



## **Guidance for Spring Semester of 2021 and Related Issues October 2020**

Thank you for your efforts to make the Fall semester of 2020 a success so far at our universities and to keep our agencies in operation during the COVID-19 pandemic. You have done a remarkable job, and the Board of Regents and Chancellor are grateful for all that you have accomplished. We recognize the amount of time and work that has gone into this effort.

In recognition of changing conditions relating to the COVID-19 pandemic, the System has determined that certain revisions and updates are necessary and/or appropriate to our operational planning for the spring semester 2021. This document describes the revisions or updates that are approved and recommended by the System. References to sections and page numbers below are references to The Texas A&M University System's COVID-19 Response Plan for Reopening Member Campuses and Programs for 2020-2021, as approved by the Board of Regents in May 2020 (referred to in this document as the "Reopening Plan").

### **Return to Campus in January 2021**

Students, faculty members and employees who are new to the A&M System must take the training and provide the self-certification referenced in the "Timing of Physical Return to Campus" and "Upon Arrival on Campus" sections found at pp. 4-6 of the Reopening Plan.

Students, faculty members and employees who took the training course in August 2020 may not be required to take the training again in January 2021 at the member's discretion, but must submit a new self-certification document. All members of the university community will have a continuing duty to self-monitor and notify the applicable university or agency official if the answer to any of the questions in the self-certification becomes "no".

### **Testing**

The System plans to continue providing testing into 2021 at levels that depend on the future course of the pandemic as a System initiative, although this effort may be supplemented locally by additional testing as the university or agency sees fit.

We are working with our experts to determine what the testing program should look like beyond the end of the calendar year and should have a fully developed strategy soon.

Specifically, we are looking at various testing approaches in addition to the current Curative tests, and we are also evaluating other strategies that might help contain and isolate the disease on our campuses and workplaces.

Further guidance will be made available as we work out the details in the coming months.

## **Permissible Types of Face Coverings**

At the top of p.4 of the Reopening Plan, it provides that “[u]niversities and agencies may choose to require face coverings in certain settings and not others, and/or may choose to require specific face coverings.”

Based on additional information that has become available indicating that face shields are less effective, System public health experts recommend that the System reduce its reliance in face shields and require the use of face masks for most persons and in most settings. The System adopts this recommendation, and advises that, except in the very limited situation described below, employees and students should not be permitted to use face shields instead of face masks as the use of face shields is likely to provide a false sense of security that puts others at greater risk.

To enhance instructional effectiveness, System members may permit faculty members to use face shields while providing instruction in a controlled classroom environment, i.e. when the instructor is more than six feet from others and the classroom has appropriate air and climate control equipment. The controls in place in the classroom setting and the fact that face shield use is for a limited period of time are critical to this guidance.

For those individuals who must wear a face shield instead of a mask due to a medical reason or for an operational reason approved by management (e.g., the need to care for or interact with hearing impaired persons), the CDC recommends that face shields wrap around the sides of the wearer’s face and extend below the chin or that individuals use hooded face shields. In appropriate situations, university or agency administrators may approve the use of face shields that meet the specifications just described.

## **GPS and Other Monitoring Approaches**

Page 7 of the May 2020 Reopening Plan notes System universities and agencies may consider using “location analytics to assess traffic and congregating patters and adjust spaces accordingly.” System member should consult with the Office of General counsel prior to implementing surveillance technologies which can track the location of individuals to identify who may have been exposed to COVID-19. These technological tools can raise privacy concerns that need to be carefully considered.

## **Classes**

Pages 7-8 of the May 2020 Reopening Plan discussed classes for the fall 2020 semester. This general guidance continues through the spring 2021 semester inclusive of any shorter academic terms that may be completed prior to the spring graduation ceremonies (e.g., physical distancing should be observed in instructional spaces, reduced capacity of instructional spaces, enhanced cleaning, etc.). Universities should continue to strategically prioritize courses to be offered face to face. Within the constraints of physical distancing and reduced capacity, universities should take steps toward normal instructional operations in the spring resulting in more students participating in class face-to-face.

## **Co-Curricular Activities**

Page 9 of the May 2020 Reopening Plan included guidance on co-curricular activities. Universities should continue to weigh the relative risks and advantages of delivery mode in considering co-curricular activities, with a goal to engage more students in more co-curricular activities in the spring semester.

Recent CDC guidance regarding study abroad programs states that institutions of higher education should be aware that students may face unpredictable circumstances, such as travel restrictions, challenges returning home, and challenges accessing health care while abroad. Taking this into consideration, study abroad and study elsewhere may be permissible in the spring semester under the following considerations:

- Study abroad experiences with a duration of one-month or less occurring before 1 May 2021 should not be permitted (e.g. faculty led experiences).
- Semester-long study abroad experiences may be allowed on a case-by-case basis, dependent upon local conditions of the abroad experience.
- Study elsewhere and field trips occurring before 1 May 2021 may be allowed within Texas.
- Study elsewhere and field trips outside of Texas occurring before 1 May 2021 may only be allowed by the permission of the President or designee. Such determination should be based on the local-conditions of the places to be visited and an assessment of the relative risk/value of the experience.
- Study abroad and study elsewhere experiences to commence 1 May 2021 or later will be determined at a later date.

