A&M prepares for students’ return

Texas A&M offering two options for those looking to be tested for COVID-19 on campus

By Rebecca Morris and Brady Stone

Since the pandemic began, Texas A&M has seen plethora of changes regarding COVID-19 testing. Director of Student Health Services (SHS) Dr. Martha Dannenbaum said the department is currently offering two different testing options — a free oral test by Curative Inc. and a self-referral nasal test through Beutel covered by the CARES Act amendment to the Families First Coronavirus Relief Act (FFCRA). Both tests are self-administered.

The CARES Act adapted the FFCRA, requiring that all insurance companies cover COVID-19 testing and waive cost-sharing to allow for the affordable testing of all individuals, regardless of ability to pay. This means all testing, including that on campus, is free of charge as long as an individual’s insurance covers self-administered tests.

Students, faculty and staff with or without symptoms can sign up to test on campus. Students can choose to take the Curative free testing site in Lot 27 next to Beutel at curative.com, where they can choose a time slot to get tested. The test has the capacity to perform hundreds of approximately three-minute oral tests per day, providing students their results in 48-72 hours.

“...the self-referral nasal test option requires a trip inside Beutel, where an individual will be screened for symptoms, then led to a testing room where they are augmented as they perform the nasal swab. Students can expect their results from this test within 48-72 hours, as well. Before the CARES Act was passed and testing became readily available, SHS offered limited antibody testing for $100 at Beutel for asymptomatic individuals. At the time, naso-pharyngeal swabbing was offered through the Respiratory Clinic for those who had a suspected case of the coronavirus. In May, industrial distribution junior Christa Anderson was tested on campus after experiencing swollen tonsils, fatigue and headaches.

“I was tested because I had come back from an out-of-state trip with my family and I knew I wanted to come back to College Station,” Mendoza said. “I knew I wanted to come back to College Station, Mendoza said. “I knew A&M had a testing station,” Mendoza said. “I knew A&M had a testing station.”

“...it was really good, the precautions and everything they were taking,” Anderson said. “When I was in the testing room, or in my room where I was getting tested, they had scrubs and they were putting them on and taking them off every time and throwing them away. Everyone was so nice and they were really helpful discussing my options.”

In the spring, the only testing available at Beutel for symptomatic cases was the naso-pharyngeal swabbing, which collects from deep inside the nose. These tests were originally charged to a person’s insurance or student account, but the Health Center is looking to give money back to those who paid out-of-pocket back early spring.

“They were really saying, ‘No, you still have to do the naso-pharyngeal or NP collection,’” and that’s the one that’s very uncomfortable for most people. We are not doing that testing anymore, since the CDC has and we don’t need to, so that’s a win for us,” Dannenbaum said. “We were first getting the insurance paying 100 percent in April when the federal mandate was done so we’re trying to help the students that may have had to pay out of pocket before we had the option to file insurance for them.”

Industrial studies senior Arica Mendez got tested in early August using the free oral swabs before her roommate moved in.

“I wanted to get tested because I had gone on an out-of-state trip with my family and I knew I wanted to come back to College Station,” Mendez said. “I know A&M had free tests, so in order to get that I had to come here and keep myself quarantined in my room while I waited for the results to come in.”

However, when Mendez went to schedule that test, the scheduling software was down for the free Curative Inc. test. This type of testing is not affiliated with the A.P. Beutel Health Center, so when Mendez called Beutel to try and get a new date, the accidentally...

To register for the self-administered nasal swab test that can be filed with insurance, visit Student Health Services or call Beutel Health Center to schedule an appointment.
Texas A&M introduces new cleaning procedures to ensure safety on buses
By Julia Potts @juliapaotts

While many organizations on campus are adapting to health concerns over the coronavirus, Transportation Services at Texas A&M has taken extra precautions to make sure its passengers have a safe and healthy ride.

Transportation Services recently updated its website with new transit and parking information relating to COVID-19. Passengers will be required to wear a mask on the bus and will continue to come in through the front door and exit through the rear door. The maximum capacity for buses will be 55-60 passengers and any bus that reaches or exceeds that number will bypass stops until it drops below capacity.

