

As schools close down amid COVID-19 pandemic

## Marist and SUNY Geneseo students face homelessness

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On March 16, Marist, a private liberal arts college in Poughkeepsie, New York, informed students that it was closing school housing due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The announcement made clear that international students as well as students with extenuating circumstances would be granted permission to stay.

A little over a week later, on March 25, students who had been given permission to stay were suddenly informed that they would be forced to vacate their residences within 48 hours. In an email to the students who had remained in school, housing vice president for student affairs, Deborah DiCaprio, stated that “it is no longer possible for you to remain in the residence hall.” Outside of a vague reference to Governor Andrew Cuomo’s executive order no. 202, no further explanation was given for the sudden shift.

The abrupt decision to evacuate school housing left many vulnerable students in precarious situations. Many are now forced to decide between homelessness and returning to an unsafe household. International students have been forced to arrange last minute flights to their home countries under conditions in which many have instituted strict travel restrictions.

The crisis that has emerged at schools and colleges around the country in the face of this pandemic has laid bare the harsh realities of life for millions of youth and students, many of whom rely on colleges and universities for housing, food and health services, including mental health.

The WSWWS reported last month that Pomona College in California denied 70 percent of housing requests, forcing students to leave their residences, pushing several into homelessness. Likewise, University of

Dayton students were given 24 hours to vacate their student housing on March 10.

Ashley, a senior at Marist College, spoke about the impact of the evictions on student life: “Marist has had a very chaotic and mismanaged response to the pandemic.

“The week before spring break began, they made the decision to extend our break by one week, like many colleges did. Three days into spring break, we got an email that said classes were going online for the rest of the semester. When that original email was sent, they had not solidified a plan for students to move out yet and there were no instructions for residents who did not have the ability to leave.”

Ashley explained that students who wanted to be approved to remain in housing were instructed to send an email request to Housing, however many had still not received a response by the March 29 deadline.

“That Monday, one week after the original email was received,” Ashley continued, “some students who were residing on campus were told they needed to be completely moved out by that Wednesday, March 25, at noon. This was less than 48 hours notice. Students contested this and were denied housing despite saying they are homeless.

“That same Monday I sent a second email to Housing and the next day was ‘approved’ to remain in campus housing past March 29. On Wednesday, I was sent another email saying that I needed to be moved out by Friday, again, 48 hours notice.”

Ashley is unable to return home out of fear of abuse and has relied on Marist for year-round housing since her sophomore year. She and her friend Alex are now effectively homeless. Like thousands of other students

around the country, Ashley has had to rely on couch surfing with friends and extended family to find shelter. In total, 91 Marist students have been forced to leave their residences, including 46 international students who had originally been told that they would be allowed to stay on campus.

A similar situation has taken place at schools across the state and around the country. Katharine, a Junior chemistry major at SUNY Geneseo, was told to vacate her campus housing despite her appeals to stay. On March 21 she was notified by the school that she had 24 hours to leave her dorm. Like many students, she has been unable to return home. Her family is currently under mandatory quarantine and to return at this time would certainly put her health and the health of her family at risk. When Katharine informed the school of her situation she was told that the school's "medical director is still saying that people in this situation should go home."

Dutchess County, where Marist College is located and where Katherine is from, has one of the highest concentrations of coronavirus cases outside of the New York City metropolitan area and has a confirmed case in every municipality. Forcing students into these conditions, particularly when they are homeless, is a criminal act and an assault on the working class.

Annual costs at Marist and Geneseo amount to roughly \$62,000 and \$20,000 respectively. There is no reason to believe that Marist and Geneseo cannot provide for its students. When asked what she thought about the argument that there is no money for education, Ashley responded: "I believe that after all of the pandemonium, the argument can't be made that the money isn't there. Trillions of dollars came out of thin air by the federal government [for the corporate stimulus]. Whether we're talking about grade school or college, there is not enough money put into these establishments by the federal government. States are left to fund public education and they just don't have the funds.

"When it comes to private schools, such as Marist, I believe that the money is indeed there. Given how much we pay in tuition, the ability for a quality experience and housing as a right is there.

"It seems to me that there is a trend among higher education that money is the most important thing, even above the well-being of the students that attend that

institution...

"There are other housing options that Marist could have provided to students with nowhere to go, but instead, they decided against it and tried to kick everyone out. I mean, for Pete's sake, Marist owns a hotel that they easily could have put students up in and STILL turned the residence halls into hospitals. They just wanted to cut their costs and make the most profit while avoiding any liability."

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