COVID-19 Task Force
Final Report
May 25, 2020
## Task Force Members

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This is not the first time a virus has shaken our campus. Within the first decade of our history, what was then Middle Tennessee State Normal School witnessed the 1918-19 influenza pandemic. Then, in 1921, a smallpox outbreak struck campus. The school was put under quarantine, and the main access road, now known as Middle Tennessee Boulevard, was even blocked for a time. Students who fell ill were cared for in a house near campus. The campus community must have been terrified. But the institution persevered.

Now, nearly a century later, another virus bedevils us. The COVID-19 pandemic has turned campus life upside down. Like most universities, Middle Tennessee State University transitioned all Spring courses to remote instruction in March 2020 to slow the spread of the virus. Shortly thereafter, we decided that all Summer courses would also be online. On April 30, however, President Sidney A. McPhee announced that the MTSU campus would resume on-campus operations for the Fall 2020 semester. He established a COVID-19 Task Force to make recommendations about how to bring students back while maintaining educational quality and minimizing risk to our community. The Task Force, which included faculty, staff, administrators, and community members, was divided into three committees: Academics, Student Affairs and Services, and Administration and Operations. The recommendations from those committees form the bulk of this report.

Current scientific projections suggest that opening the new academic year as usual is not advisable given the nature of university life, which presents heightened risks through repeated prolonged personal contact in densely populated spaces. (See, for example, the most recent CDC guidelines for institutions of higher education.) Starting the semester entirely online, however, is far from ideal for courses requiring labs, performances, or other activities that need to occur in specialized spaces or involve significant collaboration with others. A more nuanced path seems preferable.

The Task Force proposes a modified reopening, in which some courses occur on-ground with social distancing, some remain online, and some are delivered in a hybrid format. This approach seeks to minimize risk while we continue to pursue our educational mission as best we can. The Task Force also offers recommendations on how changes to housing, on-campus events, and student services might reduce population density on campus while continuing our work. In addition, we make suggestions about mitigating risk for our employees and addressing anticipated budget shortfalls.
Let us hope that the virus behind the COVID-19 pandemic is soon dispatched into oblivion. In the meantime, we must face our circumstances with the same fortitude and sense of community shown by our predecessors who confronted smallpox a century ago. They worked together to get through their trials, and we must do the same.

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My thanks to all the members of the Task Force for their hard work on a tight deadline. Special thanks to Bud Fischer, Mary Hoffschwelle, Karen Petersen, Deb Sells, and Alan Thomas. Matthew Hibdon, Allison McGoffin, and Cheryl Torsney also provided valuable help in creating this report.

Mark Byrnes
Chair, MTSU COVID-19 Task Force
Our Values during the Pandemic

In these challenging times, Middle Tennessee State University reaffirms its commitment to the values essential to our academic community and civic life. The True Blue Pledge and MTSU’s Community Standards are more relevant than ever: honesty and integrity, respect for diversity, engagement in the community, and commitment to nonviolence.

The University also affirms its commitment to maintaining quality in its academic programs and services, maximizing options for learning and working, and minimizing risks to the health of students, faculty, staff, and the public. As we return to campus, the life of the University may look, sound, and feel different than it was before the pandemic. What has not changed is our commitment to student success and the success of all other members of the MTSU community.

The Institution’s Commitment

To minimize risk to individuals and the public, the University will comply with local, state, and federal regulations and guidance from public health authorities. These measures may change, sometimes on short notice, as conditions change on and off our campus.

The University may adopt temporary policies and procedures to protect individual and public health, including but not limited to:

- Academic social distancing measures, such as limiting the number of on-ground course offerings, alternating days or weeks for students to attend on-ground/remote class sessions, and limiting access to academic spaces and buildings.
- Academic and public social distancing measures such as limited or restricted access to University facilities, assigned seating, and prescribed pathways in, out, and through University facilities and the campus.
- Protective measures such as face masks, temperature checks, enhanced cleaning of surfaces, rooms, and buildings, and temporary closures of rooms and buildings.
- Enhanced protective measures in campus residences, food service operations, and recreational spaces.
- Additional protective measures for at-risk individuals who must be on campus.
- Accommodations for remote instruction and work for at-risk individuals.
Appropriate academic and experiential alternatives to on-ground or in-person instruction that meet learning outcomes for courses and degree programs and, to the extent possible, requirements mandated by outside agencies for licensure and certification.

A temporary University class attendance policy.

