

# Higher Education Tabletops: Lessons Learned

## Background

The Tennessee Emergency Management Agency (TEMA), Tennessee Higher Education Commission (THEC), and Governor Lee's Unified Command Group (UCG) have recently conducted emergency management Tabletop Exercises (TTX) at higher education campuses across the state, allowing presidents and their senior teams to experience realistic COVID 19 scenarios that mirror potential fall contingencies. To date, exercises have been conducted at all six LGI campuses and with the TBR system, with exercises planned for the UT system.

## Purpose

This document is intended to share best practices from these scenarios, to ensure all campuses are informed of common challenges and strategies to mitigate them.

## Common Challenges

**Communication plans:** Campus and system communications plans were a challenge at virtually all campuses. To meet the demands of the TTX scenarios, campuses were encouraged to consider all relevant stakeholders, determine what communications were necessary in specific circumstances, and determine to whom messages should be directed. *To assist with communication planning, campuses are encouraged to develop a set of preplanned messages that would require minimal deliberation and increase response time*

Social media has eliminated the reaction time campus leaders and communication officials once relied upon to formulate responses. Institutions must be prepared with a reflexive plan when even small COVID 19 related contingencies emerge. Incidents that may seem small (e.g., a single football player testing positive) will be amplified almost immediately via social media. Proactive communication to students, faculty, and staff regarding expectations upon returning to campus (e.g., wearing masks, staying home if sick, procedure for notifying the campus if an individual is ill, etc.) are essential.

**Plans are not fully developed or tested:** While every campus has taken the first steps to plan for potential COVID 19 disruptions this fall, many of these plans were underdeveloped or untested at the time of the TTX. It is crucial that campuses move beyond the first level of a plan to probe the "what ifs", specifically assuming things will not go as planned. Many of the campus plans relied on best case scenarios, rather than the very likely chance that things will not only go wrong, but that multiple, interrelated things will go wrong, possibly all at once.

**Incident Command:** It is essential to clearly define who oversees the management of a COVID 19 emergency. While the president bears ultimate responsibility for decision making, a single point of contact *other than* the campus or system president/chancellor should be designated to manage the flow of information, provide direction for operating an emergency operations center, and establishing data parameters to guide decision making. Furthermore, the designated COVID 19 incident commander (or campus response team) serves as a crucial funnel for myriad data points that flow from athletics, residence life, student health, student affairs, campus police, etc.

**Student Conduct Policies:** Many campuses were unsure of how student conduct policies can address noncompliance with public health requirements (e.g., wearing face masks). It is crucial that campuses prepare to address student conduct issues, reviewing specific policies that may be invoked and how a violation will be addressed. This preparation intersects with communications functions, as it is imperative to share relevant expectations for student behavior, as well as the sanctions for noncompliance, broadly with both faculty and students.

**Lacking involvement from external partners:** While there were notable exceptions, many campuses seemed to have poorly defined collaboration with their local emergency managers, health departments and medical facilities. Involving these partners in daily/weekly discussions about the campus is vital to ensure that when challenges arise in the fall, relationships and reporting norms are already established.

**Confusion regarding contact tracing:** Many campuses seemed to underestimate or were unfamiliar with the complexities of contact tracing and what specific role the campus should play. Institutions should collaborate with their local health departments to determine which functions are automatically conducted by health officials and what assistance could be provided to ensure more precise tracing. For example, campuses may be able to leverage some of their existing procedures and technologies to provide local health departments with valuable information regarding student contact, while allowing the health departments to conduct the primary tracing *and/or case investigation functions*. (Updated:08/10/20)

**Succession:** At virtually all campuses, successful operations relied on the knowledge of three to four individuals. Given that COVID 19 has no regard for organizational charts, it is essential that presidents ensure they and their cabinet members prepare for operations to continue in the event key leaders are incapacitated or unavailable. These planning considerations should be extended to faculty and staff functions at every level of the campus. There is substantial risk of an academic program or course relying on a single faculty member. Provosts should inventory Fall offerings to ensure there are plans in place for seamless course delivery, should an instructor become incapacitated.

**Common Campus Areas:** The TEMA/THC/UCG team was very impressed with the level of detail devoted to classroom operations and residence halls. Gaps emerged, however, when

evaluating libraries, university centers, and other common areas. Fine grain, tactical plans regarding capacity, spacing, operating hours, and cleaning procedures should be developed and communicated to all relevant stakeholders. In some cases, it may be prudent for the president to evaluate if common areas need to be taken entirely offline.

## Best Practices

**Leveraging technology:** Many campuses are using existing technology to aid in contact tracing and to facilitate mass communications with students. For example, smartphone apps that serve as “clickers” to gauge understanding of class concepts can be used by students to report their seat numbers. As such, instructors will know the seat in which a student sat on a given day without having to assign seats or have students identify themselves. This will help tremendously with contact tracing, should it be necessary. Apps such as Signal Vine and EAB were frequently mentioned as avenues for mass communication to students, in addition to any existing emergency notification software programs/apps.

**Student pledges:** Related to student codes of conduct, many campuses are asking students to sign a campus pledge, committing to wear a mask and adhere to social distancing requirements. These pledges will allow students to hold each other accountable in a peer-to-peer fashion different from faculty and staff enforcement and will lead to critical conversations about protecting themselves and others from COVID 19.

**Communications:** A critical communications practice employed on various campuses is a daily briefing to the campus president and cabinet-level leaders from the COVID 19 incident lead and response team. These briefings may be short and can take the form of a “stand up meeting,” particularly if there is no new information to share. Establishing this protocol and dedicating time each day for a briefing is imperative to keep all parties up to date with the latest campus-level and public health information. Further, campus representatives should meet weekly with the community external to the campus (e.g., local health department, hospitals and medical providers, etc.) to inform these parties of any updates from the president and campus community.

**Closure plans:** It was clear during these exercises that institutions have given considerable thought to the procedures that closing in-person operations require, and that the actions taken during Spring 2020 have led to significant improvements. To aid in cleaning and containing potential outbreaks, effective closure plans included guidelines to minimize the impact across the larger campus when possible (e.g., closing a wing of a building as opposed to the entire building), in accordance with CDC and Tennessee Department of Health guidance.

**Limiting visits to student health facilities:** As campus health clinics will require additional capacity to test and care for students in the event of a COVID 19 outbreak, many campuses

have considered limiting or restricting routine campus health visits. Non-emergency medical appointments can be delayed or conducted via telehealth, with students needing care being referred as appropriate to community health partners.

**Athletics:** Many campus athletic departments are incubators for best practices that may be generalized to the broader campus population. Student athletes will be tested for COVID 19 at a greater frequency than their non-athlete peers, and protocols for doing so (e.g., process for testing, timeline for analysis) can be applied to the broader campus as appropriate. Further, because many student athletes have already arrived back on campus to prepare for Fall sports, lessons learned about housing, dining, and quarantining can be shared broadly with the campus community at large.

**Increased Outdoor Air Delivery and Filtration:** ASHRAE recommends increasing outdoor air ventilation to effectively dilute ventilation per person within buildings. Opening outdoor air dampers as much as possible to eliminate recirculation (seasonally permitting) is also recommended if capacity is available in the building to control dew point and humidity within the air handling systems. Improving air filtration to a minimum of MERV-13 (Minimum Efficiency Reporting Value) and running air handling systems as long as possible (up to continuous 24-hour use) may assist in reducing the spread of aerosolized virus particles. Facilities engineers may refer to current AHSRAE guidance for more details. (Updated: 08/10/20)