### **Travel**

University sponsored student travel should be limited to mission critical functions. Similarly, business travel for employees should be limited to mission critical functions, as determined by the president or agency director.

### **Spring Break**

The Chancellor's September 21 memo authorizes members to modify their spring holiday schedules as warranted by local conditions to protect the health of their students, faculty, and staff. Universities may choose to alter the previously planned spring break schedule accordingly, inclusive of instructional schedules and holidays.

### **Contact Tracing**

We now have an exceptional contact tracing effort operated by the Texas A&M University Health Science Center ("System Ops Center") that serves not only Brazos County but most other System members. The contact tracing system continues to be refined and improved, and it will continue for as long as is necessary to keep your universities and workplaces as safe as possible.

Certain System members have decided not to use the System Ops Center for contact tracing and have established their own localized process, pursuant to a written plan submitted to and approved by the System. Any System members that also desire to use a localized process must first submit a written plan for System approval.

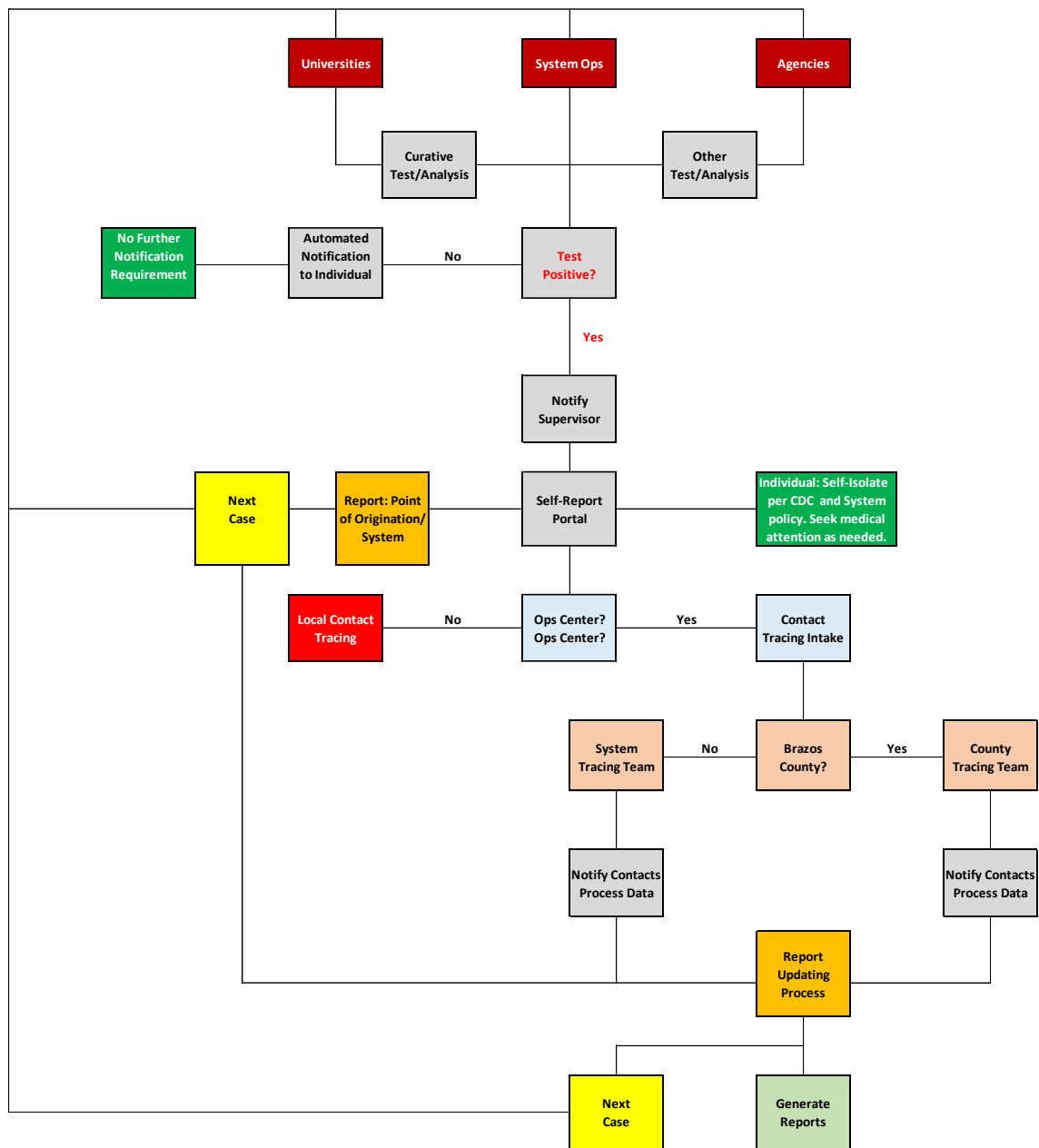
Per prior System Guidance, each System member was directed to form a committee (COVID-19 Reporting Committee) to have access to the COVID-19 reports and facilitate contact tracing. The COVID-19 Reporting Committees should now be fully operational, dedicated and available, on a daily basis, to take information from the COVID-19 reporting portal and provide appropriate information to other key university or agency officials so that they can make decisions regarding specific facilities and programs to contain the spread of the disease while also protecting the confidentiality of the affected individual(s)'s information to the greatest extent possible.