Braydon Kelm, assistant manager for Transportation Services, said there is a cleaning routine in place for the buses to help prevent the spread of the virus. “Once a week, on handouts or Saturdays, buses are fogged with a product called Vital Oxide, which is effective for about seven days on hard surfaces,” Kelm said. “That’s going to cover high-touch areas on the bus. The drivers throughout the day will also use Vital Oxide Wipes.”

Communication specialist Karina Garcia, an Aggie Spirit bus driver, said the drivers use the wipes to clean the ridges and other frequently-used surfaces on the bus. “During this time allowed we’re going to clean and high-touch areas around the unit, including the seat,” Garcia said. “If we do clean the driver’s area we make sure the bus is comfortable doing that, because as well as being a driver and a cleaner we are also a student who needs to do their classwork.”

Kelm said using the wipes is necessary because the effects of the weekly fogging can wear off in heat and after frequent touch-ups, and will help with the increase in riders. Kelm said, “So on a typical day throughout the semester, on average, we’ll provide about 55,000 rides a day.”

“I don’t think [cleaning] should impede our ability to get passengers to and from campus,” Garcia said. “But we could see a dramatic decrease in the number of people riding the buses.”

Caprice Vasquez, an Aggie Spirit bus driver since 2016, said if the number of passengers decreases too much, it could be the same person to and from campus, but it could be the same person four times. Once campus and everything went online, she had between 800 and 850 riders a day, so we saw a dramatic decrease in the number of people riding the buses.”

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The Battalion's sports desk will report on the spread of the virus.

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Transportation Services adapt to COVID-19
The Battalion will strive to meet readers where they are with easily accessible content.

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NEWS

As the Department of Residence Life wraps up the final days of dorm and apartment move-in, Aggies are learning to adjust to campus life in the midst of a pandemic.

In order to protect on-campus residents, ResLife has taken many safety precautions and created new rules and regulations that encourage social distancing and frequent sanitary procedures.

These rules include limited capacity in dorm common areas such as kitchens and TV lounges, required social distancing, wearing masks everywhere except for the student’s room, self monitoring for symptoms, allowing only one guest per resident at a time and no overnight visitors, said ResLife Director of Administrative and Support Services Carol Binzer, Ph.D.

“These rules were created with lots of research and lots of consultation,” Binzer said. “In fact, campuses around the nation have been looking to us because we’re one of the larger housing operations. Everybody is doing the best they can with the information they have.”

In addition to these rules, Binzer said ResLife has a cohesive plan in the event of an outbreak in the dorms.

“When a student gets sick, they and any roommate would have to isolate themselves,” Binzer said. “If their hall has a shared bathroom, the sick resident will be moved to specially designated COVID-19 isolation rooms with personal bathrooms. These rooms are located in all areas of campus so residents would not have to move far from their old dorm and support networks.”

While students who test positive will be able to get fresh delivered to them using their meal plans via the ResLife case management team. This team helps provide necessities for sick residents until they recover from the virus.

If an outbreak occurs within a dorm, the building may be converted into a quarantine facility, depending on the size and severity of the outbreak, as well as the building’s layout and location. The campus and county health departments will also be involved in responding to any outbreaks on campus, Binzer said.

“We have some spaces set aside and should it surge beyond that, I know we have explored some off-campus opportunities to house people,” Binzer said. “We have spoken to a bunch of different scenarios and are trying to figure out what’s going on and how best to respond to stem the tide of the contagion.”

With all these new rules, the ResLife Engagement, Learning, and Support (ELS) unit, formerly known as Academic Support Initiatives, hopes to continue fostering community, academic achievement and personal well-being in the dorms through modified programs this semester, said ELS manager Sara McCoy.

“The Department of Residence Life is working extensively to ensure the safety and security of our students while still honoring our commitment to community development,” McCoy said. “We have updated our protocols to ensure that students are taking their own health and safety seriously.”

ELS graduate assistant Bianca Cerda said students can still take advantage of the Academic Peer Mentoring Program safely via virtual meetings with their residence hall peer mentor.

