

COVID-19 Preparedness and Campus Safety

Audit Report # 21-103
May 7, 2021



The University of Texas at El Paso
Office of Auditing and Consulting

"Committed to Service, Independence, and Quality"



The University of Texas at El Paso
Office of Auditing and Consulting Services

500 West University Ave.
El Paso, Texas 79968
915-747-5191
www.utep.edu

May 7, 2021

Dr. Heather Wilson
President, The University of Texas at El Paso
Administration Building, Suite 500
El Paso, Texas 79968

Dear Dr. Wilson:

The Office of Auditing and Consulting Services has completed a limited-scope audit of the University's COVID-19 Preparedness and Campus Safety. During the audit, we identified many strengths in University procedures. In particular, the University developed a COVID-19 testing program for individuals on campus and a COVID-19 vaccination program for faculty, staff, and students. Additionally, the University consistently updated the Resuming Campus Operations website to provide faculty, staff, and students with up-to-date information regarding the University's response to the pandemic.

We appreciate the cooperation and assistance provided by Environmental Health & Safety, the Office of the Vice President for Business Affairs, the School of Pharmacy, Human Resources, the Dean of Students Office, the Office of Special Events, and Housing and Residence Life during our audit.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, reading 'Lori Wertz', is positioned above the printed name.

Lori Wertz
Chief Audit Executive

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Background

Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) is a respiratory illness that can spread from person to person. On March 11, 2020, the World Health Organization declared COVID-19 a pandemic.

Audit Objectives

The objective of the audit was to determine whether the University has developed procedures to promote the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and public health guidance designed to minimize the spread of COVID-19.

Scope

The scope included activities, policies, and procedures for the period of March 12, 2020, to April 14, 2021.

Strengths

As part of the COVID-19 response, the University has done an excellent job of incorporating CDC guidance into its daily operations by:

- implementing a testing program for employees and students on campus,
- creating a contact tracing program for individuals who test positive,
- developing a vaccination program for employees and students,
- approving a Temporary Health Policy and a Remote Workplace Policy,
- monitoring local transmissions rates,
- constructing a Resuming Campus Operations website to guide employees and students on the transition back to campus,
- suspending international and domestic travel,
- training employees on how to prevent the spread of COVID-19,
- establishing fan protocols for athletic events, and
- providing apartments where students who live on campus can isolate if they test positive for the virus.

Conclusion

Based on our review, we conclude the University has developed comprehensive strategies to promote CDC and public health guidance designed to minimize the spread of COVID-19. Additionally, the University has done an exceptional job of communicating COVID-19 related information to the campus community.

BACKGROUND

COVID-19 is a respiratory illness that can spread from person to person. The outbreak originated in Wuhan, Hubei Province, China, and from there spread worldwide. On March 11, 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared the COVID-19 outbreak a global pandemic.

COVID-19 is spread mainly between people in close contact (within about 6 feet of one another) through respiratory droplets that are produced when an infected person coughs or sneezes. Although most people who have COVID-19 experience mild symptoms, it can also cause severe illness and even death.

In response to this public health emergency response, CDC has issued guidance to reduce the spread of COVID-19. The CDC recommends:

- maintaining social distancing of six feet between individuals,
- requiring the use of face coverings,
- promoting personal hygiene such as hand washing,
- getting tested when you are experiencing symptoms, and
- staying home when sick.

The CDC has also published documents that provide specific guidance for employers, school administrators, and institutions of higher education.

The audit was conducted in accordance with the *International Standards for the Professional Practice of Internal Auditing* and the authoritative guidelines of the *International Professional Practice Framework* issued by the Institute of Internal Auditors.

AUDIT RESULTS

To protect its faculty, staff, and students, the University responded quickly and efficiently to the COVID-19 pandemic by offering remote classes for faculty and students and remote work for staff. Additionally, the University developed procedures designed to minimize the spread of COVID-19.

1. COVID-19 Testing and Contact Tracing Program

The University of Texas at El Paso (UTEP) created a free COVID-19 testing program for faculty, staff, and students on campus. The testing program identified individuals who were not experiencing COVID-19 symptoms but who were positive for the virus. We examined the Standard Operating Procedures for COVID-19 Testing at UTEP and determined the procedures were well documented. UTEP effectively communicated details regarding the testing program on the Resuming Campus Operations website and through campus announcements.