University leaders will ensure that the institution maintains academic and operational continuity in service to its mission and vision for students and communities in our region, state, nation, and world. The University will:

- Maintain the integrity and quality of the institution and the degrees it awards.
- Maintain its commitment to intellectual and academic freedom and shared governance.
- Ensure the quality of teaching and learning in all formats.
- Ensure continuity of research, creative activity, professional and public service, and University partnerships.
- Provide virtual options and alternatives for academic, co-curricular, and/or extra-curricular activities.
- Continue to protect privacy and confidentiality, academic integrity, equity, and access.
- Use its resources prudently to ensure academic and operational continuity.
- Be transparent and inclusive in decision-making processes about academics, student life, and other University operations, including athletics, employment, and learning/living/working conditions.
- Continue to enforce rules and provide due process when dealing with unethical, disruptive, illegal, or dangerous behavior and other rules of conduct as specified in University policy and in handbooks for faculty, students, and University employees. Violation of any policy or rule may result in immediate removal from a class, building, event, or campus.

The University will provide support to faculty, students, and staff for adapting their teaching, learning, research, and service activities as needed to ensure academic and operational continuity. Such support will include but is not limited to:

- Timely communication with faculty, students, staff, and the public about potential changes to on-ground, remote, and online academic instruction, co-curricular and extra-curricular activities, public events, and University operations.
- Enhanced and expanded technological resources, professional development, academic and student support services, disability access services, physical and mental health services, and campus safety and police services.
✓ Accommodations for remote teaching, learning, and working.

Our Individual Commitments

We expect that all members of the MTSU community:

✓ Will take personal responsibility for protecting their own health and the health of others.
✓ Will not come to campus or, if they live on campus, will self-isolate if they have symptoms of, have been exposed to, or have tested positive for COVID-19.
✓ Will inform designated MTSU staff if they have been exposed to or tested positive for COVID-19.
✓ Will inform the University if they are at-risk or need accommodations to avoid COVID-19 infection.
✓ Will comply with all University policy and procedures, including temporary rules and guidelines necessary to protect the health and well-being of individuals, their families, and the public.
✓ Will act with integrity, self-respect, and respect for others in all instructional environments.
✓ Will comply with University policy and procedures concerning academic and intellectual freedom, respect for diversity, and the free exchange of ideas.
✓ Will take responsibility for maintaining high-quality teaching in all instructional environments.
✓ Will take responsibility for learning in all instructional environments.
✓ Will take responsibility for providing high-quality service to students, faculty, staff, and the public in all work environments.
✓ Will respond respectfully when asked to comply with University rules, policies, and procedures, including those adopted to protect the health and well-being of students, faculty, staff, and the public.
✓ Will not ask or expect others to violate University rules, policies, and procedures, including temporary measures to protect the health and well-being of students, faculty, staff, and the public.
✓ Will consult an appropriate University administrator about approved alternatives to on-ground academic, co-curricular, and/or extra-curricular activities if they do not wish or are not able to comply with temporary policies and procedures.
To persevere through the COVID-19 pandemic will require commitment, flexibility, patience, and kindness. The University is here for you and we are here for each other. Working together, we can and will find ways to promote health and well-being, share and create knowledge, and serve students, faculty, staff, and the public.

Related links:

MTSU Mission, Purpose, Vision, and Community Standards

True Blue Pledge

True Blue Community Values

MTSU Policies

Faculty Handbook

Student Handbook

Employee Handbook
**Academics Committee Recommendations**

1. **We will mitigate risks to our community’s health by limiting the number of students in each classroom and building.**

   We plan to implement social distancing by significantly restricting the number of students in classrooms at any one time. Our estimate is that most classrooms can only accommodate about one-third to one-half the typical number of students.

2. **A mix of instructional delivery methods will be employed.**

   To facilitate necessary social distancing, we will offer a variety of course types: on-ground, hybrid, and online. If we are to meet social distancing requirements, we must recognize that the number of fully on-ground classes will be relatively small.

3. **“Hands-on” courses will be given priority for on-ground teaching.**

   Some courses—including art studio, science labs, audio production, music performance, etc.—cannot easily meet program or course learning outcomes through remote instruction. These courses will have priority for available on-ground spaces. Social distancing rules must be followed.

4. **Courses will be controlled locally within a University framework.**

   Because of extensive variation in courses across the University, decisions about managing specific courses will be made at the departmental and college levels within parameters set by the University.

