

October 2, 2020

SMU, and encouraging President Turner and his administration to continue the important dialogue to address these issues.

accounting is handled by the [Office of Grant and Contract Accounting](#) (a division of Business and Finance). Research Compliance provides oversight for all human, animal, and biohazard research. Technology Management works with the Office of Legal Affairs to assess, protect, and commercialize intellectual property. The Office's [research handbook](#) gives a good overview of the support faculty and staff receive across a research project's lifecycle.

- Lab opening and safety guidelines – Research facilities are currently open to faculty, staff, and undergraduate and graduate students subject to compliance with the guidelines outlined in the table within this [document](#). In addition, faculty, staff, and undergraduate and graduate students must complete COVID-19 training on Canvas before accessing University research facilities. Research with human subjects may be undertaken according to the [guidance set forth by the IRB](#).
- [Guidance for researchers during COVID-19](#) – To maintain continuity of operations and to maximize faculty research productivity, University offices that support research are fully operational. Contact information is provided on the website of the office from which you need support.

[Office of Research and Graduate Studies](#)
[Grant and Contract Accounting](#)
[Office of Legal Affairs](#)

Better understanding of *US News and World Report's* (USN&WR) peer assessment scores – As mentioned in previous newsletters, SMU is ranked 66 in USN&WR's 2021 ranking of national universities, with a goal of being within the top 50 universities. We are reviewing the data to develop and refine our action plan to reach this goal, with our areas of focus being: 1) retention rates 2) graduation rates, 3) affordability, particularly for Pell-eligible students, and 4) increasing the University's peer assessment score (an externally-rated perception of the academic quality of an institution) as reported by college/university senior leadership.

In today's newsletter, I want to share a more detailed look at what we are learning about the importance of the peer assessment score to our ranking. In academic year 2019-2020, and at the request of then(on of)3(th)-11(e)4(a)4(c)-5(a)4(de)4(m).

decision about the institution, select “do not know.” If the score is a reflection of the quality of the academic programs, the number of votes cast by presidents, provosts, and deans of admission might be considered a measure of familiarity with the institution and their academic programs. Figure 1 below provides an average, over the past 15 years, of SMU’s peer assessment scores compared with the same average for those schools ranked in the 50s by USN&WR. Figure 2 below provides an average, over the past 15 years, of SMU’s vote counts compared with the same average for those schools ranked in the 50s by USN&WR.

Figure 1: Average Assessment Ratings, 2005-2021, for SMU and Institutions Ranked in the 50s in 2021



Figure 2: Average Votes Cast, 2005-2021, for SMU and Institutions Ranked in the 50s in 2021

The data indicates that SMU suffers from two intertwined challenges with the USN&WR peer assessment process.

Raters (presidents, provosts, and deans of admission) do not view SMU's academic quality to be equivalent to other institutions, ranked by USN&WR, within the ranking group which we aspire to climb over or surpass (those ranked 51-59).

Raters appear to be less familiar with SMU as an institution, or at least the academic quality of SMU, than institutions ranked in the 50s.

general education and degree programs we are adding software enhancements to Canvas. These interrelated projects will require significant efforts on the part of OIT, the Registrar's Office and the schools – including their records offices. As we have learned over the last several years, launching new software is a delicate task and requires deft handling of the components that feed into it. Reducing the normal workload associated with curricular changes will support a successful launch.

At the same time, we also recognize that ongoing curricular changes are central to our efforts in continuing improvement. Starting October 12, deans will be asked to prioritize any further curricular changes for this academic year and submit these once a month to the Office of Curricular Innovation and Policy for review by the EPC. Those potential changes that are approved can then move forward through the normal approval process. Changes include not just new programs but changes in course prefixes and number, prerequisites, etc. We also ask that submitted changes should be brief and should include reasons for why these changes are essential in this academic year.

Fall 2020

Campus health and safety update – The favorable decline in active cases of COVID-19 among students and employees extended into this week, with our active case count just above 100. As of today, we have 101 student cases and 4 employee cases. Fortunately, there have still been no hospitalizations reported for any employees or students to date. As a result of this favorable trend, and the accompanying reduction of the utilization of campus isolation spaces, we were able to change our operational level to the 'moderate' category last Monday using the original calculation tool. This week, which is our first using the revised assessment tool, we remained in the 'moderate' category. Remember that our operational level is reviewed each week and any necessary updates are made each Monday afternoon on the [Mustang Strong website](#). Having now completed six weeks of the fall semester I want to express my gratitude to each of you for your flexibility and vigilance in these challenging times.

New COVID-19 case count dashboard – As I have mentioned, we are developing a new dashboard tool that will provide even more information and transparency regarding COVID-19 case counts and isolation capacity. Be on the lookout for additional information, hopefully as soon as next week, once the new dashboard is available.

Qualtrics/PathCheck reminder – As part of our efforts this fall to help protect and inform the SMU community, we deployed two tools for monitoring the health of students, faculty, and staff—a COVID-19 symptom checker and contact tracer.

Thanks also to SMU's faculty and students for their feedback. The Provost's Office will provide monthly surveys in October and November so that faculty and students can keep providing feedback as we continue to monitor unfolding circumstances and address issues that the surveys reveal.

Early progress reports for fall 2020 – Thank you to our faculty for completing early progress reports for fall 2020. I'm pleased to report that 74% of early term grades were reported this semester. These reports are reviewed by the University Advising Center and major advisers and serve as a great way to identify students in need of outreach. In addition, student academic success programs in the A-LEC contact students with deficient grades to remind them about tutoring, academic counseling, and opportunities to work with the writing center and research librarians on campus. All of these services are available both in person and virtually in fall 2020. Faculty who did not have a chance to complete their early term reports will have a second opportunity during midterm progress reports.

Inaugural Provost's Faculty Fellows program – Thank you to the 30 faculty members who submitted applications for the Provost Faculty Fellows program. This week, members of my team reviewed all the applications, and I will be announcing our inaugural cohort next week. The Faculty Fellows will begin this month with collaborations on the strategic priorities of equity and inclusion, undergraduate and graduate student success, research enhancement and scholarly impact, strategic communication, and institutional planning and data analytics.

Sincerely,

Elizabeth G. Loba, PhD