COVID-19 Test Results through April 14, 2021	
Negative Tests	55,140
Positive Tests	1,377
Invalid Tests	214
Total Tests	56,731

Environmental Health & Safety (EH&S) contacted all individuals who tested positive for the virus. We reviewed the contact-tracing program and determined it effectively addressed the following areas:

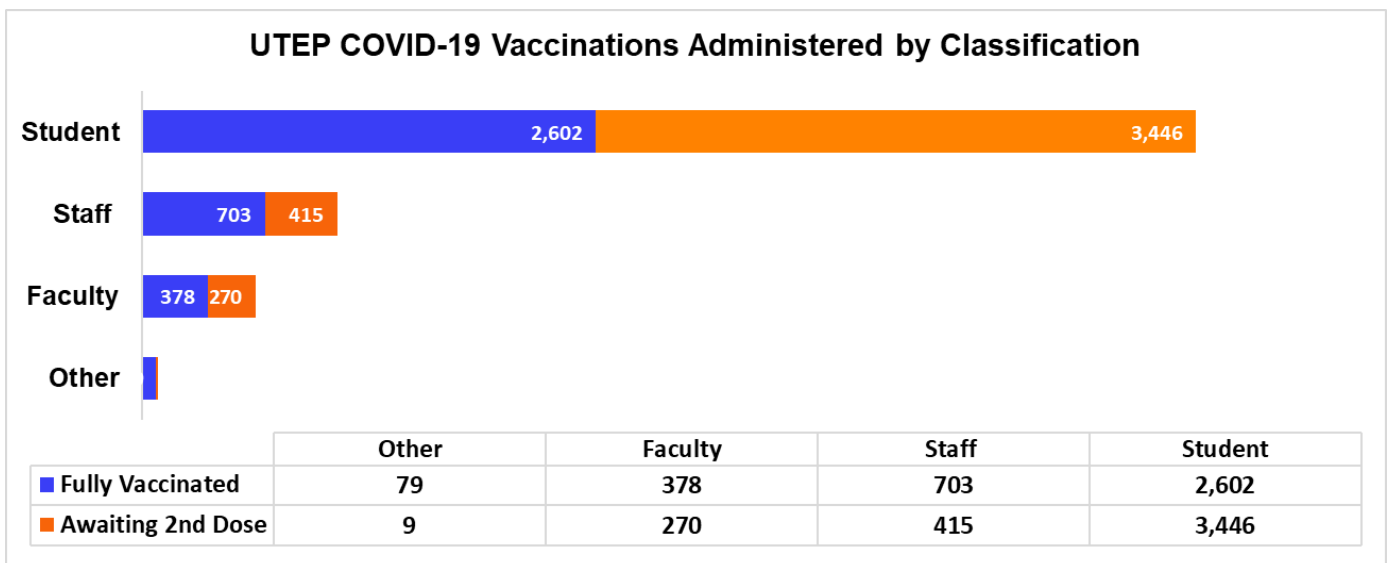
- advising individuals who tested positive to stay home,
- determining who else on campus may have been exposed so they could be tested,
- evaluating facilities for disinfection, and
- clearing individuals to return to work.

2. COVID-19 Vaccination Program

UTEP became an approved COVID-19 vaccine provider through the Texas Department of State Health Services. As part of the program, the School of Pharmacy developed procedures for the vaccination clinic. The vaccination procedures are detailed and comprehensive.

The clinic administers COVID-19 vaccines on campus to UTEP faculty, staff, and students. UTEP effectively communicated all information regarding the program to faculty, staff, and students through the Resuming Campus Operations website, campus email, and Town Hall meetings.

As of April 14, 2021, the vaccination clinic fully vaccinated 3,762 individuals and has 4,140 individuals awaiting the second dose.



