

Universities and colleges close across the US as COVID-19 disrupts the lives of millions of students

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Hundreds of universities and colleges around the United States have canceled in-person classes in an effort to prevent the spread of the coronavirus. A reported 520 campuses across 47 states shut down before Friday. For many students the shutdown comes just days before the spring semester recess.

University and college students in the United States are joining over 300 million students across Asia, Brazil, Iran and Europe to have their schooling affected by the spread of COVID-19, the illness caused by the novel coronavirus which first emerged late last year in China's Hubei province.

There is no doubt that school closures are a necessary and important measure from a public health standpoint. However, the haphazard manner in which these school closures have taken place is another stark indication of the complete lack of preparedness within the political establishment to handle a public health crisis of this magnitude. The consequences for workers, students and youth have already been immense.

Many universities followed the announcement to end in-person classes with a notification that students had to leave campus midweek, or in the most sudden cases within 24 hours. The University of California system was among the first to close down. They announced plans to close eight of their nine campuses by Thursday, just over a week before spring break, forcing the tens thousands of students with homes across the United States to hastily make arrangements for travel across the country.

In many cases little or no thought was given to what the implications would be for the tens of thousands of homeless and home-insecure students as well as hundreds of thousands of international students.

Alek, a student at the University of Dayton (UD) in Ohio, spoke to the WSWS about his experience with the school's sudden closure: "Lots of my friends had to kind of scramble to find ways home or places to stay since the school did not make it very easy to apply for an ability to stay on campus. And to put it into context the school owns most of the housing around the campus as well so I'd estimate anywhere from 80 to 90 percent of students live in school owned housing."

Alek expressed particular concern for low-income students: "Housing subsidies, for the unused housing that students have already paid for, have yet to be provided so low income students are really getting screwed... Ohio is a state with lots of rural poverty too and that's really endangering those kids who don't have great social nets near them."

He contrasted the lack of support for students with the enormous resources at the school, noting, "UD has an endowment over half a billion dollars."

Thousands of students are suffering from similar experiences. One Harvard student posted on Twitter, "72 hours Harvard told me to leave campus. My mom and I are homeless and I no longer have my term-time job I use to support my family." The full impact these measures will have on students and their families is yet to be determined.

International students face similar obstacles. At Princeton, classes were canceled preemptively on Monday and students told to leave before the end of the week, at first with no exceptions and also applying to the nearly two thousand international students.

By Wednesday morning, students had circulated a petition with over 4000 signatures calling for temporary options to be available for those on financial aid, those

with unstable home conditions and international students. The petition also raised the concern of sending international students home without testing them for the virus, especially those from both East Africa and East Asia, regions with no reported cases and regions with high risk travel warnings.

As one student wrote on Twitter, “I am signing because as an international student from 4000 miles away, I cannot travel on a whim back home.” This situation applies to most international students, particularly the hundreds of thousands of Indian and Chinese students studying in the United States, who would in addition have to log into online classes in the middle of the night local time. Other students expressed concern if their American visas would even allow them to continue officially studying in different countries.

Some universities and schools have already decided to suspend classes for the rest of the semester, including the State University of New York (SUNY) and City University of New York (CUNY) systems and Temple University in New Jersey. Hundreds of thousands of students trying to pack up and leave campus within a week has caused immense anxiety and confusion on the campuses. For these schools with mostly in-state residents, the move also means that parents and student workers have to take time off from their jobs to spend a day packing and driving home.

Rutgers University closed campus a day early on Thursday after trying to switch to online classes in the middle of the week, a move which many universities are attempting to implement in order to keep education disruptions to a minimum.

Already there are growing concerns from students about the quality of learning online, often taking place in bedrooms and living rooms. Students are also forced to rely on their personal technology and varying levels of access to the internet in their homes.

Over the last week, the transition to online class for grade school students in Seattle forced the city’s Department of Education to provide Wi-Fi routers to dozens of households who didn’t previously own one. A similar crisis will be met by tens of thousands of college students without Wi-Fi routers in their homes or who are in more precarious situations.

At the Robert Wood Johnson University Hospital in the city of New Brunswick, the related hospital for Rutgers-New Brunswick’s health department and

nursing school, nursing and pharmaceutical students that normally would have worked over the spring break were asked to continue coming into the hospital and connected labs. EMT nursing trainees were also asked to work over the break to build up their training hours but forcing students to either commute for early morning or night shifts, or scramble for the limited housing available over the spring break period.

Nursing students have reportedly been told that this will be a learning experience like no other.

While there is certainly much confusion among students, youth and workers regarding the political and social causes and consequences of the crisis, there is also an immense level of anger with the current state of affairs.

Alek told our reporters that he thought the response from the Trump administration was very poor so far: “His CDC’s initial test failed. They de facto banned private testing from being rolled out until after the CDC had a working one. The travel ban from Europe is stupid if American citizens cannot come back, but regardless no travel ban would ever work... I’m not optimistic.”

One student from University of Maryland, Kelly, told the WSWS, “What is taking place is the beginning of a complete catastrophe. People will die because of how unprepared the political figures have been on these issues. If they think the whole world does not see this, they have another thing coming.”



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