



SMU

Elizabeth G. Lobo
Provost and Vice President for Academic Affairs
Office of the Provost

October 2, 2020

Dear Faculty and Staff,

These weekly updates will serve as a tool to keep you informed and engaged with SMU's Academic Affairs division as, together, we work to advance the goals of SMU's strategic plan and continue to move SMU forward and upward. If you have suggestions for what we should include in future communications, please send your ideas to this [email address](#). Previous newsletters are available [here](#). Today's update falls into four categories: 1) SMU's Response to the Black Unity Forum action plan, 2) SMU's Road to R-1, 3) Fall 2020, and 4) News and Noteworthy.

Update on Black Unity Forum and SMU response

The Black Unity Forum submitted its consolidated action plan on August 30. President R. Gerald Turner assured the Forum of a response by September 30. Working in collaboration with my leadership team (deans and associate provosts), we submitted Academic Affairs' responses and proposed timelines for the items pertaining to academics within the Black Unity Forum's Action Plan. The University's other vice presidents followed a similar process to develop responses for their respective areas. Dr. Maria Dixon Hall, SMU's Chief Diversity Officer, worked with senior leadership to further develop and finalize the response.

President Turner submitted the University's comprehensive response to Black Unity Forum members on the morning of September 30, and the President, Dr. Dixon Hall, Vice President of Student Affairs K.C. Mmeje and I met with the group later that afternoon for a detailed review and discussion. Following that meeting, the [University's response](#) was released to the broader SMU community. I hope that you will take the opportunity to review it, if you have not done so already.

SMU's success in addressing the challenges, hardships and inequities, as elaborated by members of the Black Unity Forum, will require commitment from our entire SMU community. As I mentioned in my September 18 [newsletter](#), SMU's board members in the September 17 Committee of the Whole meeting reviewed the Black Unity Forum Action Plan and ultimately signaled their commitment by adopting a [motion](#) clearly stating their commitment that racial injustices or inequities will not be tolerated at

SMU, and encouraging President Turner and his administration to continue the important dialogue to address these issues.

I, along with members of my team of deans and associate provosts, will begin engaging faculty in the days, months, and even years ahead to bring the University's commitments, as documented in SMU's response to the Black Unity Forum, to reality.

SMU'S Road to R-1

- **Faculty development opportunity: National Center for Faculty Development and Diversity** – Since 2017, SMU has been a member of the National Center for Faculty Development and Diversity (NCFDD). Our institutional membership symbolizes the University's ongoing commitment to faculty development – particularly for underrepresented faculty groups.

The NCFDD is an independent professional development, training, and mentoring organization that offers support to its members. Our membership in NCFDD aligns with Goal One, Objective One of SMU's Strategic Plan to "strengthen the University's ability to recruit, appoint, promote, and retain a distinguished, gifted, and diverse faculty." Jessica Dixon Weaver, Robert G. Storey Distinguished Faculty Fellow, and Gerald J. Ford Research Fellow Associate Professor in the Dedman School of Law, was fundamental in bringing this membership opportunity to the University's attention and advocating for funding.

As an institutional member of the NCFDD, all interested SMU faculty or graduate students may take advantage of the services offered by visiting www.FacultyDiversity.org to register for a free membership to access the center's online resources which include workshops, webinars, and seminars on topics related to faculty life, such as increasing writing productivity, managing time, cultivating mentors, securing external funding, and maintaining work-life balance.

- **Research support and guidelines** – As we increase our focus on research, I wanted to remind everyone about some of the key areas of support for faculty, as well as current guidelines for laboratory operations and research activity during COVID-19. In future newsletters, I have asked the deans to help me highlight faculty excellence in the areas of research and creative activity within their individual college/schools.
 - SMU's Office of Research provides research services (Sponsored Projects and Contracts, Research Compliance, and Technology Management) to all faculty and staff at the University. Sponsored Projects facilitates pre-award proposal preparation and submission, accepts awards on behalf of the University, negotiates non-financial post-award changes and all research-related contracts. Post-award

accounting is handled by the [Office of Grant and Contract Accounting \(a division of Business and Finance\)](#). Research Compliance provides oversight for all human, animal, and biohazard research. Technology Management works with the Office of Legal Affairs to assess, protect, and commercialize intellectual property. The Office's [research handbook](#) gives a good overview of the support faculty and staff receive across a research project's lifecycle.

