



OFFICE OF THE PRESIDENT

UHD President, Loren J. Blanchard

Greetings, University Community,

With Fall 2021 approaching and COVID-19 still a factor for our institution and community, the University of Houston-Downtown is working diligently to ensure a safe start to the academic year. This message outlines changes to the University's approach to fall in light of increased COVID cases throughout our city.

Before we offer details on the start to Fall 2021, we want to thank each and every one of you for your fortitude during a most challenging period for our University. It has been difficult for all of us to navigate this pandemic as it ebbs and flows. Still, we as a University must stay the course while remaining vigilant in our efforts to stay true to our academic mission.

Please know that UHD is working to support your safety and success. Our top priority is you, and we are consistently monitoring city, county, state, and national data, as well as following the guidance of healthcare experts as we move forward into a new academic year. While our strategy for the start of fall offers flexibility for our campus community, the University will continue to evaluate its path forward for the rest of the semester.

We recently met with Deans, Vice Presidents, Faculty Senate and Staff Council leadership to discuss these changes to the start of the semester. We are grateful for their patience and for the opportunity to communicate with them directly on critical matters such as this. Each of these campus leaders plays an important role at our University, and they will assist in communicating the fall strategy to their respective constituents.

We recognize this revised strategy arrives less than two weeks prior to the start of Fall 2021, but if the pandemic has taught us anything, it's that we're able to pivot quickly to continue our academic mission. We are certainly prepared to do so now and know our resilient UHD family will be ready to do the same. Please know that we will continue to monitor the pandemic's effects on our community and may make additional changes to the semester or classes should the need arise.

Fall Classes:

The University will conduct a "soft opening" for Fall 2021. This approach will offer flexibility from the start of classes on August 23 through September 11 to reduce campus density. Faculty currently scheduled to teach a face-to-face or hybrid class should engage the class in one in-person class experience each week. More specific details on implementing UHD's "soft opening", including best practices, will be communicated to the academic community by the Provost's Office by Friday, August 13.

On Monday, September 13, classes will resume in their regularly scheduled instructional delivery modes.

On-Campus Operations:

All UHD offices must continue to be staffed and open during regular operating hours, Monday through Friday. Non-essential staff may be eligible to work a hybrid schedule from August 23 to September 10, with virtual work not to exceed two days per week. After September 1, essential staff in student-facing offices may be eligible for a hybrid schedule until September 10 as well. Requests to work a hybrid schedule must be endorsed by the supervisor and approved by the appropriate Vice President.

As always, employees who may need medical-related accommodations can reach out to the UHD Benefits Team in Employment Services & Operations (ESO).

Commencement

The August 14 Commencement ceremony at NRG Stadium will be conducted in a socially distanced environment recognizing 2020 and Spring 2021 graduates as planned. Attendees are encouraged to wear face coverings/masks during this event.

Vaccinations

If you have not received the vaccination, now is the time to do so. More and more establishments have walk-in opportunities to receive the vaccination. Grocery stores, pharmacies, churches, and community centers offer the vaccine. As another reminder, [UHD will offer vaccinations](#) on August 26 (first dose) and September 17 (second dose) in the Welcome Center. This event is open for you and your families who are eligible within the age requirement. Also, this [Harris County Public Health site](#) has details on the vaccination and a map of locations offering it.

UHD will roll out the **Gator Vaccination Incentive Program** with some outstanding benefits for faculty, staff, and students who are vaccinated. Additional details will be available soon.

If you have questions about vaccinations, consult your physicians. As you may recall, UHD hosted forums with the following medical experts: [Dr. Peter Hotez](#), [Dr. David Persse](#) and [Dr. Stephen Spann](#). All of these conversations are available at the links provided.

Face Coverings

Face coverings also can make a difference in reducing the transmission of this virus. Let's please do what is right for our fellow Gators and consider masking up whether you are vaccinated or not. This is highly recommended by the Texas Department of State Health Services and the Centers for Disease Control.

COVID-19 Testing

[Testing for COVID-19 is available throughout the city](#) and UHD's Community members should consider getting tested. Please be reminded that [UHD hosts an on-campus testing site](#) (next to the Student Life Center) that is open Monday - Friday from 9 a.m. - 5 p.m.

Self-Health Checks

Lastly, the easiest thing you can do each day is to conduct a health check. If you are feeling under the weather, stay home. Consult with a physician and communicate with your supervisor and advise them of your situation.

This is indeed a complicated time for all of us. Bearing this in mind, let's work together, as a community to practice caution, courtesy and trust that we will get through this current wave as we make personal commitments to taking the necessary actions in protecting ourselves from the pandemic ... and ultimately, protecting others as well.

Sincerely,

Loren J. Blanchard, Ph.D.
President, University of Houston-Downtown

Akif Uzman, Ph.D.
Interim Provost, University of Houston-Downtown