



September 2020

Dear colleagues and friends:

As we continue to adjust to the new reality dictated by the COVID-19 pandemic, one thing is certain: our ability to change, adapt and move forward is evident. I have witnessed exceptional energy, resilience and patience from all our faculty and staff and a willingness to work together to address so much uncertainty.

The transition to work from home has provided an opportunity to challenge our workforce culture, learn about new ways to maintain business continuity, and rethink how we could design better research space after a vaccine is discovered.

Remarkably, despite the slowdown imposed by the pandemic, our research enterprise indicators show steady gains for FY20, prompting optimism as the new fiscal year begins.

I am grateful to the units operating under the VPR office for their collaborative spirit and innovative tactics to support our research community during this unprecedented time. As the infographic below illustrates, several key FY20 accomplishments are particularly impressive.

- The [Institutional Review Board \(IRB\)](#) continued to **evaluate and approve a large number of clinical trial protocols throughout the pandemic**
- The [Institutional Animal Care and Use Committee \(IACUC\)](#) enabled the **continuity of animal research at pre-COVID levels**
- The [Institutional Core Labs](#) provided services at 75-80% of their capacity during the months of April-July but they ramped up their operations to 97% in August
- We launched a new [Institutional Biobank](#) located in the Research Administration Building on the Greehey Campus

Our community of scholars is the key driver of our research growth which has rippling effects on the biosciences industry in our city and beyond.

A pivotal factor to recruit and retain human capital is the availability of funding mechanisms targeting out-of-state talent and fostering research in strategic research areas. One example is the [Cancer Prevention and Research Institute of Texas](#) (CPRIT). Last month, our institution [announced five awards totaling \\$10.3 million](#) including \$6 million to recruit David Gius, MD, PhD, a physician-scientist and radiation oncologist, and Peng Zhao, PhD, a researcher working in the field of nonalcoholic steatohepatitis and its progression to liver cancer.

Earlier this summer, three [Voelcker Young Investigator Awards](#) were granted to Drs. Chen, Taverna, and Zhao to support their careers as independent investigators. In addition, the UT System STARS program continues to provide additional resources to enhance startup packages and expand the research programs of new junior and senior investigators. (See Table)

Table: FY20 UT System STARS and Voelcker Young Investigator Awards

Investigator	UT System STARS Awards	Voelcker Awards
Kevin Bieniek, PhD	★	
Lizhen Chen, Ph.D.		◆
Patricia Dahia, MD, PhD	★	
Patrick Sung, PhD	★	
Josephine Taverna, MD		◆
Feng-Chun Yang, PhD	★	
Weixing Zhao, PhD		◆

So, what lies ahead? University and research operations in FY21 will continue to follow the safety [measures and precautions](#) implemented in FY20. Also, I do want to point out some new initiatives involving our external research partners that will certainly enable our investigators to engage in new collaborations in drug discovery, precision medicine, artificial intelligence (AI) and technology commercialization.

- The [San Antonio Partnership for Precision Therapeutics \(SAPPT\)](#) is a collaborative launched last fall among UT Health San Antonio, The University of Texas at San Antonio (UTSA), Texas BioMedical Research Institute(Texas Biomed), and Southwest Research Institute (SwRI®). Within the first 12 months, SAPPT has awarded multiple grants and offered its platform to accelerate COVID-19-related research.
- [UTSA AI Consortium for Human Well-Being Today](#) (MATRIX) is a new alliance focusing on four research theme areas: Machine learning, Trustworthy AI, Augmenting Human Capabilities (co- led by Paula Shireman, MD), and Neuroinspired AI (co-led by Peter Fox, MD).
- [Velocity Texas](#) is a subsidiary of the Texas Research Technology Foundation that provides seed funding to develop new ventures and biotechnologies. This innovation hub opened this past spring to support and advance the entrepreneurship ecosystem in our region.

Every organization, ours included, can only accomplish its mission when its employees are engaged and feel valued. Programs and resources to support our research community undoubtedly are important, but we also must not lose sight of fostering a culture of inclusion, diversity, and equality. I encourage you to visit the anti-racism [curated resources](#) available on the Office of Inclusion & Diversity website and listen to the remarks delivered by Ford Foundation President, Darren Walker, at the [Ewing Halsell Distinguished Lecture](#) entitled, “From Generosity to Justice: A New Gospel of Wealth”.

In closing, as a further point for reflection, I would like to re-share the Martin Luther King quote my colleague Ruth Berggren, MD, included in her introductory remarks at last week's distinguished lecture: "Of all the forms of inequality, injustice in health is the most shocking and the most inhuman because it often results in physical death."

With respect and gratitude,

Andrea Giuffrida

Figure 1 INFOGRAPHIC