- Lab opening and safety guidelines – Research facilities are currently open to faculty, staff, and undergraduate and graduate students subject to compliance with the guidelines outlined in the table within this [document](#). In addition, faculty, staff, and undergraduate and graduate students must complete COVID-19 training on Canvas before accessing University research facilities. Research with human subjects may be undertaken according to the [guidance set forth by the IRB](#).
 - [Guidance for researchers during COVID-19](#) – To maintain continuity of operations and to maximize faculty research productivity, University offices that support research are fully operational. Contact information is provided on the website of the office from which you need support.
 - [Office of Research and Graduate Studies](#)
 - [Grant and Contract Accounting](#)
 - [Office of Legal Affairs](#)
- **Better understanding of *US News and World Report's* (USN&WR) peer assessment scores** – As mentioned in previous newsletters, SMU is ranked 66 in USN&WR's 2021 ranking of national universities, with a goal of being within the top 50 universities. We are reviewing the data to develop and refine our action plan to reach this goal, with our areas of focus being: 1) retention rates 2) graduation rates, 3) affordability, particularly for Pell-eligible students, and 4) increasing the University's peer assessment score (an externally-rated perception of the academic quality of an institution) as reported by college/university senior leadership.

In today's newsletter, I want to share a more detailed look at what we are learning about the importance of the peer assessment score to our ranking. In academic year 2019-2020, and at the request of then-Provost *ad interim* Peter Moore, SMU contracted with Spivey Consulting Group (Spivey) for an analysis of USN&WR and recommendations based upon that analysis. Regarding the peer assessment score, Spivey said, "Expert assessment is assigned the largest sole weight for any individual factor. This makes expert assessment score particularly important."

To compute a peer assessment score, USN&WR asks University presidents, provosts, and deans of admission to complete a survey each spring asking a single question: "Rate each institution on a scale of 1 (marginal) to 5 (exceptional) on the quality of their undergraduate academic programs. Raters are told that if they do not have enough information to make an informed

decision about the institution, select “do not know.” If the score is a reflection of the quality of the academic programs, the number of votes cast by presidents, provosts, and deans of admission might be considered a measure of familiarity with the institution and their academic programs. Figure 1 below provides an average, over the past 15 years, of SMU’s peer assessment scores compared with the same average for those schools ranked in the 50s by USN&WR. Figure 2 below provides an average, over the past 15 years, of SMU’s vote counts compared with the same average for those schools ranked in the 50s by USN&WR.

Figure 1: Average Assessment Ratings, 2005-2021, for SMU and Institutions Ranked in the 50s in 2021

