

COVID-19 cases surge on college campuses as Yale administrator warns students to prepare for deaths

Matthew MacEgan, Genevieve Leigh
20 August 2020

A disastrous situation is unfolding on college and university campuses across the US as tens of thousands of students return to campuses for in-person learning each week.

After mere days of starting in-person courses this fall, several universities, including Princeton and the University of Southern California, have already been forced to hastily cancel or postpone their plans and reinstate online learning. On Tuesday, Notre Dame announced that it was moving all undergraduate classes to remote instruction for two weeks, and Michigan State asked undergraduates who planned to live in residence halls to stay home while they transition to remote formats.

The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, which did not conduct widespread testing prior to reopening last week, announced Monday that all undergraduate instruction would be moving online immediately. This move came after four separate outbreaks occurred on campus during opening week, leaving 130 students infected and several hundred more quarantined.

One administrator and professor at Yale University, Laurie Santos, the Head of Silliman College and a psychology professor, sent a chillingly honest email to campus residents this week telling them that they may be killed by COVID-19 while attending school this semester: “We all should be emotionally prepared for widespread infections—and possibly deaths—in our community. You should emotionally prepare for the fact that your residential college life will look more like a hospital unit than a residential college.”

Despite overwhelming scientific evidence and the most recent experiences of school like UNC-Chapel Hill and Notre Dame, scores of schools are still pushing forward with reopening plans. According to the College Crisis Initiative, a research project at Davidson College in North Carolina, more than 1,000 four-year colleges and universities in the United States planned to bring students back to campus in some form this fall, with 45 planning to operate “fully in

person.”

In Arizona, three major universities are beginning face-to-face instruction and filling up residential halls despite the state being considered a hot spot for the virus. While some are being tested for COVID-19 prior to their arrival on campus, others are not getting tested until after they have arrived. At Northern Arizona University, one resident assistant has already tested positive, requiring dozens of residents to be quarantined.

The State of Alabama is using its students as guinea pigs to carve out a back-to-school policy that can be used throughout the country to reopen face-to-face learning. UAB (University of Alabama at Birmingham) President Dr. Ray L. Watts bragged to reporters about GuideSafe this week, stating: “It’s this comprehensive plan that gives us confidence. If there’s a flare-up, a small one somewhere, we can find it early and we can quarantine, treat and reduce the exposure to others.”

The first UAB students to serve as test subjects for this system were its football players, who began returning to campus in June. Across the country, including at universities such as UNC-Chapel Hill where the semester has already begun with a disaster, student athletes are being required to put their health at higher risk so that big-business sporting events can still be held.

At Cornell University in Ithaca, New York, President Martha Pollack claimed that mathematical modeling suggests that reopening their campus will produce fewer COVID-19 cases. According to the very questionable model, a closed campus would result in many students living in shared housing in and around Ithaca, driving an outbreak of 7,200 new cases. The university is using this model to claim that the threat will be mitigated if students are on campus and being tested regularly, resulting in a mere 1,200 cases.

The scientific journal *Nature* published a news feature Monday, aptly describing the return to US universities for what it is: “a vast unplanned pandemic experiment.”

In response to outbreaks of the virus on campuses, colleges and universities have begun blaming the students, and some have even used the virus as an excuse to beef up campus police.

Boston College, for example, is hiring a Boston police detail to “keep an eye on and break up parties on Thursday, Friday, and Saturday nights,” according to City Councilor Liz Breadon, who represents the popular student neighborhoods of Allston and Brighton.

The University of Notre Dame spokesperson Paul Browne similarly implied that student behavior was the main factor in the spread of the virus, stating that an increase in cases at his university “was a reminder that its coronavirus plan would work only with total cooperation from students.”

Chastising a small group of 20 Albion students in Michigan who participated in a house party last week, the college president, Matthew Johnson, wrote in an email to a student: “This is exactly the type of behavior that has led to the shutdown of other campuses across the country.”

Responding to these developments, one Albion student, who wished to remain anonymous, told the WSWS about his experience returning to the campus: “I have felt a great deal of anxiety over the state of my and others’ health. Conditions did not start at a competent level when we returned early on the 12th, and things only continued to deteriorate as time went on.”

The student went on to explain that students have been kept in the dark as to any new infections.

Speaking directly about Johnson’s chastisement of the students for the small party, he said: “The inevitability of an outbreak under these conditions is apparent, completing debasing the near-sociopathic claims made by Dr. Matthew Johnson in his email yesterday. ... Albion is forcing us to play Russian roulette and blaming us for biting the bullet.

“Albion and Yale, like UNC and Notre Dame, will march forward, sacrificing students, staff, and faculty along the way, before an uncontrollable outbreak forces them to close, which only spreads the disease further as students return home across the world.”

A student and health care worker in Chicago explained the situation on her campus to WSWS reporters: “It’s sure as hell not safe. I firmly believe we need to shut down the campus. I feel like we need to shut down athletics as well. For students who need to live at school due to poor home lives, then, of course, they should be able to come to the dorms. But everyone else should stay off-campus.”

She continued, “Students who have unsafe homes and need to come to campus do genuinely need to have a safe campus to come to. But that means hiring more trained workers to keep dorms safe while shutting down the rest of the campus.”

When asked about teachers being forced back into unsafe schools she told WSWS, “Teachers are held up as role models for students—it’s hypocritical of admins to say all these things about healthy practices, doing your part, and COVID while staying safely at home *and* demanding that teachers be put in an unsafe position where it’s physically impossible to demonstrate/model best practices. We all need to support teachers organizing because that is the kind of ‘model citizen’ behavior we should be encouraging. After all, they teach that being a ‘model citizen’ includes being active for your rights and for progress. We should support teachers who are practicing what they teach.”

The same student told the WSWS that she has been forced to work overtime at her job as a medical worker on the campus-linked hospital with no overtime pay or hazard pay. “It is ridiculous in the sense that they are making me work OT and outside of my job scope, then getting angry that I’m working OT because they don’t want to pay extra/pay for benefits.”

Despite the irresponsibility of some students, the scapegoating of youth for the rise in COVID-19 cases is founded on a lie. The unbridled spread of COVID-19 is not the fault of a relatively small number of students but is a direct consequence of the criminal response of the American ruling class to the pandemic which has been entirely oriented to the whims of the financial and corporate elite.

The cost of this decision is now playing out in real time. It will result in more cases, more hospitalizations, and more death.

The Socialist Equality Party is organizing a fight back against the reckless reopening of schools. All educators, school workers, parents and students who support this initiative should join our Facebook page and contact us today to find out how to join our fight.

We will be hosting a national call-in meeting at 3:00 p.m. EDT (12:00 p.m. PDT) on Saturday, August 22, to discuss developments and the way forward. We urge you to make plans today to attend this vital meeting.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact