced by OL platforms and social media recruitment tools. As is the case of OL learning, OL recruitment must be assessed for its utility.

REFERENCES

Texas Southern University. (2020). *A safe return to Tigerland: Texas Southern University A plan for the 2020-2021 academic year.*

<http://www.tsu.edu/about/administration/marketing-and-communications/coronavirus/pdfs/safe-return-to-tigerland-august.pdf>