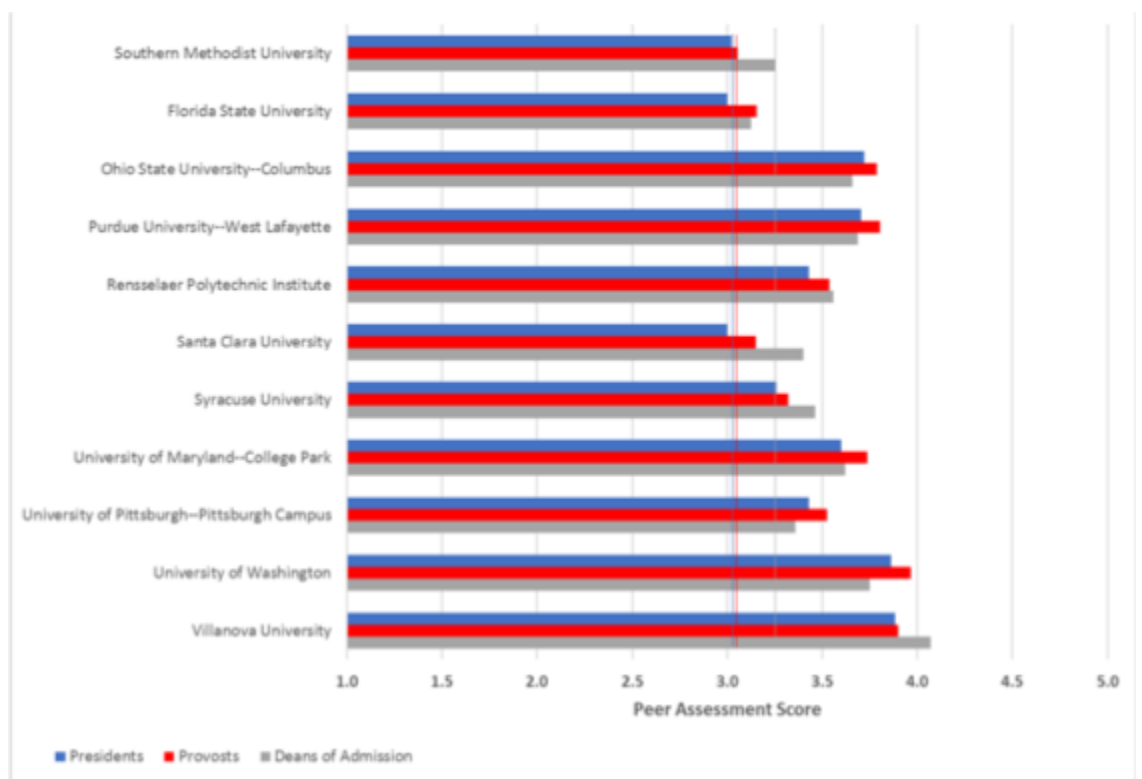
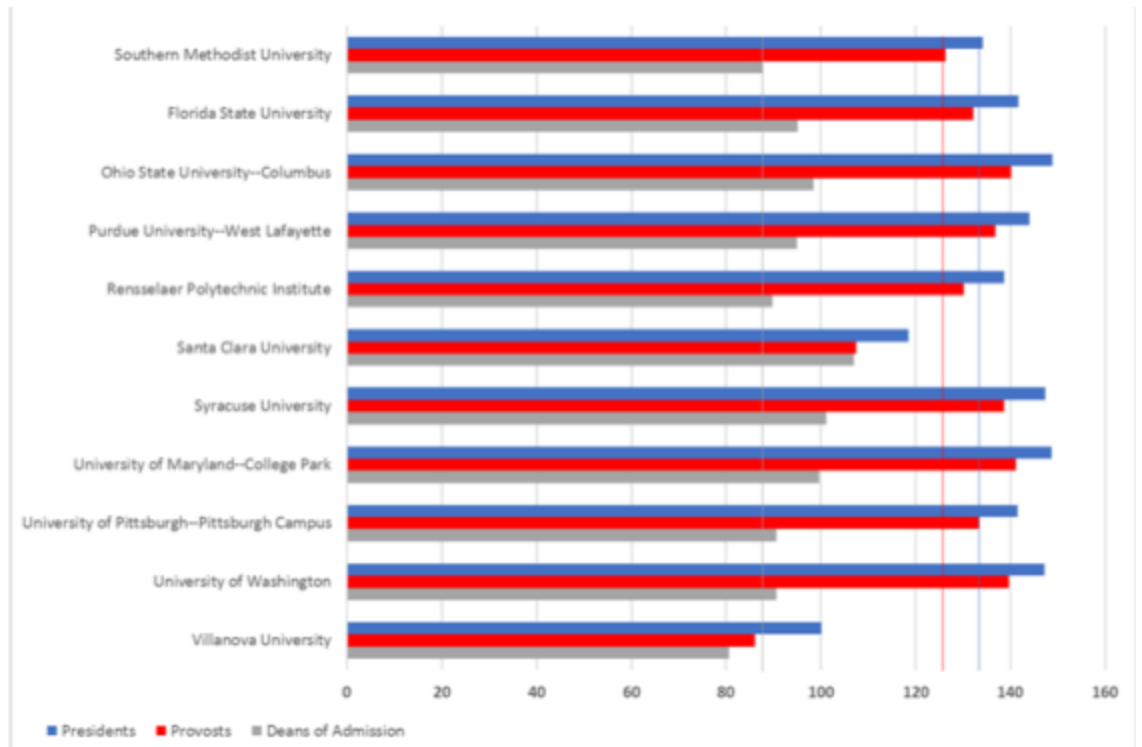


Figure 2: Average Votes Cast, 2005-2021, for SMU and Institutions Ranked in the 50s in 2021



The data indicates that SMU suffers from two intertwined challenges with the USN&WR peer assessment process.

