



# SMU

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May 14, 2021

Dear Faculty and Staff:

I hope you have found these newsletters helpful throughout the year. As I mentioned in the very first one, open and transparent communication is vital to our success and will remain my commitment to you whether we are in the midst of a pandemic or once we have finally reached a steady state. Barring the need to communicate more frequently over the summer, my plan is to send updates twice in the month of June and once in the month of July.

As spring 2021 comes to a safe and successful close and we make final preparations for May's Commencement ceremonies, allow me to express my profound gratitude for all you have done this year in service to SMU. I recognize that many of you are now, understandably, extremely weary and that everyone is ready for renewal and restoration.

The rigors of any academic year can take their toll by this point in the spring. And, as you all well know, this year was by no means "normal." Our successful response to COVID-19 required *more, new* and *different* from each of you – *more* vigilance, *new* tools and technology, and *different* ways of working.

In the midst of COVID, I have consistently challenged you to consider SMU's academic priorities for the next 3-5 years and have asked the entire academic community to develop and implement plans that will allow SMU to reach its full potential as a research and teaching university with global impact. In today's newsletter, I want to: 1) reflect on all that we have been able to accomplish in this difficult year, 2) affirm and to champion our pursuit of even greater academic quality, and 3) preview the exciting path that lies ahead.

### **Year in Review:**

Many other higher education institutions made the decision to begin the 2020-2021 academic year with remote-only instruction. To meet the educational needs and desires of our students, and working in consultation with our own health and safety experts, local/state/federal authorities and CDC guidelines, SMU chose to offer a combination of remote, virtual (SMUFlex), and in-person learning.

In response to this decision, this past summer (while welcoming SMU's third provost in as many years) you were called on to transform both the campus and our ways of engaging with it – all while promoting health and safety and maintaining academic continuity. This

transformation required months of careful deliberation and planning as well as considerable individual flexibility, sacrifice and trust.

More than 340 faculty members completed 25+ hours of required training modules to join the 160 faculty who had previously received this training across the last four years. This training, provided by the combined efforts of CTE, OIT, and SMU Libraries, supported the preparation for the demands of online and hybrid instruction. SMU invested over \$1.5 million to upgrade classroom technology and more than \$5 million in signage, air quality upgrades, classroom/office infrastructure, COVID 19 testing and vaccinations, and many other items necessary to operate safely in the COVID 19 environment. We centralized the process for undergraduate course scheduling and developed an algorithm to maximize in-class learning opportunities for our students, while maintaining proper social distancing standards.

Over the summer, in the height of the pandemic, we as a nation struggled with a series of terrible events that underscored our nation's painful legacy of racial and social injustice. The Black Unity Forum, a consortium of students, faculty, staff, and alumni groups, came together to develop an action plan in the summer of 2020 aimed at helping our campus become a more welcoming and inclusive environment for our Black students, faculty, and staff. SMU's response to the Black Unity Forum action plan was released on September 30, and will help define our work in the days and years ahead to make tangible, systemic, and sustainable change to be true to our collective belief that "Every Mustang is Valued."

From spring through summer, over 20 faculty committees worked diligently to create and recreate Student Learning Outcomes, Supporting Skills, Rubrics, Courses and Post Hoc Assessment processes in preparation for the fall 2020 year in advance of the launch of SMU's new Common Curriculum. All of this, in the midst of ongoing work adjusting to the pandemic.

As of September 8 (the University's census date), the combined number of undergraduate and graduate students totaled 12,385 (a record for SMU). The fall 2020 incoming class of 1,531 first-year students was the most diverse in terms of race/ethnicity (31%), in SMU's history. And the 297 transfer students who came to SMU in the fall (45% racially/ethnically diverse) was our largest cohort since 2013. The average ACT score for our incoming students was 31 (95th percentile nationally).

After an initial, anticipated spike in COVID-19 cases, we were able to transition to a stable state for the rest of the school year, with no transmission reported as a result of classroom activities. The Emergency Operations Center (EOC) provided outstanding leadership and service by monitoring conditions, developing and overseeing SMU's COVID response, and keeping the community informed.