It is important to reiterate that, under applicable privacy laws, access to the information submitted to the System Ops Center or a System member's local contact tracing process must be limited, and personal medical

information may be shared only with those university or agency officials who have a business “need to know.” Over the past few months, we believe our members have developed appropriate practices regarding the use of this information. However, if you have questions about the manner in which COVID-19 Reporting information may be shared, please contact OGC.

As a reminder, included below is a flow chart to illustrate how the System testing and contact tracing processes will work, at a high level, both for System members that use the Ops Center and those that do not.

**Schematic Design**  
**Texas A&M University System**  
**COVID-19 Testing and Contact Tracing Process**



## Metrics for Adjustment Decisions

On July 13, 2020, the System issued Guidance to our members regarding the need to continuously monitor conditions relating to the pandemic and to establish a framework for evaluating possible changes in our operations. As noted at the beginning of this document, we are pleased with the way our universities and agencies have managed through the pandemic up to this point, but we also realize that COVID-19 presents a continuing challenge to our operations.

Set forth below is a restatement of our prior Guidance regarding the framework to be used as we go forward. The most difficult judgement that lies ahead for the System is how to respond to changing conditions within our individual communities with the spread of the disease and deciding what that means for in-person and web-based instruction. The following metrics are offered to guide the evaluation of any decisions that may be necessary as conditions change. University presidents must consult with Dr. James Hallmark and agency CEOs must consult with Billy Hamilton before proceeding with a change from one stage of operations to another (as described below).

*Each member should designate an individual or committee that monitors community and campus COVID-19 conditions no less than weekly.*

- The monitoring process must produce a weekly report/recommendation to the CEO for purposes of possible adjustments to face to face instruction, co-curricular activities, athletics, research, and residential life (and others, as necessary). This report should also be forwarded to the TAMUS Office of Risk Management.
- The individual/committee must consider
  - Guidance and coordination from
    - the Governor, the Chancellor and the Regents, as well as local governing authorities (e.g., county and city)
    - CDC, State and Local Health Departments
    - Athletic associations and conferences
  - Sufficiency of supplies and personnel, including the availability of
    - COVID-19 testing, associated supply chains, and turnaround times (days) for return of test results
    - Contact tracing, its capacity and effectiveness
    - Health Care Workers specific to COVID-19 operations
    - Cleaning supplies, PPE, disinfectant, etc.
  - Metrics sufficient to evaluate local and university/agency conditions
    - University available capacity for quarantine and isolation for on-campus students
    - University ability to support off-campus students during quarantine and isolation
    - Level of spread among faculty and staff necessary to support classes
    - Level of spread among staff needed to support essential campus functions (maintenance, food service, public safety, etc.)
    - Level of spread among students – general spread vs localized spread
    - Spread of infection through campus operations (rather than off campus functions)
    - Local available hospitalization capacity, particularly ICU and ventilator capacity
    - Infection rate (7 day rolling average) in local/community testing and in university/agency testing

- Local elementary, middle, and high school operations
- These considerations (guidance, sufficiency of supplies and personnel, and metrics) shall be balanced in performing a “gating” function to determine the level of activity occurring on a campus at any given time. For those members needing and requesting consultation on metrics and/or levels of risk, the System will provide consultation with qualified medical and public health experts.

*Based on the gating functions listed above, each member should develop no fewer than four stages for potential operation this fall. Movement from one stage of operation to another must receive written consent from chancellor or his designee.*

- **Initial COVID-19 Operations:**
  - Precautionary measures in place at beginning of Fall 2020 semester including face coverings, physical distancing, enhanced cleaning
- **Heightened Awareness:**
  - On-site work for faculty and staff levels above 50% but less than 100%
  - Face to face instruction, co-curricular activities, research, and athletics may or may not be scaled back depending on need
  - Residential living continues with precautions
- **Extreme Caution:**
  - On-site work locations for faculty and staff would reside between 25% and 50%
  - Face to face instruction, co-curricular activities, research, and athletics should be limited but may continue under additional limitations the institution may implement
  - Residential living continues with heightened precautions
- **Remote Operations:**
  - On-site work limited to personnel essential to support functions such as maintenance, food service, public safety, residential living, IT, etc.
  - Face to face instruction temporarily suspended; all instruction offered remotely, exceptions may be granted by the president/CEO
  - Co-curricular activities may continue remotely
  - Research suspended except as needed for animal care and those projects excepted by the VPR
  - Athletics status to be determined by state, conference, and athletic association
  - Students living in residence halls may be encouraged to return to their permanent residence. Residence halls, food service, computer labs remain open to support students who choose to remain