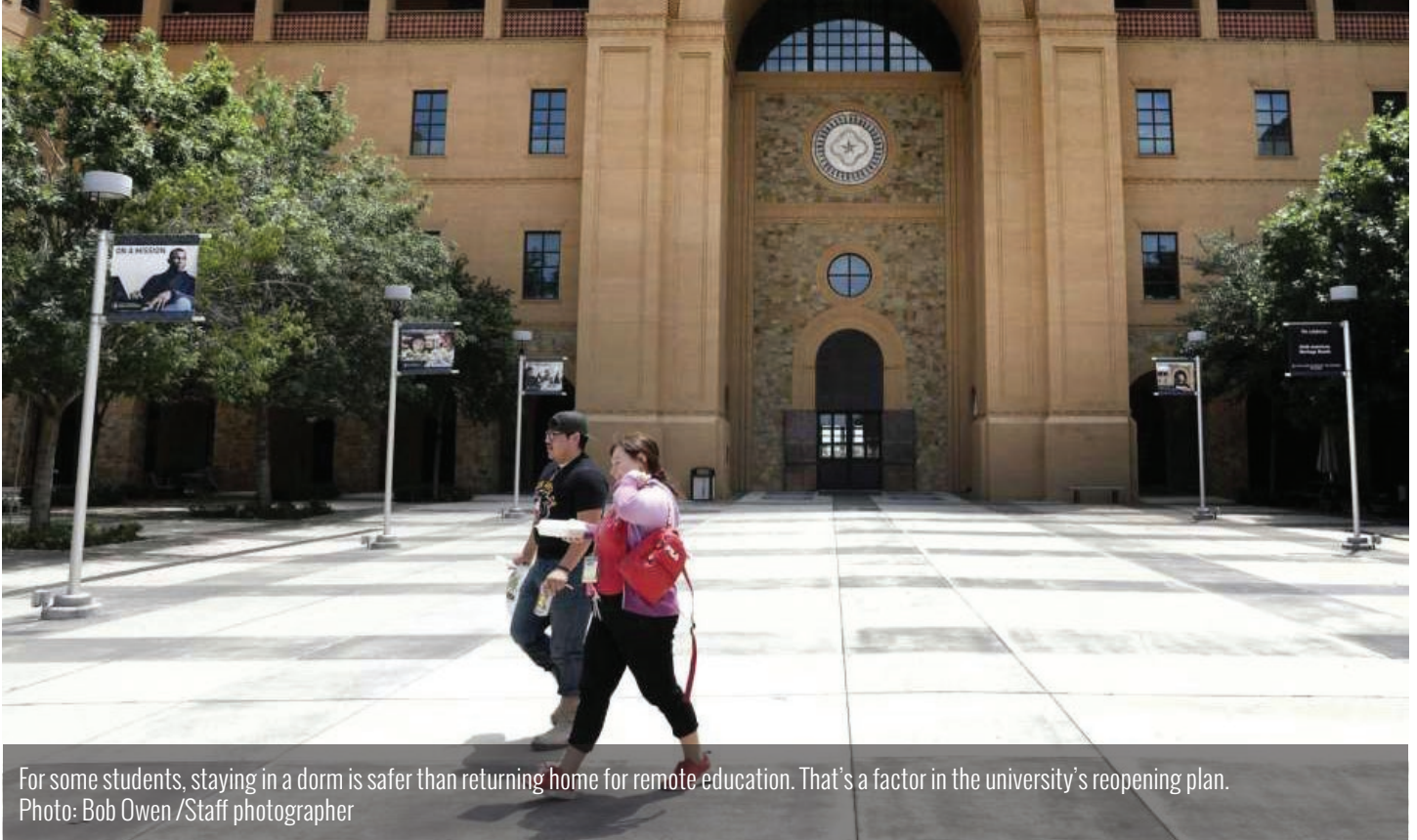


Teniente-Matson: Serving students during the pandemic, and beyond it

Cynthia Teniente-Matson, For the Express-News Aug. 1, 2020



For some students, staying in a dorm is safer than returning home for remote education. That's a factor in the university's reopening plan.
Photo: Bob Owen /Staff photographer

Texas A&M University-San Antonio is not unique in the challenges we face amid the ongoing pandemic.

