UT Martin reports fall enrollment decline but hopeful signs amid pandemic

UT Martin reports 7,119 students enrolled for the 2020 fall semester, including both undergraduate and graduate students. This represents a 2.4% decrease over the fall 2019 enrollment of 7,296 students and ends three consecutive years of enrollment growth. Despite the decline in total student numbers, several positives are found in the final fall enrollment report prepared by the university’s Office of Institutional Research.

First-time freshmen were down 43 students compared to fall 2019; returning students increased by 34; and graduate students increased 205 or almost 40%. The university’s dual-enrollment program declined by 252 students compared to last fall, a likely reflection of the uncertainties faced by K-12 schools during the pandemic. Dual-enrollment courses offer college credit to high school students in West Tennessee and other parts of Tennessee.

“The pandemic is affecting higher education on several fronts and, given the health concerns and financial challenges facing our students and their families, this is really an amazing outcome,” Chancellor Keith Carver said. “Everyone is trying to adjust to these new circumstances, and I applaud our students, their families, and our outstanding faculty and staff for adjusting to the realities that we currently face. You always hope for better, but I’m extremely pleased with where the university is positioned moving forward.”

Also encouraging to Carver and university officials are the full-time equivalent (FTE) numbers that provide the basis for public university funding in Tennessee. Undergraduate FTE declined by 160 or 3% this fall compared to 2019, but graduate FTE rose by 123 or 42.5%. Overall FTE declined by 38 or .7%. FTE is determined by dividing undergraduate student credit hours by 15 and graduate hours by 12.

“We’re grateful to the state for its financial support of higher education during these uncertain economic times,” Carver said. “Our own UT System leadership and the UT Board of Trustees also continue to support the positive direction that we’re headed with our new Strategic Enrollment Plan. UT Martin is in good financial shape, which allows us to pursue our educational mission at a high level.”

UT Martin continues to earn solid regional and national rankings both for the university and individual academic programs. The four-year graduation rate has increased 14.4% since the start of the Soar in Four tuition program that was approved in 2016 by the UT Board of Trustees. Soar in Four encourages students to take at least 15 hours per semester in order to graduate in four years. Among other academic success stories are Skyhawk athletes who earned the highest combined grade point average in UT Martin history in spring 2020 with a 3.26 GPA.

Plans for spring semester are still being determined. For more information, contact the Office of University Relations at 731-881-7615.

‘Return of the Living Grad’ exhibit to feature alumni art

The UT Martin Department of Visual and Theatre Arts is hosting an alumni art and design exhibition in the Fine Arts Building Gallery titled “Return of the Living Grad.”

Thirty UT Martin alumni will have their creative works featured in the exhibit.

“Return of the Living Grad” opens Tuesday, Sept. 29, and runs through Oct. 24. The gallery is open 1 – 5 p.m., Monday-Friday, with no admission fee. All guests are required to wear masks while on campus.

The Department of Visual and Theatre Arts will host a virtual opening reception that will be livestreamed to the department’s Facebook account at 5 p.m., Sept. 29.

For more information, email Jason Stout, professor of art, at jstout7@utm.edu.

Right: A visitor admires a previous student art showcase in the Fine Arts Gallery that opened February 2020.
Faculty Spotlight: Dr. Sean Walker

“Skyhawks fly high because Skyhawks fly together.” Whether it’s students, faculty and staff members, or his friends and family, Dr. Sean Walker has dedicated his life to helping those around him.

As a professor of management, Walker makes time to assist students and get to know them on a more personal level. It is important to him that by the end of his third or fourth week of an in-person class, he is able to recognize his students’ names and faces, and with that, knows their behaviors and stories about their lives. Through forming this connection, he can not only help them with assignments, but with problems they are struggling with in their everyday lives.

“The key to success for a student is not necessarily teaching them what’s in the textbook, ... they need someone who encourages them and believes in them and will help them deal with these personal components that are going to spill over into their academic performance,” Walker said.

He also strives to help faculty and students through his role as Faculty Senate president. He uses his seat on the Chancellor’s Cabinet to advocate for the needs of students and staff to make changes on campus. On top of his responsibilities of examining admissions requirements and implementing strategies to improve retention rates, Faculty Senate is also evaluating changes in curriculum up for discussion.

“Curricular changes this year as it relates to diversity and inclusion are something that we are focused on,” Walker said.

“The committee on instruction has sent out some messaging to faculty to encourage submissions as it relates to [diversity and inclusion], so we’re going to look at any and all kinds of curricular changes there to address some of those issues.”

While Walker knows the curriculum changes will take time, he makes it a priority in his classes to ensure everyone receives the respect and equal treatment they deserve. This mission is part of what drew him to management. After seeing friends and family face discrimination based on gender or race, Walker was motivated to not only strive for equality in his own workplace, but to teach students how they can do the same in their prospective careers.

“You come to me with a request or a concern, whether you’re a student, a faculty member, a staff member, all I worry about is your concern and what can I do to try and address it because I think that’s what everybody deserves: to be treated as Skyhawks. That’s really what we all are,” said Walker.

One of UT Martin’s greatest strengths, in Walker’s eyes, is the community-wide friendliness and sense of belonging.

“I like that you see guys and gals opening doors for each other and people saying simple things like ‘Hi, how are you,’” Walker said. “I don’t think people realize how much those four words could potentially change someone’s day, or outlook, or their semester or a lot of things – their lives even, by just saying those simple things. When you see those very simple, easy activities being exhibited all around, you see that people really do look out for each other.”

Walker’s work as both a professor and as Faculty Senate president allows him to help people all over campus and contribute to the UT Martin community he cherishes.

Written by Antonia Steele, newswriting intern for the Office of University Relations.

TCC SCHOLARSHIP - Nicholas Carpenter, a senior agriculture communications major from Crossville, received the 2020-21 Tennessee Council on Cooperatives Scholarship. The scholarship was established to aid college students studying agriculture who are likely to return to communities served by rural cooperatives. TCC Vice President Dan Strasser presented Carpenter with the $1,000 scholarship as well as an invitation to the annual Tennessee Young Leaders Conference. Pictured (l-r): Dr. Todd Winters, dean of the College of Agriculture and Applied Sciences; Carpenter; Strasser; and Dr. Joey Mehlhorn, interim dean of graduate studies and professor of agricultural economics.
You Tell Me

• Question – Should student workers be asked to provide flu vaccination verification to the university area in which they work?

• Answer – Students do not need to provide verification to the area in which they work. They would just need to submit verification to Student Health and Counseling Services who will verify.

Submit your questions anonymously to the Suggestion Box link at www.utm.edu/suggestionbox.