We completed on-campus instruction around Thanksgiving, and on December 19, 2020, we celebrated more than 500 graduates with an in-person and webcast outdoor commencement in Ford Stadium.

To safely navigate spring 2021, SMU made the difficult decision to forego spring break, typically a much-needed chance to catch our collective breath, as a way to limit the risk of

increased infection. We also transitioned many student activities, including fraternity and sorority recruitment, to virtual offerings. Just as we were settling in to the spring semester, the state of Texas experienced its most extreme winter weather event in nearly a century. Many of you endured personal and professional hardships to make it through that difficult week as well as during the subsequent return. Losing a week of instruction due to severe weather put additional pressures on the academic calendar, which you patiently addressed.

During the spring semester, to share the variety of ways that faculty have innovated their teaching in response to the challenges this year, 61 faculty members collaborated across a variety of disciplinary and pedagogical perspectives to share ideas about how to engage with new teaching and learning modalities. Thirteen partnerships formed around themes related to student engagement, feedback strategies, content creation, and mental health. We invite you to explore the resources our colleagues have created, which are [featured here](#) as part of the newly redesigned [CTE website](#).

We also hosted SACSCOC accreditors as a part of the decennial reaffirmation of accreditation. Our success in making the case with SACSCOC would not have been possible without the sacrifices and dedication of the 100+ faculty and staff responsible for writing content, securing and organizing evidence files, designing and producing SMU in Four books, shooting and editing a video tour of SMU's main campus and participating in many interviews. The list of those who were involved is [here](#). Thank you all for helping to show SMU's ongoing commitment to excellence. Special thanks to Associate Provost for Institutional Planning and Effectiveness Dr. Patty Alvey for her tremendous leadership, both prior to, and throughout, this two-year reaffirmation window.

Thankfully, we were finally able to transition to spring and have reached the end of the term. Finals are over, final grades are being submitted, and we now have many reasons to celebrate.

The synopsis above does not do justice to all that we have accomplished, working together, this year. However, let me once again express my gratitude for all the ways, big and small, that you made this year not only possible but successful.

**SMU's pursuit of greater academic quality:**

SMU has made tremendous strides, particularly over the past two decades, in terms of academic quality. We are *US News and World Report's* highest-ranked university in North Texas (66<sup>th</sup> in 2021). Also, many of our graduate professional programs are ranked within or near the top 50 (Cox, 44<sup>th</sup>; Dedman Law, 52<sup>nd</sup>; and Simmons, 59<sup>th</sup>). And, the research productivity and Ph.D. output from our most research-intensive schools (Dedman, Lyle, and Simmons) earned SMU a "Research-2" position in the most recent Carnegie Classification system reporting cycle. Meadows is renowned for its instruction across a broad range of visual, performing, and communication arts degrees, and its faculty continue to excel in traditional as well as creative and innovative contributions to scholarly excellence across its array of disciplines. The Perkins School, home to the internationally-renowned Bridwell Library, has experienced renewed student demand and boasts a roster of world-renowned scholars.

During the interview process, and confirmed time and again upon my arrival to campus last July, I came to understand that SMU was on the verge of breaking through into the top-tier of higher education institutions. Through the hard work of our faculty and staff, along with the work of those who came before you – and thanks to the sustained and visionary leadership of President Turner, the generosity of our donors, and the students who choose to study with us – SMU is as well-positioned as nearly any other university to reach the next level in terms of academic excellence.

Knowing that SMU has made these tremendous strides while so many of our higher education peers are experiencing the financial stress that comes with a negative outlook for the entire sector, declining enrollments and diminished support from state governments makes our accomplishments – and current position – more remarkable.

SMU, however, is not immune to financial challenges and limitations. In addition to the operational hardships, COVID-19 has exacerbated the financial strain already endemic throughout much of higher education. For SMU, for FY 2021, a \$22.6M impact resulted from operational changes as the result of COVID 19. We will be able to address these impact and address impacts that will likely carry on in FY 2022 thanks to the efforts of the entire campus. Faculty and staff, while asked to do more with less – particularly in response to the hiring freeze – were fortunately able to receive merit and one-time pay adjustments this year, both in 2020 and in 2021.