5. **Faculty members will develop alternate delivery plans for all their courses.**

   Given the potential for a spike in COVID-19 cases after the start of the Fall 2020 semester, we must be ready to pivot to all remote instruction as we did in Spring 2020. Instructors and students will plan for that possibility and prepare to make the change at any time. Instructors who need additional professional development to teach effectively online should take advantage of the expanded campus resources being offered this summer.
6. **Class content will be readily available for students who cannot come to campus.**

   For every class meeting, we will either record the class or have notes produced by a paid student note-taker. We will strive to make the technology associated with this as easy to use as possible by both faculty and students. We will make any recordings password protected and will delete them on a regular schedule. Faculty members will be consulted in making decisions in this area.

7. **The existing schedule of courses for Fall will be kept as intact as possible.**

   Because many students have already registered for their Fall 2020 courses, we will not radically change the existing schedule. We will have more flexibility to adjust meeting schedules for Spring 2021, if necessary, to maximize social distancing.

8. **Course sections will be adjusted as appropriate.**

   To meet distancing guidelines, many courses will have to be moved to larger spaces or converted to hybrid or remote delivery. Areas of campus not typically available for academic uses without cost, including the Student Union Ballroom, the JUB Tennessee Room, the Campus Recreation Center, and Tucker Theatre, will be available for instructional purposes in academic year 2020-21 to accommodate larger sections.

9. **The University will adjust the Fall 2020 calendar.**

   We will shorten the semester and reduce risk from students returning to campus after holiday travel by having no on-campus class meetings after Thanksgiving break. All finals will be taken remotely, and we will make up the three lost class days by eliminating Fall Break and holding class on the Wednesday before Thanksgiving.

10. **Faculty development is crucial.**

    The University is offering a robust program of development opportunities over the summer for faculty who want to improve their remote teaching skills.
11. **We will address the hardware, software, and internet access needs of faculty and staff.**

Given that faculty and staff will most likely have to do some work from home, the University will provide appropriate tools. This appears to be an allowable use of federal CARES Act funds.

12. **We must ensure student access and equity.**

Remote teaching and learning present particular challenges for some students. The University will work to help students with access to technology and internet service, provide accessible course materials for students with disabilities, and support academically at-risk students through online tutoring and other services.

13. **We will offer training for students on remote/online learning.**

Just as not all faculty are prepared to teach remotely, not all students are ready to learn remotely. We will offer support for students to thrive in this new environment (e.g., how to use D2L effectively or time management tips).

14. **We will maintain instructional excellence in all courses, regardless of delivery mode.**

We must apply the same high standards to remote teaching that we do to on-ground and traditional online instruction. Student evaluations of teaching will take place in all courses, including those taught remotely.

15. **We will develop a University-wide class attendance policy.**

A class attendance policy that encourages sick students to stay home will be adopted. This temporary policy will be crafted with input from students, faculty, and administrators, and will end when normal operations resume.

16. **We will facilitate curricular activities conducted off campus.**

Off campus activities related to instruction, e.g., student teaching, clinical placements, internships, and field work, will continue as much as possible. In cases where that is not feasible, we will try to accommodate students with virtual alternatives.
17. We must reconsider how to handle events.

All events will be held in accordance with recommended health safety guidelines. We anticipate a significant reduction in the number of in-person events for the 2020-21 academic year. Virtual events are encouraged.

18. The University will develop a policy on the use of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) and other risk management behaviors.

The University must set clear expectations for the campus community about the use of face masks and other behaviors designed to mitigate health risk, e.g., distancing, hand washing, and holding virtual rather than in-person meetings and office hours.

19. The University will set capacity limits on academic spaces.

Limits on the number of people allowed in non-classroom academic spaces, e.g., the Walker Library, the Science Building Lobby and Atrium, Tucker Theatre, Hinton Hall, and the outdoor stage area in Peck Hall, will be established. Where possible, informal gathering spaces will remain closed until normal operations resume.
1. **MTSU must monitor emerging public health guidelines regarding testing and recommendations for testing protocols for the campus.**

   Decisions will be made about who gets tested and with what kind of testing and who pays for testing if insurance companies decline. A single case, once traced, could necessitate dozens of other tests at a current cost of $70 per test.

2. **MTSU must monitor emerging public health guidelines regarding density and proximity to guide decisions regarding the appropriate number of people in attendance for club meetings, campus events, and other activities.**

   Managing campus density is a primary challenge. We will consider establishing a green/yellow/red threat level for campus, with accompanying requirements for PPE, permitted size of gatherings, allowing visitors to campus, etc. We will communicate that all students and employees must adhere to the standards.