“Our Academic Peer Mentor Program is still going strong,” Cerda said. “They are going through training to prepare to provide virtual office hours, academic check-ins, collaborative programming with RAs and Peer Pals to help students connect to resources and each other as we navigate this challenging time together.”

Mc Coy said dorm safety goes beyond physical health and students should be conscious of their mental health throughout this upcoming year.

“Don’t be afraid to reach out for help, no matter what kind of help you might need,” McCoy said. “The Residence Life staff is thoroughly trained to either assist you or direct you to where you can find the help you need. Make sure you take at least one hour a day for yourself to do something you enjoy – read a book, go for a walk, watch something not for class— whatever feeds your soul and is truly for you.”

On-campus living undergoes changes

FREE COVID-19 TESTING

FOR STAFF, FACULTY AND STUDENTS

TX.AG/COVIDTEST
Texas A&M’s University Dining has made several changes to on-campus dining this fall semester in response to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. Fall semester meal plans officially started Aug. 8 in conjunction with the first move-in day of the semester. Since then, University Dining locations have undergone phased openings to accommodate students’ returns, said Stephanie Denson, Chartwells district marketing manager.

Denson said the University Dining team has been working throughout the summer to change the seating layouts in all dining locations, implement enhanced cleaning measures and create socially distanced queuing options with floor decals spaced six feet apart. “We’ve definitely looked at all angles for how we can have adequate social distance queuing so people feel safe while they’re in their lines,” Denson said. “When possible, we’re limiting specific doors for entrance and specific doors for exit to help the flow of traffic.”

Denson said the doors at the entrance of the Sbisa Underground Food Court have been changed to automatic doors to eliminate another object campus members will need to touch. Additionally, Denson said half of the seating at each dining location has been completely removed to comply with Texas’ 50 percent maximum capacity requirements for restaurant operations.

In the event a dining location reaches 90 percent capacity, associates will direct campus members to available locations nearby, Denson said. The dining halls will also begin offering to-go meal options on Aug. 16 as an alternative to eating inside the venues.

According to University Dining’s guidelines, all associates, campus members and visitors must comply with the university’s rules on face coverings and social distancing. “All guests must adhere to the A&M rule for face coverings when entering dining locations and should only remove once seated at a table consuming food/beverage,” the guidelines state. “Plexi Health Shields are placed at all registers to protect both guests and cashiers.”

All locations have hand sanitizer, which Denson said students are encouraged to use when they enter and exit dining locations. In addition to new safety measures and dining options, Denson said University Dining has created the Retail Bonus option on campus. According to their website, students can now convert one meal swipe on their meal plan to a “retail swipe.” The retail swaps can purchase any menu item up to $7.50 on the menu at all on-campus dining locations.

“This feature replaces the Meal Trade program where Meal Swipes were traded for a set combo, side and drink,” according to the website. “This allows convenience, customization and variety.”

Denson said the decision to change the meal trade options to retail swaps was made before the COVID-19 pandemic in response to feedback University Dining received from campus members. “Because we have over 65,000 students on campus, we have so many different types of budgets and appetites,” Denson said. “We try to find ways to make these meal plans work for different types of students and what they want.”

Denson said these new changes were decided with students’ best interests in mind in order to keep operating under safe conditions for everyone. “We’re doing everything we can,” Denson said. “We’ll adjust as needed so we’re never stuck in what we’re doing.”
Student organizations at Texas A&M have made major changes to Howdy Week recruitment in order to ensure the safety of current and potential members.

Over the past few months, A&M has put many regulations in place to protect the students, faculty and staff from COVID-19, such as restrictions on gatherings and space reservations. Since many organizations do most of their yearly recruitment during Howdy Week, which is almost at an end, some face difficulty in finding ways to meet potential members.

The Student Government Association and the Traditions Council have been using social media to spread the word about their organizations and promoting the use of online options to attend activities.

Psychology junior Jenna Miller, a member of the Kappa Delta Sorority, said in a normal year, those rushing the sorority would walk around the houses to speak with the other members. However, the coronavirus caused some changes in the recruitment process.

“They’re still talking to us, but it’s just over Zoom,” Miller said. “The first two days that we had, we didn’t talk to them in person, they basically sent us all videos.”