In terms of financial limitations, SMU can no longer rely on continual tuition increases as a source of additional revenue. With tuition making up approximately 72.5% of the operating budget, meeting our undergraduate class size enrollment goals and pricing SMU studies appropriately are of vital importance. You might not know this, but SMU ranks within the top-25 colleges and universities nationally in terms of total cost of attendance (tuition, fees, and room and board). Particularly in these challenging financial times, we are planning for only very modest tuition increases that will allow us to maintain current operations.

Without the benefit of tuition revenue as a sustainable stream of increased revenue, we must look for other ways to sustain our forward progress. In addition to new revenue sources, most notably through online offerings, we need to undergo the difficult work of determining where and how to reallocate resources to address greatest needs and make the greatest strategic impact. Data will be key to informing these decisions. The decentralized nature of higher education institutions often makes it difficult to develop transparent and commonly-shared data sets and reports. In this, SMU is no exception. But my team, particularly under the leadership of Dr. Michael Tumeo in the Office of Institutional Research, has made great strides this year, working in partnership with the Deans, to develop a common understanding of our data as well as a preliminary suite of reports (e.g., faculty:staff ratios, student credit hours:faculty FTE, extra compensation, etc.) to inform our decisions. We will continue to invite academic leadership groups (Deans, Associate Deans, Department Chairs, and the Faculty Senate) to access this data as we make progress on shared and sustainable goals.

During the FY 2022 budget cycle, our team of Deans and Associate Provosts demonstrated tremendous commitment and dedication by coming together to advance a budget reflective of

shared priorities. Their willingness to collaborate in new and time-consuming ways this year strengthened the case for our Academic Affairs budget this year. I know that this was a new approach for SMU and that there is justifiably some ambiguity and concern about how we will go about the process of determining future resource allocations. Knowing already that we will need more data and more time to make informed decisions, we will begin budget deliberations sooner in the year to allow more time to develop, harmonize, and review the data. And I pledge transparency throughout the process.

As often as I can, I remind everyone about my four priority areas for the next three to five years: SMU's 2016-2025 Strategic Plan, *US News and World Report* top-50 status, SMU's Road to R-1 via Research/Creative Excellence, and SMU's Inclusive Excellence Initiatives. We must hit our goals in all four of these areas. This is our roadmap, developed by many of you through campus dialogue and service on task forces and committees well before my arrival last summer.

I recognize that this year's heavy focus on research – particularly in terms of achieving R-1 status – has left some of our community members feeling outside of the conversation and vision – an area of concern that I intend to address actively and with continued dialogue. As backdrop, based on my background as a research-intensive faculty member and as an administrator in R-1 institutions, I saw research as SMU's greatest area of immediate need. We are very strong in terms of fulfilling our teaching mission, very strong in terms of the visual and performing arts, and very strong across a broad range of professional degrees.

In a lull between last week's Board meetings, I found myself sitting in the lobby of SMU's Department of Economics. Among the memorabilia beautifully laid out in a display case was the Ph.D. regalia for SMU's first male and first female Ph.D. graduates (both from the Economics Department). It struck me that the pursuit of research is not new to SMU. When thirteen graduate students began seminars in the fall of 1958 in preparation to formally launch the Economics Ph.D. program in 1959, we began the quest toward comprehensive research excellence that brings us to the present.

For those faculty whose scholarly and creative outputs are not tracked by the Carnegie Classification system, let me emphasize that we want to equip everyone to achieve excellence in their scholarship. The Carnegie Classification System, and our quest for R-1 status, provides clear and consistent metrics by which we can judge progress on that scale. And progress toward R-1 is necessarily accompanied by significant increases in funding from research grants. Growing this source of revenue is essential in light of the fiscal realities the University faces. However, all campus scholars will benefit from the research infrastructure we will be putting into place. And in turn, all students will benefit from learning that is informed by scholarship as well as exposure to scholarly and creative excellence. The best R-1 institutions, to which SMU can and should aspire, have successful artistic and creative components. Being R-1 does not mean that we must forfeit our other, worthy scholarly and creative pursuits.