3. **Preventing the spread of the coronavirus in the campus community will be a focus at the beginning of the academic year.**

   International students and faculty returning to campus from overseas may be required to quarantine for 14 days, as may those coming to campus from domestic COVID-19 hot spots. The University will provide quarantine or isolation space for only those students living on campus. We will establish guidelines for opening the campus to visitors, conference attendees, prospective students, and others.

4. **We will continue to provide excellent student support services.**

   All campus departments must identify ways to continue providing high-quality, safety-informed student support services, both online and in-person. We have special concern for students with disabilities and those needing counseling or other mental health services.
5. Facility managers, domain managers, and department heads will oversee social distancing and density protocols for their facilities (e.g., Campus Recreation, Student Union, dining venues, and athletic facilities).

Consistency among venues is a goal but may not always be possible. Clear signage at each building entrance will communicate social distancing expectations for the facility, including one-way hallways or designated entry and exit doors.

6. Housing and Residential Life will consider reducing the total density of campus housing and establishing areas for the quarantine of on-campus residents.

Reducing density by requiring private-occupancy residence hall rooms for most students will reduce co-mingling of students in restrooms and social areas. Students with current room assignments will be encouraged to consider living off-campus, and we will incentivize their decision by refunding all pre-paid housing fees. We will create a Residents’ Manual, which outlines behavioral and social distancing requirements and consequences for not complying.

7. Aramark Dining Services must establish appropriate risk mitigation standards.

New plans must include reducing the number of customers in any venue at one time, eliminating buffets, providing grab and go options, and substituting online for walk-up ordering. Online ordering options must include alternatives for students without a smart phone.

8. The University will establish clear standards for cleaning and disinfecting and will provide sufficient staff and supplies to maintain those standards.

The University will implement standards, processes, and organizational responsibilities for routine cleaning and disinfecting including high-touch areas in facilities and for areas to be deep cleaned following a presumptive or confirmed positive COVID-19 case. Sufficient supplies must be available throughout campus.
9. **Welcome Week/Connection Point activities for new students will move from mass gatherings to college-based opening activities, with support from Student Affairs. All extracurricular and involvement activities must include web-based alternatives for the fall term.**

   We will strive to provide both remote and face-to-face options simultaneously whenever possible. We will develop strategies to build community and connection if face-to-face group activities are not permitted.

10. **Undergraduate recruitment and admissions must set parameters about appropriate social distancing protocols for their events, including True Blue Preview Days and the True Blue Tour. Many events will need to take place online instead of in person.**

    Based on emerging public health guidelines, we may need to discontinue on-campus recruitment for Fall 2020 and focus our efforts online. If on-ground tours are permitted, the schedules and routes will be adjusted to maximize social distancing.

11. **We will need coordinated, consistent, regular communication that people trust.**

    Communication efforts will target each appropriate constituency: residential students, off-campus students, remote learners, parents, faculty, staff, and community members. Campus-wide information and signage about queuing, face covering, and other social distance guidelines must be prominently displayed. We will formulate a strategy about how to communicate updates about the virus on campus.
Administration and Operations Committee Recommendations

1. **Protocols for bringing employees back to work will be clear and widely disseminated.**

   The University will develop a Return to Work Plan to provide clear guidance on employee responsibilities. Additionally, policies and/or procedures will be developed to assist supervisors in answering employee questions related to COVID-19 and the University’s efforts to minimize health risks to the campus community. The plan will outline a phased approach for the University to return to full levels of service based on guidance from public health experts.

2. **Establish protective measures for the health and safety of returning employees.**

   The University will develop health and safety protocols for each office or unit consistent with the Return to Work Plan. Minimum PPE provided will include cloth face coverings for all employees and desktop shields for high traffic areas. Employees will be required to wear face coverings on campus when social distancing is not possible or their work environment involves frequent traffic. Specific units or facilities may require additional PPE, including free standing or mounted hand sanitizing stations and disposable masks for visitors/guests. Facilities Services will identify high-touch areas, determine the appropriate cleaning/disinfecting protocols, and communicate these practices to the appropriate departments. The installation of no-touch fixtures where appropriate will be considered.

3. **The University will develop communication protocols that address employee concerns about returning to the campus.**

   General information on MTSU’s coronavirus response will be emailed once a week, if needed, on the same day so employees know when to look for the weekly update. Communication will focus on non-critical issues, anticipated safety protocols, and employee questions/concerns. Time-sensitive communications will be clearly identified and not included in general informational emails.