Miller said she has not seen a decrease in women interested in joining Kappa Delta, though there is some difficulty making connections with them remotely as opposed to face-to-face.

“It’s definitely different because obviously when you’re in person, you get to sense people’s body language a lot easier when you’re talking to them,” Miller said. “You can sense how they’re holding themselves a lot better.”

Political science senior Rachel Roberts, co-founder of the Freudian Slip Improvisational Comedy Troupe said this group, which customarily performs monthly shows, finds most of their new members during Howdy Week.

“In the fall, we’ll try to do a free Howdy Week show and then also an open house show as well, and auditions are after open house,” Roberts said. “So, we’ll usually do the majority of our recruitment during that Howdy Week show and during [MSC] Open House.”

Roberts said COVID-19 and the regulations from the university have changed the way Freudian Slip can exist as an organization. However, public health senior Sheil Choksi, social media director for Freudian Slip, said they have already made some changes to their plans for the semester, which still allow them to perform virtually.

“Instead of doing improv in front of an audience, we’re going to be doing it internet style,” Choksi said. “We’ll be writing sketches and putting them on YouTube and putting them on social media.”

Roberts said Freudian Slip is just one of many student groups experiencing difficulty with recruiting, but believes this particular organization will make it through.

“I think every organization at the moment is sort of struggling with how to figure out, ‘How can we make sure our members are still active and involved in the organization?’” Roberts said. “For improv, I think we’re uniquely suited to adapt to situations.”
To prepare for the free, oral swab test, individuals should not eat, drink or smoke for at least 20 minutes before arriving for the test.
The SEC plans to kick off football season Sept. 26 and full season schedules will be released at 6 p.m. Monday, Aug. 17. 

Sankey, Bjork offer candid updates on college sports with season in limbo

By Hannah Underwood

The SEC teams to play football this fall. That much is known.

How will the SEC play and whether the SEC fans will accept its season? That’s up in the air, which is why the SEC season remains a mystery.

The SEC has had precautions in place so they wouldn’t have to make any decisions regarding the future of fall sports, including delaying the start of the season, coming into full practices for football and implementing extensive testing protocol.

“I feel good on Friday, and then a little tired on the weekend,” said the SEC Commissioner Greg Sankey.

Sankey said the SEC has had precautions in place so they wouldn’t have to make any decisions regarding the future of fall sports, including delaying the start of the season, coming into full practices for football and implementing extensive testing protocol.

“Nothing really surprised us with those outcomes,” Byrko said. “But we know that things are fluid, things are changing. The quotes that I’ve said we’re not day-by-day, we’re 15-by-15 — we’re 15 minutes at a time because things are changing rapidly.”

Byrko said while the Big 10 and Pac-12’s decisions were based on the discovery of a heart issue called myocarditis in some of the athletes who had tested positive for the virus, A&M has been aware of the condition “since recently.”

“We don’t fear that,” Byrko told Studio 12. “We do initial screening when our athletes come on our campus. We did initial screening when they returned to activity for any cardiac issues. If anyone tested positive, they had to pass those cardiac test before they could return after 30 to 45 days. That’s not uncommonly a new piece of data either. We’re not worried about that. We’re here to make it safe. To me, that’s the track that we have to stay on.”

Since the Big 10 and Pac-12 announcement, SEC fans have taken to social media asking the conference to continue with their season, even if they are the only league to do so.

“Why are they [the SEC] not able to urge the conference to continue with their season, even if they are the only league to do so?”

“Why are they [the SEC] not able to urge the conference to continue with their season, even if they are the only league to do so?”

Sankey said while it would be possible for the SEC to be the only conference participating in competition this fall, he is unsure if it is the right decision.

“I don’t think that’s the right direction, really,” Sankey said. “Could we? Certainly, there’s a difference between can you do something and should you do something. I don’t think that’s the right direction, really.”

Sankey and Bjork said the SEC has had precautions in place so they wouldn’t have to make any decisions regarding the future of fall sports, including delaying the start of the season, coming into full practices for football and implementing extensive testing protocol.

The SEC is currently scheduled to kick off football season Sept. 26.

Sankey and Bjork offer candid updates on college sports with season in limbo

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