1. Raters (presidents, provosts, and deans of admission) do not view SMU's academic quality to be equivalent to other institutions, ranked by USN&WR, within the ranking group which we aspire to climb over or surpass (those ranked 51-59).
2. Raters appear to be less familiar with SMU as an institution, or at least the academic quality of SMU, than institutions ranked in the 50s.

Fewer votes and a lower score is more advantageous than many votes and a lower score.

Creating a positive impression of SMU for those not familiar with us is less challenging than raising SMU's rating among those who see us less favorably. Since the number of raters is finite, known, and relatively small, we can and will make targeted efforts to increase SMU's familiarity through targeted marketing and outreach.

- **Recommended modifications to strengthen our curricular planning and delivery** – This fall and spring SMU is launching two critical software enhancements, AEFIS and Highpoint that will enhance our assessment and advising efforts including those tied to our Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP) and SMU-in-Four, which itself is an effort to improve student success. Secondly, as we continue to work to reduce the workload of assessment of

general education and degree programs we are adding software enhancements to Canvas. These interrelated projects will require significant efforts on the part of OIT, the Registrar's Office and the schools – including their records offices. As we have learned over the last several years, launching new software is a delicate task and requires deft handling of the components that feed into it. Reducing the normal workload associated with curricular changes will support a successful launch.

At the same time, we also recognize that ongoing curricular changes are central to our efforts in continuing improvement. Starting October 12, deans will be asked to prioritize any further curricular changes for this academic year and submit these once a month to the Office of Curricular Innovation and Policy for review by the EPC. Those potential changes that are approved can then move forward through the normal approval process. Changes include not just new programs but changes in course prefixes and number, prerequisites, etc. We also ask that submitted changes should be brief and should include reasons for why these changes are essential in this academic year.

Fall 2020

- **Campus health and safety update** – The favorable decline in active cases of COVID-19 among students and employees extended into this week, with our active case count just above 100. As of today, we have 101 student cases and 4 employee cases. Fortunately, there have still been no hospitalizations reported for any employees or students to date. As a result of this favorable trend, and the accompanying reduction of the utilization of campus isolation spaces, we were able to change our operational level to the 'moderate' category last Monday using the original calculation tool. This week, which is our first using the revised assessment tool, we remained in the 'moderate' category. Remember that our operational level is reviewed each week and any necessary updates are made each Monday afternoon on the [Mustang Strong website](#). Having now completed six weeks of the fall semester I want to express my gratitude to each of you for your flexibility and vigilance in these challenging times.
- **New COVID-19 case count dashboard** – As I have mentioned, we are developing a new dashboard tool that will provide even more information and transparency regarding COVID-19 case counts and isolation capacity. Be on the lookout for additional information, hopefully as soon as next week, once the new dashboard is available.
- **Qualtrics/PathCheck reminder** – As part of our efforts this fall to help protect and inform the SMU community, we deployed two tools for monitoring the health of students, faculty, and staff—a COVID-19 symptom checker and contact tracer.

