

UNC Chapel Hill, Notre Dame and Michigan State University forced to revert to online learning after COVID-19 outbreaks

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Only one week after beginning the fall semester with in-person classes on August 10, the University of North Carolina (UNC) at Chapel Hill became the first major college to pivot to online classes after reopening in person. This shift comes after the university announced at least four clusters of outbreaks of COVID-19 in student living spaces.

UNC-Chapel Hill, which enrolls approximately 30,000 students, was one of the first and largest universities in the United States to bring students back to campus for in-person classes at the end of the summer term. It is serving as a test case for other large institutions around the country that plan on resuming face-to-face instruction over the coming months.

On Tuesday, two other leading universities, Notre Dame and Michigan State University, announced they would also be reverting to online learning because of outbreaks.

At Notre Dame's campus 12,000 undergraduate and graduate students were tested before they could return to campus on August 3 to start classes a week later. At the time, a few dozen tested positive and were told to stay home. Despite these efforts, by Tuesday the school reported that at least 147 people had tested positive for the virus over the last two weeks.

UNC Chapel Hill reported 130 new student cases of COVID-19 during its first week, more than one thousand percent higher than the ten it reported on campus during the week prior to reopening. As of Monday, 177 students had been isolated after testing, and another 349 students are in quarantine because of possible exposure.

No doubt influenced by the unfolding disasters they were seeing at other campuses, Michigan State University announced on Tuesday that they would be shifting their reopening plans, telling students not to return for the start of classes in two weeks.

It has become quite clear that the experiences at UNC-Chapel Hill and Notre Dame are not the exception, but the rule. The reopening of college campuses is proving to have

disastrous health consequences.

University administrations that have experienced outbreaks are now working around the clock to do damage control.

UNC Chancellor Kevin Guskiewicz and Provost Robert Blouin wrote in a statement on Monday, "As much as we believe we have worked diligently to help create a healthy and safe campus living and learning environment, we believe the current data presents an untenable situation. The health and safety of our campus community are paramount."

Guskiewicz told reporters that his university attempted to comply with Orange County recommendations, but the UNC system, whose board of governors is elected by North Carolina lawmakers, decided that all of its universities would open for in-person classes for the fall semester.

The fact of the matter is that the drive to reopen schools and campuses at every level is a central element of the campaign to reopen the economy and force workers back to work. This campaign is being spearheaded by the Trump administration and backed by the Democratic Party.

The reopening of schools goes against all scientific evidence. There is broad opposition to this homicidal policy among workers and youth.

In fact, local health officials in Orange County, where UNC-Chapel Hill is located, advised the school in July to start the semester with online instruction for *at least five weeks*. They also recommended that student housing be limited to those most in need. On July 30, a group of UNC-Chapel Hill tenured faculty wrote an open letter to undergraduate students, imploring them to stay home and protect themselves from COVID-19.

Despite these appeals and the clear scientific evidence, the school moved ahead with reopening.

It should also be noted that student-athletes at UNC Chapel Hill will remain in student housing and continue to engage in "workouts and practices ... under the standards set by our university, health officials, and department,"

according to a statement from the athletic department. “We are expecting to play this fall.” Apparently, sports rise to a higher level in the eyes of the administration than student health.

Similar developments have taken place in sports departments in schools around the country. College athletics in America are a multi-billion-dollar business, with attendance and revenues equal to and, in some cases, greater than professional competitions. Top football coaches make salaries similar to those of CEOs of Fortune 500 companies.

Many other universities that planned to bring students back to campuses this fall have also canceled or at least heavily modified those plans over the past few weeks. There are still, however, hundreds of universities that plan to go ahead with plans to reopen in person in the coming weeks.

As the *World Socialist Web Site* warned weeks ago, administrations are already seeking to blame students for inevitable COVID-19 outbreaks. At Albion College in Michigan, President Matthew Johnson wrote a letter Tuesday referencing an off-campus party of 20 Albion College students that was reported to public safety officers, stating: “This is exactly the type of behavior that has led to the shutdown of other campuses across the country.”

The campuses Johnson explicitly mentioned in the letter were UNC-Chapel Hill and Notre Dame University. There has, however, been no evidence reported that student parties were to blame for the multiple outbreaks at either university. Notre Dame University spokesperson Paul Browne also implied that students were at fault for the spike in cases at his school. He said last week that the increase in cases “was a reminder that its coronavirus plan would work only with total cooperation from students.”

The attempt to blame students for these disasters is nothing short of criminal. In fact, there is a mountain of evidence to show that students, faculty and staff are taking the pandemic much more seriously than many of the school administrations. At least 16 workers on UNC campuses are suing the schools for working conditions that put them “at an increased risk of exposure to COVID-19.” According to the plaintiffs, “Everyone involved in making the decision to reopen these campuses did so with the knowledge that it places these employees at a greater risk of exposure to COVID-19 than they would have otherwise been exposed to.”

Earlier in August, dozens of UNC-Chapel Hill students protested plans to reopen by staging a “die-in” on campus. They lay on the ground outside of the South Building on August 6 and called for the university to operate online during the pandemic, citing the Orange County recommendations.

One student told a reporter, “We know that there will be

an outbreak on campus. Campus workers will get sick and some of them will die. Students, community members, faculty and staff all will get sick and potentially die.”

Another student declared that “the architecture is set up to spread the pandemic. There’s simply no way to safely handle that density of students. The administration can pretend that it’ll be students’ fault for not following their guidelines, but the fact is that they’re creating a situation where thousands of students will be in dorms, students will be in dining halls, and they’ll be in classes which are also poorly ventilated.”

David Brannigan, a groundskeeper who works on campus, also spoke at the August 6 protest: “I think the most disappointing thing to me is the absolute abdication of leadership responsibilities by Chancellor Guskiewicz. It seems to me that you should be listening to the director of Orange County Health. If you’re not listening to [her], you’re listening to the wrong people.”

The truth is that the reopening of schools is the official policy of the American government, both Democrat and Republican. The response of the ruling class during the pandemic has been entirely oriented to the whims of the financial and corporate elite. After implementing a brief lockdown and securing a multi-trillion-dollar handout for the wealthy, states and the federal government prematurely reopened the economy to ensure the extraction of profit from the working class could continue unabated. But to fully open the economy requires the opening of schools, which will inevitably result in a surge in COVID-19 infections and deaths.

*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.*



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