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EDUCATION



UC San Diego forges ahead with plan to bounce back from damaging days of COVID-19



UCSD's lecture halls were jammed in 2019 but will have fewer students as the school heads into 2021.

(Erik Jepsen/ UC San Diego)

The school's anti-COVID campaign has given it the confidence to slowly start opening the campus more broadly

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It's an unexpected sight on a campus dominated by big, bold buildings.

UC San Diego erected four circus-like tents in its engineering quad, creating space for students to take classes when school resumes on Jan. 4.

La Jolla's sea breeze will ventilate the tents, helping fend off the coronavirus and enabling UCSD to increase its in-person enrollment to 7,400, up 800 from the fall, the university says.

There also will be 1,000 more students in dorms. Six restaurants will start to open in a new campus village that houses 2,000. A second village that size is coming. And a [grand plaza is taking shape](#) where a Blue Line trolley station will open in November.

UCSD's anti-COVID campaign has given it the confidence to slowly start opening the campus more broadly, and to quickly build what it needs to handle upwards of 41,000 students.

The virus infection rate among students is [0.8 percent](#), compared with 7.7 percent countywide.

The university also believes that the COVID-19 vaccination program that will start nationwide next week will vanquish the virus, making this the ideal moment to reinvigorate a school that — like others — has mostly been operating online since March.

“Our momentum might have slowed, but it did not go away,” said UCSD Chancellor Pradeep Khosla.

“It looks like the campus will be about 80 percent populated in the fall. I think we’ll still be wearing masks. We will not be greeting each other with hugs and handshakes as often as we used to. Our classes will not be as crowded.

“But there will be a sense of normalcy.”



A lone student strolls along Library Walk at UC San Diego in August. (K.C. Alfred/The San Diego Union-Tribune)

The desire for change is palpable. Students say they’ve been worn thin by the loneliness, isolation and “Zoom fatigue” associated with online courses.

UCSD is leaning hard on Return to Learn, a blueprint for renewal that the school began to draft shortly after the pandemic hit.

Khosla marshalled his resources, which are considerable. UCSD operates two major hospitals, clinics, a health care network, drug trial units, and separate schools of medicine, pharmacy and pharmaceutical science, and public health.

It's also teeming with scientists who specialize in finding, tracking and fighting viruses like COVID-19.

By early May, UCSD was beginning to test asymptomatic students for COVID-19. Today, UC San Diego Health frequently does more COVID testing than the University of California's other four medical centers combined.



Biologist Rob Knight has created a system for detecting the coronavirus in the waste water of university buildings.
(Erik Jepsen / UC San Diego)

UCSD succeeded, in part, because it got quick buy-in from students on testing and wearing masks.

That's not entirely surprising; it's a STEM-heavy school. But hundreds of "health ambassadors" have been roaming campus and politely asking students without masks if they would like one. Students who are wearing them receive a word of praise and, in some instances, a Starbucks card.

The "soft touch" has made a difference.

"Students prefer to be asked to do something rather than told," said Kimberly Giangtran, president of UCSD's Associated Students. Things turned out differently at San Diego State University, which struggled in the early days of the fall semester to find effective ways to talk to students. More than 1,700 students have tested positive since the semester began. The situation has greatly improved over the past couple of months.

SDSU, like the county's other major universities, is planning to remain primarily online through the spring.

UCSD also has benefitted from its decision five years ago to recruit Rob Knight, a renowned biologist who is an expert on what enters and leaves a person's gastrointestinal system.

Knight knew that COVID-19 turns up in a person's feces during the early phase of infection, before someone tests positive. So he tapped into the school's waste-water system to search for traces of the virus, which he quickly found.

He then created an [early warning system](#), using sensors to look for the virus in waste water coming out of many buildings. When there's a positive signal, UCSD notifies people who might have used the building's rest rooms during a specific period of time and asks them to get tested, helping slow the spread of the virus.

The network has 52 automated sampling stations, the most of any university in the country. It will be greatly expanded in the coming weeks and is expected to be particularly useful in early January when residential students return from the holiday break.

UCSD also helped run a pilot test for CA Notify, a COVID-19 exposure notification system for smartphones. The Bluetooth-based technology is being used on campus and was recently made available to all Californians.

Khosla is primarily known as a gifted fundraiser and planner who has added more than \$2 billion in buildings since he arrived in 2012. Now, he's also getting praise for crisis management.

"There was some skepticism among faculty when he started talking about bringing people back on campus and even opening up in-person teaching," said Steven Constable, chair of the Academic Senate.

"But he followed through on the execution of Return to Learn, and not just in testing. It's the ventilation in classes, it's instilling a culture of responsibility in students, it's contact tracing, and it's putting people in place to make systems work."



Chancellor Khosla has been earning praise for his handling of the COVID-19 crisis. (Nelvin C. Cepeda / San Diego Union-Tribune)

Without the faculty's support Khosla could be in deep trouble, especially in his efforts to modestly increase the number of students taking in-person classes.

There have been uproars at places like the University of Florida, where many faculty and students oppose the school's plan to greatly expand in-person teaching in the spring. Opponents say they feel like they're being forced to comply and that the coronavirus might not be brought under control by then.

UCSD is trying to avoid such showdowns, emphasizing that whatever happens will be a shared decision.

"Curriculum really is in the hands of the faculty," said Elizabeth Simmons, UCSD's executive vice chancellor.



UCSD has erected tents where in-person classes will be held. (Erik Jepsen / UC San Diego)

The university's COVID testing has shown that infections aren't occurring in the school's lecture halls, which held far fewer students this fall. It's mostly happening in places where students go to socialize, which takes a bit of the fear out of adding more face-to-face classes.

Constable thinks faculty are more worried "about the exhaustion of online teaching than they are about the risks associated with in-person teaching."

It's too late to add a lot of those type of classes in the winter quarter, which begins on Jan. 4. And the spring quarter starts on March 24, well before the COVID-19 vaccine is expected to be widely administered to faculty and students.

UCSD is angling for near-normalcy in September, and it is under pressure to embrace the masses. The coronavirus scared nearly everyone, but it didn't hurt the university's reputation. Enrollment unexpectedly [soared past 40,000](#) for the first time this year, and it could hit 41,000 in late 2021.

It's unclear whether UCSD will keep many or any of the for-credit online courses it's been offering to undergraduates. Throughout its 60-year history, the university has been steadfast in its belief that classes should be taught in-person, on campus.

It has stayed with that position even though its faculty helped develop the Internet, social media, and smartphones, and its undergrads are members of Generation Z, which never knew a time when those things didn't exist.



Masks were a rare sight at UCSD prior to the pandemic.
(Gary Robbins / The San Diego Union-Tribune)

"I see online technology as being an amplification factor," Khosla said. "It's not going to replace in-person completely. It's going to amplify it when needed."

Constable said: “My sense is there a good fraction of the population, if not the majority, who would actually prefer to take an in-person class. Just as (some) professors have sort of hated this remote teaching, I know a lot of students who hate it too.”
Jahfreen Alam doesn’t see it quite that way.

“If you have a heavy class load it might make it easier if one of them was online, especially if you’re a commuter,” said Alam, editor of the UCSD Guardian, the student newspaper. “It depends on whether a student likes it and has the resources to study online.”

One way or another, change is coming, said Sean Gallagher, a professor of educational policy at Northeastern University in Boston.

“There’s a risk of backlash against online education because so much online learning that’s happened (during the pandemic) has been hastily put together and poor quality,” Gallagher said.

“(But) we’re at this moment where colleges and universities are going to have to become more digital.”

Union-Tribune reporter Lyndsay Winkley contributed to this story.

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