While we have the most work to do in developing our research infrastructure, I pledge to you that we will continue to support all of SMU's hallmarks, with the focus on strengthening our Road to R-1 as a "both/and" approach that should also augment our many strengths.

During the April 30 faculty Town Hall to discuss 3-5 areas of academic distinction for which the ability to hire additional clusters of faculty would set SMU apart as world-class in several fields, some faculty expressed concerns about the focus on only STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Math) and encouraged us to expand the conversation beyond STEM to include STEAM (Science, Technology, Engineering, the Arts, and Math). Following the Town Hall, I received many thoughtful emails with recommendations along similar lines. In response, I plan to offer a Town Hall early in the fall 2021 semester that is focused more heavily and centrally on SMU's areas of academic distinction in the arts, humanities and social sciences, and we will include opportunities to bring forward ideas around strategic planning and visioning, both across the short- and long-term goals at SMU. We will share more information as plans materialize.

In the meantime, I would like to emphasize continuity for all faculty, in the hopes of dispelling concerns that have come to me through these recent conversations. All faculty at SMU, not just faculty in disciplines that have conventionally been more aligned with research metrics associated with R-1 Carnegie distinction, will continue to have their scholarly and creative contributions supported and celebrated. All faculty will continue, for example, to receive opportunities to apply for internal funding and awards, to apply for promotions, and to be eligible for research leaves. In addition, the Deans and I will be convening over the summer to make further decisions about faculty lines, which will result in strategic investment of both tenure-line and non-tenure line faculty to support all four of our pillars.

Given the challenges and time crunch we have already faced this semester, I felt it best to move these conversations to the fall. However, if any faculty members are interested in engaging in these conversations over the summer, please e-mail [provost@smu.edu](mailto:provost@smu.edu) so that we can determine interest and better inform this fall's conversations.

### **Closing/the Road Ahead**

Despite the considerable headwinds we have faced and overcome this year, SMU is well-positioned to reach its goals for even greater academic quality. On the COVID-19 front, President Turner has [announced our plans](#) for the May, summer and fall terms, as well as our intentions to transition to a fully in-person instruction by fall 2021. Taking lessons learned from managing through the pandemic for over a year, we will continue to make decisions based on the health, safety and overall well-being of our community. Despite the need to remain cautious and to maintain vigilance, there are many positive signs on the pandemic front.

As of May 12, with daily student testing ongoing, the Dr. Bob Smith Health Center had not reported a single COVID-positive test result in 32 consecutive days. Last week, we reached a major milestone with zero active or new COVID-19 cases and zero individuals in quarantine or isolation. That favorable trend and similar ones have continued into this week, and with your cooperation and adherence to safety we hope to sustain them moving forward. Over 60% of our faculty, 50% of our staff and over 35% of our students report receiving at least their first vaccine dosage and, with an increasing and reliable vaccine supply, SMU plans to remain a provider throughout the summer and fall.

Last week, SMU's Board of Trustees approved plans for the upcoming capital campaign – Campaign 3.0, and we can now look forward to the excitement and energy that comes with such an important endeavor.

While recruitment is not yet complete, there is a lot to be excited about for SMU's Class of 2025! Our planned undergraduate enrollment next fall is 1,530. Thanks to the tremendous efforts of our Deans, the College/School recruiters and the Division of Enrollment Services, under the leadership of Associate Vice President for Enrollment Management Dr. Wes Waggoner and Dean of Undergraduate Admission Elena Hicks, we look to be on track to meet, and possibly modestly exceed, our enrollment target. Some noteworthy data points on next year's incoming class:

- About 33% of this fall's deposits are from students identifying with traditionally underrepresented groups
  - This is a 13% increase in those numbers over last year
  - This includes a 32% increase in those identifying as Black/African American
  - And, a 21% increase in those identifying as Hispanic/Latinx
- 10.3% of the deposits are from students who qualify as Pell-eligible (This is an increase of 38 over last year, for a total of 170.)

It has been a hard year, full of new and difficult challenges. But it has been a very productive year as well. And for that progress, I am grateful to each of you for your service and for your partnership. I look forward, hopefully via more face-to-face and less via Zoom, to opportunities to refine and implement the plans that can propel SMU even higher.

Sincerely,



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