

Georgia Tech faculty, students and parents express opposition to school reopening

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13 July 2020

Despite the surging number of coronavirus cases in the state of Georgia, especially over the past couple of months, the authorities are rushing ahead to reopen public colleges and universities for the upcoming fall semester in August. The spike in COVID-19 cases over the past couple of months follow Republican Governor Brian Kemp, a close ally of President Trump, directing businesses and industries to reopen in late April and early May.

The Georgia Department of Health projects that by July 19 the number of confirmed COVID-19 cases will be over 111,000, with 2,965 deaths, close to 13,000 hospitalizations and at least 2,565 intensive care admissions.

The reopening plans in Georgia come within the context of the Trump administration loudly pushing for the reopening of industries, businesses and schools in order to push ahead with its plans for “herd immunity,” an outlook that advocates the homicidal policy of exposing tens and even hundreds of millions to the virus causing COVID-19, to supposedly create immunity within the population.

The normal reopening of schools, especially without corresponding public health preparations, would not only expose students, faculty and their family members to the threat of contracting the COVID-19 disease. It could well result in numerous deaths as the state’s medical facilities, overwhelmingly private, are close to collapse from surging hospitalization.

This decision to reopen has provoked widespread opposition among the faculty, students and parents of the Georgia Institute of Technology (Georgia Tech), one of the country’s premier public universities.

Around 870 of approximately 1,200 faculty and staff, with the support of over 1,900 students and parents, released an open letter dated July 2 expressing their

outrage at the authorities’ open indifference to the overwhelming scientific evidence of the danger posed by the highly contagious coronavirus. They also oppose the autocratic way this decision has been made by the board of regents, a governor-appointed bureaucratic body of 19 people who oversee Georgia’s public university system.

The faculty at Georgia Tech have also been told that they would have to be 65 or older, or have one of seven specific health conditions, such as diabetes or chronic lung disease, to qualify for teaching remotely.

The letter, Statement of Academic Faculty of Georgia Tech on the COVID-19 Crisis and Fall 2020 Semester, was first reported on the website of the Georgia Public Broadcasting (GPB) television station.

Taking issue with the authorities’ blatantly anti-scientific attitude, the faculty wrote: “We are alarmed to see the Board of Regents and the University System of Georgia mandating procedures that do not follow science-based evidence, increase the health risks to faculty, students, and staff, and interfere with nimble decision-making necessary to prepare and respond to COVID-19 infection risk.”

Among those signing the letter are world renowned professors and researchers in several different fields.

The letter also goes on to demand that no “faculty, staff, or student should be coerced into risking their health and the health of their families by working and/or learning on campus when there is a remote/online equivalent.”

The *New York Times* reported on July 3 that faculty members across the country are expressing opposition to school mandates that instructors teach in person in crowded classrooms. More and more universities are pushing ahead to reopen as they are desperately trying to make up a shortfall in their funds as state

governments deeply cut budget allocations to both public universities and kindergarten to 12th grade school systems. The universities hope to collect the numerous fees, such as for parking, athletics and the highest amount for tuition, which they will not be able to collect if classes are shifted to online learning.

This is also the reason why international students, a lucrative source of revenue for US universities, have been threatened by the Trump administration with deportation if they do not enroll for physical attendance of courses.

In early May, the Georgia Board of Regents announced on their website that the “USG (University System of Georgia) is working now with its 26 colleges and universities to develop a new spending plan for fiscal year 2021 that includes a 14% reduction from the current fiscal year.”

In contrast to their rush to reopen campuses, the board has not announced even minimal preparations for testing, contact tracing and quarantining of the infected. As the number of infected skyrockets in the state, Georgia’s hospitals are becoming overwhelmed due to critical shortages of hospital beds and intensive care units (ICUs). This in turn means that the required medical care not only for COVID-19 patients, but to those suffering from other acute diseases, would be unavailable, inevitably leading to needless deaths.

When the campus reopening plans were first announced about a month and a half ago, face masks were mandated only for faculty members but not for students, who were merely “strongly encouraged” to do so. This was more than likely a transparent attempt to facilitate the Trump administration’s “herd immunity” policy by exposing the younger student population to the coronavirus. After outrage by faculty members, students and parents, the Board of Regents reversed itself, requiring the wearing of masks by students on campus.

Many faculty members are facing harrowing decisions. Those who are on contract are afraid to speak out against reopening as they fear their contracts will not be renewed.

In its July 3 article, the *Times* gave the example of tenured professor Anna Curtis, an associate professor of criminology at the State University of New York, Cortland. Being the mother of a four-year-old son, she was concerned about scrambling to find other care if

her child was sent home early from his current daycare if he caught a cold or exhibited other such symptoms. When she requested permission to teach her course remotely, she was denied permission, with the Human Resources department callously telling her that caring for a child was not a sufficiently valid reason.

In the letter released by the Georgia Tech faculty, their first demand is to “Empower the President of Georgia Tech to act independently to safeguard the health and safety needs of the Georgia Tech community, informed by scientific evidence.”

It needs to be forewarned that such a demand would be self-defeating since the president of Georgia Tech, who is paid over a million dollars a year, is beholden to the Board of Regents. Instead, the Georgia Tech faculty should reach out to their colleagues, students and parents at other universities to take the decision-making about how to deliver lessons and other related education matters entirely into their own hands.



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