Like our counterparts at higher education institutions across the country, my colleagues and I are grappling with complex questions: How can we best serve our students and keep the university community safe and healthy? How can we make sound plans when public health conditions are changing daily? How profound will the impact of the pandemic on our enrollments and our budgets be in the coming months and years?

But while the questions may be the same across institutions, how we answer them may be different. Even within the Texas A&M University System, the answers for our 11 campuses are not identical. A&M-San Antonio is the only A&M campus in a major metropolitan area, one still seeing hundreds of new confirmed COVID-19 cases each day. In that regard, we have more in common

with our fellow institutions in San Antonio than with our system sister campuses. Within San Antonio, though, we are uniquely situated on a fairly isolated campus — and as a young and growing institution, one of the luxuries we have in abundance is space.

As we look forward to fall and beyond, we're leveraging the excellence of the A&M System, which gives us access to world-class resources like the Texas A&M Health Science Center and the Texas Division of Emergency Management; and our geography, which has allowed us the literal space to responsibly plan to conduct business operations and some classes in person.

Our COVID-19 response planning has required us to reassess our mission, vision and values — not because we've changed course but because in this time of great challenges and tough choices, with every decision, every action, every assignment of resources, we have to

ask, “Is this essential to A&M-San Antonio getting where we need to go?” Our plans must be grounded in a firm understanding of who we are and whom we serve.

That’s not to say we haven’t changed how we’re doing things. Everything looks different — the way we all live, work, learn and play. University campuses are no exception.

But at A&M-San Antonio, the through line is our students. The better we understand them and their needs, the better poised we are to serve them, under any conditions. While we don’t exclusively serve South Side residents, Hispanic students or first-generation college students, a large portion of our students falls into one, or more, of those categories. How we respond to this pandemic has to be informed by an understanding of the specific challenges those students face, both in “normal” times and now.

We know much of our student population resides on the “wrong side” of the digital divide. We know our students are less likely to have reliable and accessible health care options. We know they and their families are at higher risk of contracting COVID-19 — and less likely to recover. Many of our students face economic, housing and food insecurity in the best of times.

As we have made our decisions about fall academics and operations, each of those conditions and circumstances has been part of the calculus. We have endeavored to be as responsive to the needs of our students, faculty and staff as possible while continuing to fulfill our mission.

And while there is inherent risk in reopening, there is also risk in not doing so — risk for students who are best served in a face-to-face learning environment and for whom a loss of momentum may mean never attaining their educational goals. There are also students, in our residence hall and classes, for whom campus is a safer and healthier environment than their alternatives.

Unfortunately, there is not a perfect reopening plan. My colleagues and I, and our peers across the nation, are operating with the best information we have at any given time — but with plans that we know can change at any moment.

As much as we’ve had to marshal resources to respond to immediate challenges, we’re also looking around the corner, imagining A&M-San Antonio’s future in a world shaped, but no longer dominated, by the pandemic.

That has meant exploring how we best serve displaced students, or contribute to the community’s economic recovery by helping alumni and others recover and reskill. It has also impacted our academic planning as we’ve identified new areas in which we can help meet workforce needs. For example, not only are historically underrepresented populations disproportionately affected by COVID-19, they are also underrepresented in health professions. We’re making plans to expand our premed program and developing an academic initiative in public health we believe will help change that.

Thinking ahead to when we emerge from this pandemic, there’s no question A&M-San Antonio will have been changed by it. But I am confident we will be strengthened by the experience, and serve our students and the community with a renewed sense of purpose.

Cynthia Teniente-Matson is president of Texas A&M University-San Antonio and a San Antonio native.