

CSSO COMMUNICATIONS

The Official Newsletter of the Chemistry Student Safety Organization



Image design: Elva Ye

UT Students Join the Fight to Beat COVID-19

by Juliette Strasser and Kanchan Aggarwal

Most graduate students will remember Spring 2020 as the semester they were forced to be out of lab. It may seem like there is no place for lab safety during a time when everyone is working from home. However, for some graduate students, a pivot to COVID-19 research or industry work means that safety is more important than ever for them.

Molly Blevins, a third-year graduate student in the Brodbelt group, has been working as a contractor in the manufacturing group at Thermo Fisher Scientific, supporting their scale-up in production of COVID-19 test kits. This contract work involves manufacturing test kit components, including formulation, filling, and packaging of reagents. Her shifts depend on the week and her graduate school workload. Sydney Povilaitis, a second-year graduate student in the Eberlin group, remains in her research lab on campus working on essential COVID-19 research. (Continued on page 3)

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by Mason Valentine and Adrian Rylski

Both near misses and incident reports can shed light on issues that lead to accidents and unsafe situations. By reporting a near miss or incident on the CSSO website, you can contribute to improving the safety culture and protect people working here from future incidents. These submissions are completely anonymous, meaning reporting can occur honestly without fear of repercussions.

To submit a report, use the QR code to the right or visit <https://sites.utexas.edu/csso/anonymous-reporting>.



QUARANTINE SAFETY QUOTE

"The future of the safety movement is not so much dependent upon the invention of safety devices as on the improvement of methods of educating people to the ideal of caution and safety."

- Walter Scott, President, Northwestern University (1921)

peer-to-Peer



Pizza Party!
(Eventually)

Crooks Group Wins Safest Lab in P2P Evaluations

by Audrey Fikes

The Peer-to-Peer (P2P) Lab Safety Evaluations held this last November through February concluded with the Crooks Group being named the Safest Lab and the Bard Group being recognized as The Most Improved Lab. Although all of the labs that participated in P2P were promised a pizza party, the plans have been delayed due to the shutdown caused by COVID-19. We hope to be able to provide the winners and all participants with their promised rewards once the need to enforce social distancing is no longer necessary. Until then, we want to thank all of the groups that participated in P2P and we hope to have even more labs participate the next time around.

UT Students Join the Fight to Beat COVID-19

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For Molly and Sydney, working during COVID-19 means that lab safety is more important than ever. Molly says that she does not specifically work with anything infectious, but that maintaining social distancing practices in the laboratory is crucial. About industry standards, Molly says, “industry manufacturing environments are already held to a very high standard of laboratory safety and cleanliness practices - mainly to avoid contamination of the reagents, but also to protect the lab employees.” Even before COVID-19, manufacturing workers were required to wear full gowns, safety glasses, face masks, hair nets, gloves and shoe covers. However, now safety practices are even more strict. Molly says that outside of the lab, use of company-provided cloth face masks is mandatory. Additionally, all employees have their temperatures taken every day prior to entering the building, and are required to wash their hands immediately upon entering the building.

Similarly, Sydney says that lab safety was already very important in their group, but now they have implemented “social distancing, limited personnel, more frequent surface sanitation, and contact tracing.”

This work, centered around preventing the spread of an infectious disease, has led to some changes in the lab safety culture both in industry and at UT. Molly and Sydney say that their perspectives have changed in a myriad of ways. Molly says that she has gained “an appreciation for the high standard of lab safety and cleanliness practices that exist in FDA-regulated laboratory environments.” She also has an increased “appreciation for the amount of flexibility” that has been displayed by these scientists in industry and academia who have “[modified] and [expanded] lab safety practices in order to accommodate this new variable [the emergence of a highly contagious virus].” Sydney notes that she finds herself washing her hands much more frequently, and is now much more aware of shared spaces in labs and grad offices. When they get back to their normal research at UT, they hope to bring some of these new perspectives back to their benches with them.

UT Austin Enters Phase 3 of Resuming Research

by Juliette Strasser and Audrey Fikes

As of Monday, UT Austin has begun implementing Phase 3 of their Six Phase plan to resume regular research operations. This includes an increase in workforce from 15-30% to 30-40% which will allow graduate students and post doctoral researchers who are close to completing their degree or term of appointment to return to the lab for research, albeit with strict social distancing guidelines in place. Although we cannot all return to our labs yet, when we do so, we must remember to practice good lab and overall safety habits according to CDC guidelines, including wearing face masks, changing gloves frequently, washing hands with soap and warm water for at least twenty seconds, and staying at least six feet apart from others.

As a reminder to her fellow graduate students, Molly Blevins from the Brodbelt group (see above article) says that she “would definitely emphasize the importance of planning experiments and experimental workflows ahead of time in a way that complies with laboratory safety practices,” as planning ahead can be a great strategy to prevent the spread of COVID. Sydney Povilaitis from the Eberlin lab (see above article) encourages graduate students and other research staff to “stay home if they are experiencing the symptoms of an infectious disease” even when the immediate threat of COVID-19 has passed. Sydney also reminds us: “Don’t be afraid to remind your labmates about social distancing, but also be forgiving and understand that we are all adjusting to a new reality.” Although this has been a stressful time, there are many important lessons about lab safety that we can learn from the pandemic.