- If you are not feeling well or not sure if you should be on campus, you can use the [COVID-19 Symptom Checker](#) at any time. The survey will help you to determine if you are currently experiencing symptoms related to COVID-19. After answering a few questions, the Checker will provide guidance for your next actions, and based on the results, you will receive further instructions. You should also be receiving automated emails each morning with instructions on how to complete your ‘Mustang daily symptom check.’
 - SMU has also partnered with the [PathCheck Foundation](#) to pilot a mobile app that can help in contact tracing efforts, should an individual test positive for COVID-19. SMU partnered with PathCheck because it is a privacy-first design that started at MIT before transitioning into a nonprofit foundation. Location data never leaves your phone without your consent but can be accessed should you experience a positive COVID-19 test result. Even then, the data will only be used once to assist in the contact tracing interview and then deleted. The app is available on the Apple and Google store. Visit this [blog post](#) for additional information and download/configuration instructions.
- **Update on the spring 2021 calendar** – The [Spring 2021 Calendar Committee](#), consisting of key faculty and staff, has been exploring options for the spring 2021 calendar that will promote campus health while maintaining the strength of teaching and learning. The committee provided me with recommendations on September 30, and I am circulating them this week with the PEC, deans, Faculty Senate leadership and associate provosts for review and feedback. I plan to present a recommendation to the PEC for review and approval next week, and we will announce plans for the spring 2021 academic calendar once approved.
 - **Faculty/student survey for early impressions on fall 2020** – The first fall 2020 Student and Faculty Surveys were administered September 8-11 during the third week of the fall semester to provide an optional opportunity for students and faculty to offer feedback on their experiences of the first two to three weeks of the fall semester. The surveys were analyzed by a team of three faculty and two members of the Provost’s Office. A total of 1,951 students participated in the student survey (1,424 undergraduate; 518 graduate; 8 certificate and 1 missing), and 472 faculty participated in the survey (out of 1,154 full-time faculty, adjunct faculty, instructional staff, and graduate teaching assistants teaching across all undergraduate, graduate, and all other programs).

My thanks to the team for their service administering and analyzing the survey, which will provide important data to inform our plans moving forward. You can review either an [executive summary](#) of findings from both surveys or a more detailed analysis of either the [faculty survey](#) or the [student survey](#).

Thanks also to SMU's faculty and students for their feedback. The Provost's Office will provide monthly surveys in October and November so that faculty and students can keep providing feedback as we continue to monitor unfolding circumstances and address issues that the surveys reveal.

- **Early progress reports for fall 2020** – Thank you to our faculty for completing early progress reports for fall 2020. I'm pleased to report that 74% of early term grades were reported this semester. These reports are reviewed by the University Advising Center and major advisers and serve as a great way to identify students in need of outreach. In addition, student academic success programs in the A-LEC contact students with deficient grades to remind them about tutoring, academic counseling, and opportunities to work with the writing center and research librarians on campus. All of these services are available both in person and virtually in fall 2020. Faculty who did not have a chance to complete their early term reports will have a second opportunity during midterm progress reports.
- **Rapid support for SMUFlex & fully virtual faculty** – The Office of Information Technology's (OIT's) Online Production Services team, in close partnership with the Center for Teaching Excellence and SMU Libraries, is immediately launching two "ASAP" support programs for faculty currently teaching in either SMUFlex or fully virtual modes. We have launched two separate Slack channels for you to join a community of other faculty and support partners (CTE, OIT, SMU Libraries, and more!)—join now to be part of a developing support forum for fall 2020 and beyond.
 - Faculty Teaching [Fully Online](#)
 - Faculty Teaching [SMUFlex](#)

Whether you are having instructional successes or you are in need of answers to questions great or small, please consider joining and letting us know how we can help. If you need help with Slack, please reach out as well. We're happy to help you get started. Each school's embedded Academic Technology Service Director (ATSD) office will be sending more information about these resources as well, but when in doubt, either contact your ATSD, or [email the main help desk](#).

- **Online exam basics video from CTE** - Due to the unique circumstances brought forth by COVID-19 this semester, exams are expected to be administered online for all students. The Center for Teaching Excellence has developed an online Exams basics [video](#) that covers the most important aspects of setting up your exams in Canvas, our learning management system.

News and Noteworthy

- **Inaugural Provost's Faculty Fellows program** – Thank you to the 30 faculty members who submitted applications for the Provost Faculty Fellows program. This week, members of my team reviewed all the applications, and I will be announcing our inaugural cohort next week. The Faculty Fellows will begin this month with collaborations on the strategic priorities of equity and inclusion, undergraduate and graduate student success, research enhancement and scholarly impact, strategic communication, and institutional planning and data analytics.

Sincerely,



Elizabeth G. Loba, PhD
Provost and Vice President for Academic Affairs
Southern Methodist University
<https://www.smu.edu/provost>



World Changers Shaped Here