



Chancellor Milliken

PREPARED REMARKS

UT SYSTEM BOARD OF REGENTS MEETING

June 29, 2020

BACKGROUND

Much has happened since January when the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention issued a Health Alert Network advisory regarding an outbreak of disease in China. Two weeks later the first COVID-19 notice was issued from the UT System Office of Risk Management to risk and safety officers at the 14 UT institutions. On March 2, the UT System issued system-wide guidance on international travel, spring break and personal travel and travelers returning to campus. Three days later we issued guidelines elevating approvals for out of state travel, a required review of infection control, and post-travel return to work protocols. At the same time Executive Vice Chancellor John Zerwas and I began twice weekly conference calls with health presidents, and Executive Vice Chancellor Steve Leslie and I did the same with academic presidents. Weekly calls were also held with institutional business officers, risk managers, academic officers and other administrative groups.

On March 17, after consultation with Chairman Eltife and communication to the Board of Regents, I issued guidance to academic presidents, directing 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. Throughout this period of early 2020, Governor Abbott declared a state of disaster and took numerous steps to control the spread of COVID-19, restricted non-COVID medical procedures, and announced expert groups to address acquisition of personal protective equipment and hospital capacity. UT employees throughout the system who were able to work from home were required to do so. By late April, all UT academic institutions had announced that summer courses would be offered entirely online. During the late spring and summer, UT academic institutions had launched comprehensive processes to plan for fall campus operations.

Today's discussion and proposed action relates to the fall plans for our eight academic institutions, but at the outset I want to recognize and express great gratitude to each of our institutions, health and academic, for the outstanding work they have done over the last four months and continue to do. Our health institutions have been on the frontlines of patient care, and all our institutions have continued to deliver on their missions under extraordinary circumstances. From my conversations with Board members, I know you agree.

SPRING ONLINE

The pivot to all online instruction in March, at UT academic institutions and virtually all institutions nationwide, was one of the most remarkable episodes in higher education history. Prior to the spring, less than 20% of UT faculty had taught online, and 40% of students had taken courses online. Now 100 percent of both faculty and students have experienced fully online education. Most students were able to continue their coursework, and most of those on track to graduate were able to do so.

While the move to online education was clearly successful by that critical measure, it was not, however, always smooth or satisfactory to students or faculty. Notwithstanding this, each of our academic institutions reports summer enrollment, entirely online, has increased over total enrollments of last year. We have learned a great deal during the spring and summer and have been able to take advantage of that experience in preparation for Fall 2020. This included the offering of training for faculty this summer on effective use of available instructional technology, online educational materials, and online pedagogy.

PLANNING FOR THE FALL

Despite the relative success of online education in the spring and summer, through surveys of our students as well as national surveys, we knew that many students were reconsidering plans for fall, and that many indicated they would not enroll if universities were planning to be completely online in the fall. Institutions were faced with a choice, and not a choice as simplistic as health versus fiscal viability, as some have asserted. In numerous discussions on the question of fall opening, the presidents and I have been remarkably unified. We believe we have an obligation to our students and the people of Texas to plan for a fall semester with a campus presence, although it will obviously be much different than any in the past. We know from student surveys that if we do not open, many students will choose to pause their education. And we know from research that pausing has an impact on persistence and graduation. The most vulnerable students—low income, first generation, and underrepresented students—will be at the greatest risk of falling off the path to success.

In light of our mission and our obligation, each institution has plans for fully online, in-person and hybrid course experiences, and each is prepared to alter its plans based on health and safety concerns. Each will be prepared to step back or close in-person activities if conditions require it. We demonstrated last March that our institutions are fully capable of changing course dramatically if necessary. Resiliency, flexibility and adaptability are the keys to operating success this fall.

We have a common set of guiding principles that is governing our approach. These begin with paramount concern for the health, safety and well-being of our students, faculty, staff and campus visitors. They include a commitment to our vital missions of education, research and service. They include adherence to the guidelines issued by Governor Abbott, the CDC, the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board, local health authorities and the Board of Regents. And they include a commitment to openness and regular communication, resiliency and flexibility, and the commitment to scale back or end campus-based activities if circumstances require.

Each institution has organized multifaceted, comprehensive processes to plan for all aspects of campus operations in the fall. Some have already released their plans publicly, and the others will do so in the days ahead. Drs. Zerwas and Lakey have carefully reviewed each institutional plan. While there are many common elements to the plans, each campus is unique, depending on factors such as location, size, residential population, athletics, research activities, and other factors. Among the common elements of the institutional plans is the plan to begin the fall semester at the previously designated time in late August and end most in-person academic experiences at Thanksgiving, with only online work after.

Each plan also has specific, detailed elements, including:

- phased and limited return of the workforce, with staggered arrival and departure times;
- continued 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.

Given the uncharted territory of operating with some continued presence of COVID-19, there will be understandable anxiety among students and their families, as well as faculty and staff. And we are well aware of and concerned about the recent increase in cases and hospitalizations in Texas. While our planning for the fall continues, recent events reinforce the importance of plans that can be altered as soon as they need to be, and activities can be scaled back or eliminated completely.

Our institutions have been communicating with their stakeholders frequently, and will continue to do so, so all are aware of the fall plans. And institutions have surveyed attitudes and preferences of faculty and students and encouraged involvement in planning from across the campuses. This has helped promote a shared sense of purpose and consensus on operational principles and practices. For instance, in one institutional survey, 77 percent of faculty and 88 percent of students surveyed agreed with a requirement that wearing masks should be required in campus buildings.

To the extent practical, each institution is providing educational modalities that will satisfy all stakeholders, including those in more vulnerable positions. Each institution will offer completely online courses, face-to-face courses, and hybrid or combined online and face-to-face courses.

One institution has identified seven different approaches ranging from completely online, asynchronous learning to face-to-face, with most courses expected to be hybrid in one form or another. Another institution has committed to offer every single course both online and in-person, with the decision of how to participate up to each student and each faculty member. As an example of the flexibility built in to the approaches, one institution had begun planning earlier this summer for about one-third of its courses to be online and two-thirds in person in the fall, and has now flipped those estimates, planning for one-third in-person and two-thirds online. This kind of flexibility in light of changing circumstances will be critical to our institutions this fall.

I am impressed and heartened by the exceptional work of our presidents and their leadership teams, and the commitment of faculty and staff. We will continue to work closely with the institutions and continue to promote what I believe has been a very useful experience among the many institutional teams, sharing ideas and plans with each other. And I will continue to keep the Board of Regents updated frequently as plans continue to develop and adapt to changing conditions. This experience is unlike any we have faced before, but our institutions have responded exceptionally to the challenge to fulfill our mission and help ensure the health and safety of our campus communities.

We would be pleased to answer any questions you may have. Thank you.
