



Dear Colleagues,

As the semester gets underway, we are mindful as campus leaders that all of us are experiencing a difficult start of the semester, made tougher by the case numbers in our surrounding community. We hear and feel these concerns ourselves, and we deeply appreciate the thought and concern members of our community are putting toward the start of a successful academic year.

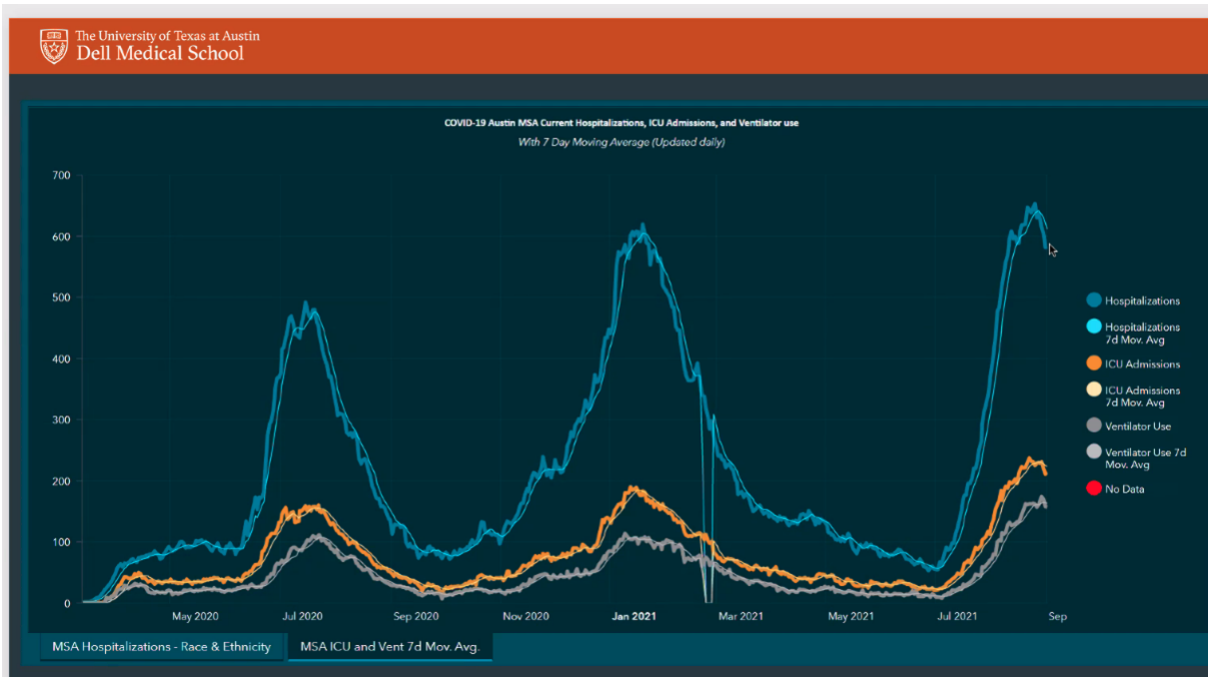
We continue to hear questions from our colleagues about our university's approach to our fall semester operations and our goal of safely providing in-person experiences for students in the classroom. While we share the objectives of a healthy and safe campus, we know that members of our community don't always share the same points of view or the same information. To that end, we wanted to take a moment to walk through many of the facts and data that we've been considering when making decisions about the classroom experience – both to help others know more about what we've learned, and to help others know what kinds of information we expect to continue to consider in the weeks and months to come.

This is not exhaustive – it is tough to summarize everything we learn or consider across multiple committee meetings each week, plus many other conversations with health experts. But, it is our hope that this will provide some additional context and information.

- [Vaccines](#) and [masks](#) are freely available, valuable tools to mitigate risks. The state has not given public universities the authority to mandate them, but we remain optimistic that usage of both of these tools can exceed

90% – especially mask usage at times like these, when disease prevalence is high.

- Vaccines are very [strongly associated with positive health outcomes](#). Put another way, there is overwhelming evidence that those who face the most severe risk from COVID-19 today are unvaccinated. We continue to hear how this is borne out in the hospitalization data, ICU usage, and mortality data.
- To support vaccination, the university has added [vaccination locations](#) and rolled out a [vaccine incentive program](#) offering prizes of up to \$10,000 for students, and many other prizes for faculty and staff members. We encourage all faculty and staff to share information about these incentives with their students.
- Those who face serious health risks from COVID-19 in spite of being vaccinated – for example, people with existing health conditions – have the ability to [seek accommodations](#) through our processes, mitigating their risks.
- We've seen good evidence of our students taking these issues seriously. For example, nearly 40,000 students uploaded coronavirus test results before the start of the semester. For students living in our campus residences, about 50 tested positive before coming to campus and delayed their move-in date. Among students who arrived without results and were tested here, we observed zero positives.
- We continue to carefully monitor the [campus positivity rate](#), which is fluctuating between 0.5% and 1% — similar to last year and much lower than the surrounding community.
- There are indications that the Austin community may have peaked for caseloads, ICU admissions, and ventilator use, based on the latest 7-day moving averages. It's too early to say, but this would be a favorable trend if it holds.



Austin 7-day averages: [Enlarged version](#)

- We have continued to invest in infrastructure, such as our [PCT testing](#), which reached a record number of students at the start of the semester
- With the increased demand for testing, we have engaged with a third-party provider to add more capacity, and we are working with them to make it easier to sign up for these additional slots and to communicate about them.
- Another way we are looking to add testing capacity is to make convenient at-home tests widely available to members of our community. We expect to have more details on this soon.
- Anecdotally, many students who did not have access to FDA- or WHO-authorized vaccines are taking advantage of this access now through our vaccine clinics at the Dell Medical School and the Student Services Building.

Finally, to continue the flow of information, starting next week the COVID-19 Executive Committee will begin sending faculty and staff members a weekly update laying out vital data and information the committee is reviewing, with information on strategy considerations plus the latest updates to policies and processes.

As we continue to face the challenges of this semester together, we are grateful for the collective efforts of our faculty and staff. Behind every classroom experience this fall, there are hard-working people facing difficult personal situations yet still rising to this challenging occasion. Thank you for your efforts to make this a successful academic year.

Sincerely,



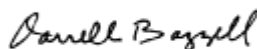
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