



OFFICE OF THE PRESIDENT

UHD President, Loren J. Blanchard

Dear UHD Community,

This week, we welcomed staff back to campus following the Winter Break. As the week progressed, however, it has become apparent that the pandemic continues to pose significant challenges for our city.

With classes set to begin on Tuesday, January 18, UHD will initiate a soft opening during the first few weeks of the semester to accommodate this challenge. This is very much a duplicate of the start of fall 2021 and will provide flexibility in terms of course delivery from Tuesday, January 18 through Sunday, February 6 after which we expect to return to our regular spring schedule on Monday, February 7. Our hope is to minimize campus density during this peak period of Omicron cases in an effort to prevent the further spread of COVID-19 and its variants at UHD and beyond.

This communication is directed to faculty and staff, and weekly updates will be provided during this period. We will communicate separately to students on Monday, January 10 through Gatormail and social media.

On-Campus Operations:

UHD remains open with all student-facing offices maintaining both in-person and virtual office hours from Monday through Friday. It is critical that those offices supporting the success of our students remain operational yet offer a safe environment for conducting day-to-day business. It is highly recommended that the practice of effective distancing and wearing masks or coverings when in public areas be continued.

Non-essential staff may be allowed to work hybrid schedules at their managers' discretion from Monday, January 10 through Sunday, February 6 with remote work not to exceed two days per week. Requests to work a hybrid schedule require a [COVID-19 Temporary Remote Work Request Form](#) and endorsement by the supervisor, appropriate Vice President or designee.

Essential personnel includes the President's Cabinet, UHD police and security officers, Emergency Management staff, Facilities Management staff, and select Information Technology personnel. In addition, staff in student-facing units are considered essential personnel during UHD's registration periods in order to attend to the needs of students and other members of the University Community. Staff in student-facing units may be allowed to work a hybrid schedule during this period provided ample on-campus, in-person coverage is maintained. Supervisors must seek vice presidential approval before implementing such arrangements.

Employees who may need health-related accommodations may contact the UHD Benefits Team in Employment Services & Operations by emailing benefits@uhd.edu.

Events scheduled during the first few weeks of the semester may be affected by this soft opening. It is recommended to check [UHD's Events Calendar](#) for updates. The Campus Reservations & Events Office is available should you have questions regarding modifying or cancelling any events due to safety concerns by emailing reservations@uhd.edu. Decisions about whether or not to go forward with events should be made in consultation with college or division leadership.

Spring Courses:

The University will conduct a soft opening for classes from Tuesday, January 18 until Sunday, February 6 to reduce campus density. We intend to return to our regular Spring schedule at UHD on Monday, February 7.

Face-to-face classes that meet twice a week will hold class at least once a week during this period. Classes that meet once a week should also plan to meet weekly during this period. All online courses will be conducted as regularly scheduled. All faculty should communicate to students via Gatormail (using the class roster or Blackboard) by Thursday, January 13 at 5 p.m.; the message should explain any changes to the class meetings or confirm that the class will happen as scheduled. We also strongly encourage faculty to post announcements in Blackboard and send multiple emails, as students will be adding and dropping during this time. All Blackboard courses will be opened by IT on Sunday, January 16 at noon if not opened earlier by faculty.

More specific details on implementing UHD's soft opening can be found [online](#). If there is a need for clarification or additional information, please contact the Office of Academic Affairs at uhdprovost@uhd.edu.

Continue to Practice Safety at Home and on Campus

It goes without saying that everyone must do their part in keeping our campus and community safe. Conduct daily self-health checks. If you are exhibiting symptoms related to COVID-19, do not come to campus and consult with your physician. Also, inform your supervisor.

COVID-19 Testing

UHD continues to host a Curative testing site on Girard Street next to the Student Life Center. Testing is available seven days a week and appointments can be made [online](#).

Vaccinations

I am pleased by the turnout at our recent pop-up vaccination clinics on campus. We will host more of these this semester and will inform the community as soon as details are available. These vaccinations and booster shots will be available for both our Gator Family and their immediate family members as well.

If you have not received your vaccination and/or booster, now is the time. As a reminder, UHD offers a monthly opportunity to do so on campus with the next clinic scheduled for Thursday, January 20 from 11 a.m. - 1 p.m. in the UHD Welcome Center. Also, the [Harris County Public Health site](#) has details on the vaccinations and a map of locations offering it. You can stay informed of UHD's COVID-19 updates with [this link](#).

Face Coverings

As addressed last semester, UHD continues to offer free masks at dispensers across campus. Make use of these pre-packaged, disposable masks if you are without a face covering while on campus. Presently, there is ongoing discussion among health officials on which kinds of masks are effective. The [CDC has recommendations on masks and face coverings](#), and we will keep the community informed on any new data on this matter. As a reminder, masks are strongly encouraged while on campus and particularly indoors.

Guidelines for Quarantine or Isolation

Be advised that the [CDC has updated guidelines](#) on when one should quarantine or isolate if positive or exposed to COVID-19. These recommendations are changing daily, and the [Office of Emergency Management](#) continues to monitor all updates and share new information on its [COVID-19 website](#).

International Travel

It is common business for University professionals to travel internationally for research and furthering the Institution's reach. For now, however, we are suspending sponsored international travel through August. Domestic sponsored travel may be allowed upon review and approval of the traveler's immediate supervisor and Vice President.

In Conclusion

We once again find ourselves in a familiar place with regards to the pandemic, and admittedly, it's not where we'd ideally like to be. Still, I am confident that working together and practicing healthy habits (wearing masks, distancing ourselves, getting vaccinated) can make a difference for our University Community.

Sincerely,

Loren J. Blanchard, Ph.D.
President, University of Houston-Downtown