

Tulane's year in COVID-19 events, breakthroughs and more

Tulane Today staff
today@tulane.edu



Students in Tulane Law School's Reading Room take advantage of quiet time with a masked statue of Nathan Hale looking on. Students have followed safety guidelines since they returned to campus after the COVID-19 pandemic began. (Photo by Sally Asher)

From frontline doctors to first-year students, Tulanians across campuses are reflecting on the year of COVID-19 and the changes, challenges and breakthroughs it has brought.

“Tulanians came together in a time of great uncertainty to offer support to one another, protect the health of one another and ensure that our teaching, research and unparalleled student experience continued at an extraordinarily high level in spite of the pandemic,” President Michael Fitts said. “This has been a challenging, stressful, often exhausting time for everyone, but one in which our students, faculty and staff have truly shone.”

In mid-March, one year ago, students were dismissed from campus residence halls and in-person classes only to pick up their coursework via Zoom. Faculty and staff carried on the business of the university from their living rooms as Tulane physicians and other frontline healthcare workers treated COVID-19 patients in overcrowded emergency rooms and intensive care units.

Thanks to one of the nation’s most rigorous safety protocols, testing, contact tracing and quarantine/isolation programs, students were able to return to campus for the fall 2020 semester. Scores of dedicated staff members stood up an Arrival Center for incoming students to start testing and to learn new university public health policies.

Tulane staff member checks students' temperatures at Arrival Center entrance
Tulane staff members check students' temperatures at the Arrival Center entrance.
(Photo by Paula Burch-Celentano)

Students were required to receive a negative COVID-19 test at the Arrival Center to gain entry into residence halls. Move-in itself was a carefully orchestrated event designed to minimize exposures.

“Our singular focus has been, ‘How do we best promote the safest return possible for our students and campus community?’” said Brian Johnson, assistant vice president for Housing, Residence Life and Campus Recreation. “ ... [The Arrival Center demonstrates that all of Tulane is committed to the health and well-being of our greatest asset, our students.](#)”

A Tulane student and his parents pose for a selfie at the Arrival Center
Tulane student Justin Haysbert (center) and his parents pose for a selfie at the Arrival Center. (Photo by Sally Asher)

Campus adaptations included 13 temporary climate-controlled buildings, plexiglass barriers, extensively enhanced technology for both in-person and online classes, updated dining options, social distancing guidelines, hand sanitizer throughout campus and a bold plan to regularly test the entire Tulane community.

These measures worked to prevent significant outbreaks and to offer students a chance to experience college life on a vibrant campus – some for the first time.

“At the end of every semester, I receive letters from students and parents, thanking us for our work,” said Robin Forman, senior vice president for academic affairs and provost. “It was particularly uplifting to get those notes this semester ... [they were writing to express their gratitude for the opportunity we gave them to come to campus](#) and engage with our faculty and each other, and for our commitment to do everything we could to keep them safe.”

Students were (and still are) required to take up to twice-weekly COVID-19 tests at on-campus testing centers run by the School of Medicine. For students who tested positive, a detailed process helped them maintain their coursework while quarantining. Separate accommodations at Paterson House as well as contact tracing prevented further spread of the disease.

A Campus Health staff member assists a student with COVID-19 test
A Campus Health staff member assists a student with a COVID-19 test. (Photo by Sally Asher)

For many students, the biggest disruption to campus life might have been the constant presence of masks and social distancing requirements on and off campus. But their adherence to these and other safety protocols helped Tulane maintain a positivity rate well below that of the city’s or state’s. A [nationally acclaimed dashboard tracked positive cases](#) and other statistics regarding the prevalence of the virus at Tulane.

A gloved hand adds COVID test samples to tray in lab
A lab worker adds COVID-19 test samples to a tray in the lab. (Photo by Sally Asher)

Tulane researchers dedicated themselves to pursuing new ways to treat, test for and prevent the spread of COVID-19. The researchers, many of whom never left their jobs during the citywide lockdown, were critical to learning about the novel coronavirus almost immediately — even as confusion over the shortage and usage of personal protective equipment to keep them safe dominated many COVID-19 conversations.

In response to shortages, medical students in the Hutchinson Building launched a massive drive to collect personal protective equipment for frontline healthcare workers. Between March 20 and May 6, 2020, the group distributed 29,217 N-95 masks; 181,467 surgical masks; 22,747 face shields; 1,100 goggles; 3,382 boxes of gloves; 13,446 gowns and coveralls; 4,525 sleeve, shoe, and head covers; 175 pairs of scrubs; 762 bottles of hand sanitizer; 699 bottles of cleaning supplies; and 38 tablets to 17 local hospitals and healthcare facilities. Physician Kendra Harris, MD, [launched Green Wave Heroes](#) to support frontline personnel with food donations, child care and more.

The emergence of COVID-19 also illuminated striking health disparities in the United States. Communities of color remain especially at risk for contracting COVID-19. In early February 2021, Thomas LaVeist, dean of the School of Public Health and Tropical Medicine [co-authored an opinion piece in *The New York Times*](#) on behalf of 60 Black health experts, urging Black Americans to get vaccinated when they become eligible.

“ ... we believe this moment requires leaders to stand up and lead: to help save our people and nation, to protect Black Americans and all Americans, and to break the stranglehold Covid-19 has had on our country,” he wrote with co-author Dr. Georges C. Benjamin, a physician and the executive director of the American Public Health Association. The piece received national recognition and was later tweeted by President Barack Obama.

The year ahead looks more promising: With three vaccines in use in the United States, including one that was tested at a Tulane-run clinic, citizens may finally have reason to believe that the “beginning of the end” is near. Tulanians, starting with frontline physicians and other workers in healthcare settings, began receiving the first doses of the vaccine in December.

Read more about Tulane's involvement in breakthrough discoveries and other initiatives during the year of COVID-19.

- [Study: Coronavirus pandemic sparked by nature, not bioengineering](#) Mar 18, 2020
- [Early study shows coronavirus can live in the air over 16 hours](#) May 12, 2020
- [Tulane University researchers develop synthetic antibody against COVID-19](#) Jun 22, 2020
- [Metabolic syndrome linked to worse outcomes for COVID-19 patients](#) Aug 25, 2020
- [Tulane researchers awarded Fast Grant for second-generation COVID-19 vaccine](#) Aug 27, 2020
- [COMPASS study seeks to measure community spread of COVID-19 in general population](#) Feb 03, 2021
- [Tulane University to lead national research partnership to speed up COVID-19 vaccines and drug discoveries](#) Feb 03, 2021
- [Tulane launches multidisciplinary Centers of Excellence aimed at complex research challenges](#) Feb 10, 2021
- [Tulane develops test that can detect COVID-19 that nasal swabs miss](#) Feb 26, 2021