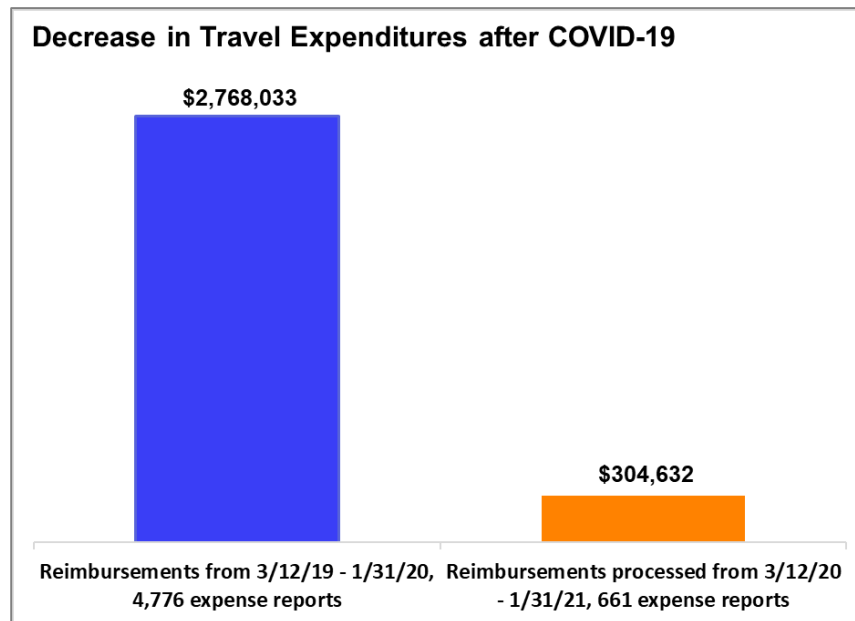
3. Campus Recovery Level

UTEP leadership developed a Campus Recovery Level Matrix. The matrix defines the steps the University will take to protect faculty staff and students based on the transmission characteristics in our community. EH&S helps ensure CDC guidelines are followed by summarizing the transmission characteristics in a daily management report. The daily report of El Paso COVID-19 statistics provides the following data:

- five-day rolling average of new cases for El Paso County,
- COVID-19 hospitalizations and ICU (three-day average),
- positivity rate for both El Paso, Texas and UTEP, and
- UTEP daily testing results.

4. University Travel

In response to the risks associated with the pandemic, the University suspended all international and domestic travel except for travel to and from Ciudad Juárez, Mexico. We compared the travel expenses processed prior to COVID-19 (3/12/19 – 1/31/20) with the travel expenses processed during the audit scope (3/12/20 – 1/31/21). The ban was effective as travel reimbursements dropped by 89%.



5. Temporary Health and Remote Work Policies

To protect faculty, staff, and students from the spread of COVID-19, UTEP created a Temporary Health and Safety Policy. We reviewed the policy and determined it incorporates CDC guidance, as it required individuals to:

- complete a health screening before coming to campus,
- wear a face covering, and
- maintain a minimum separation of six feet between themselves and others.

The Remote Work Policy allows individuals to work from home with the approval of their supervisor. To maintain social distancing requirements, UTEP encouraged employees to work remotely.

6. Housing and Residence Life (HRL)

We reviewed the HRL website, the HRL resident handbook, and photographs provided by HRL. HRL took the following actions to ensure compliance with CDC guidance:

- reduced occupancy to 413 of 785 (53%)¹ to ensure social distancing requirements,
- posted signs regarding social distancing, personal hygiene, face coverings, and occupancy limits throughout the residence halls, and
- dedicated apartments in each residence hall to ensure students testing positive had a place to isolate.

7. Special Events

We reviewed Special Events' fan protocols to determine if CDC guidance was followed. In response to the guidance, Special Events:

- implemented remote ticketing and assigned seating,
- enacted enhanced cleaning procedures before and after the event, and
- required temperature checks and face coverings for all individuals.

¹ The occupancy rate reported reflects the numbers reported on Census Day.

8. Families First Coronavirus Relief Act (FFCRA)

The FFCRA required state agencies and institutions of higher education to provide paid sick leave, and it expanded family medical leave for COVID-19 from April 1, 2020, through December 31, 2020. We reviewed the leave provided and determined that a total of 121 employees received 6,961 hours for a total of \$122,765 in paid leave while FFCRA was in effect.

9. Staff Training

The CDC recommends training employees on how to help prevent the spread of COVID-19 in the workplace. In response to this guidance, the Office of Institutional Compliance added a COVID-19 training module to the annual compliance training. As of March 1, 2021, 5,254 of 5,441 (97%) employees completed the training module.

Additional Suggestions

UTEP has done an excellent job of protecting its faculty, staff, and students from the spread of COVID-19. During our review, we noted two minor opportunities for improvement.

1. Students are not monitored to determine if they have completed COVID-19 student training before they are allowed to register for classes. Without the training, students may not be aware of the behaviors that reduce the spread of COVID-19.
2. The UTEP Temporary Health Policy requires all individuals to complete screening questions before coming to campus. Some departments included the need to conduct a health screening on their website, while others did not. Individuals may not be aware of the need to complete the health screening if it is not mentioned prominently throughout the website.

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Auditors Assigned to the Audit:

Sharon Delgado, Senior Auditor I