4. **Capital projects and infrastructure improvements across the campus will continue.**

   Capital outlay and maintenance projects funded by the state, as well as locally funded projects, will maintain their original design and construction schedules, as funding permits. Potential budget cuts, however, could reduce or eliminate funding for the capital maintenance projects currently in the 2020-21 Governor’s Budget.
Preparation of 2021-22 Capital Outlay and Capital Maintenance project requests will continue for submission to the Board of Trustees and THEC for approval. All construction contractors will be required to maintain a set of COVID-19 protocols that adhere to the current State of Tennessee guidelines.

5. **Current energy protocols will be evaluated to look for potential savings.**

   Facilities Services will consider indoor air quality (IAQ) and environmental health issues. In addition, Facilities Services will explore opportunities for an electrical rate credit through the TVA Back to Business Credit Program, which provides financial credits to large customers who have reduced or shutdown their operations due to COVID-19.

6. **Academic space planning will include anticipated downtime and additional signage.**

   Specific classrooms and other non-academic spaces will be identified as surge spaces to replace classrooms that need to be temporarily closed for deep cleaning in cases of suspected infection. Signage specifying occupancy limits, spacing details, etc. for each space will be installed.

7. **Parking and Transportation will implement appropriate protocols.**

   Bus routes and staffing will be adjusted at each phase of the Return to Work Plan in conjunction with student needs. Revised capacity limits, social distancing standards, safety protocols, and cleaning/disinfecting activities will be implemented. Online procedures for no contact delivery of student parking decals will be established.

8. **Non-academic campus events will be evaluated for compliance with social distancing and safety guidelines.**

   The expected costs and benefits must be weighed for permitting use of campus facilities by non-University groups.

9. **Administrative processes will be adjusted to foster employees’ work from home.**

   Given the need for continuing employee telework, all remaining paper processes will, to the extent possible, be updated to use electronic routing and approval. Until such alternatives exist, email approvals are officially an acceptable substitute.
Current hiring processes will also be reviewed and modified to support alternative evaluations and interviews of prospective hires.

10. **The University will review current budgets and explore new revenue opportunities.**

The University will plan for anticipated reduced state appropriations and enrollment fluctuations that may extend beyond the end of the pandemic. We recommend that the University explore the following actions:

- Promote the University’s efforts in providing a safe environment for new and returning students and our commitment to quality instruction.
- Aggressively increase and refocus marketing resources in the Nashville MSA for local high school graduates. Current data suggests that many students will be looking to stay closer to home when selecting a higher education institution this coming year.
- Review and revise payment plan options allowing students and families affected by the pandemic more time to pay their bills.
- Evaluate opportunities to provide continuing education and training. If necessary, develop new policies and procedures to expedite the admissions process and provide easy access to institutional programs.
- Evaluate eliminating or suspending ancillary student fees, remembering that several of these fees are tied to auxiliary units that receive no direct state support and must be self-sufficient.
- If allowed, consider using stimulus funding to award additional grants to students to cover specific ancillary student fees.
- Seek to increase research productivity and the funding coming into the University from external sources.
- Implement a hiring freeze on all unfilled positions.
- Restrict University-funded travel and consider exceptions on a case-by-case basis.
- Implement a voluntary buyout program for faculty and staff.
- Evaluate the implementation of furloughs, either universally across the campus or within specific programs.
- Evaluate reorganizing both academic and non-academic units.

11. **Evaluate the landscape of athletics both operationally and financially.**

Understanding the importance of athletics to the University and community, the University will:
• Develop protocols for the health and safety of student athletes and the support staff. In conjunction with team doctors and medical training staff, develop protocols for student athletes or staff who test positive for COVID-19 to include contact tracing, quarantines, and facility review and cleaning.
• Regularly update student athletes and their families on safety concerns.
• Monitor both Conference USA and NCAA guidance/recommendations regularly and pivot operations as needed.
• Monitor revenue sources including Conference USA, NCAA, and locally produced revenue and be prepared to adjust for shortened seasons, cancelled seasons, etc. Work in conjunction with the NCAA and Conference USA to develop efficiencies to reduce expenses.
• Evaluate amenities for the upcoming season, including fun zones and large group activities, using current University protocols.
• As will be done for the overall University, analyze all athletic expenses for possible reductions, including hiring freezes, travel restrictions, buyouts, and furloughs.

12. Assess institutional priorities for philanthropic support.

The University must prioritize its short-term philanthropic needs to focus on student success, including increased scholarship support and other funding to support individual health and wellness and technology needs.