

First week back on campus amid the COVID-19 pandemic: A US college student's first-hand account

An Albion College student
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Schools and universities across the US are reopening for in-person classes amid the raging COVID-19 pandemic. Outbreaks on college campuses where students have returned have already forced some colleges to cancel in-person classes and switch to online learning. The experiments at UNC and Notre Dame show the inevitability of outbreaks on reopened campuses is the rule, not an exception.

Albion College—a small, private liberal arts college located in Albion, Michigan—is one of those colleges which has already brought students back to campus. An Albion student, who wishes to remain anonymous, has documented his first week after returning to campus in a diary.

Albion promised a safe return with the installation of automatic doors, a testing routine for students and staff and sanitization. But his experience reveals a different picture, one of unsanitary rooms, a lack of sanitization supplies, failing protocols and a testing regime full of holes.

This student's account provides just one example of what is taking place on college campuses throughout the country.

The WSWs urges college students, faculty and staff to contact us and tell us your school reopening story. Sign up for the WSWs Educators Newsletter and help build the Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee.

Day 1, 12 days until classes start

Date: 12/08/2020

I arrived at Albion in the morning with my father and sister who would help me move in. A series of tents had been set-up for check-in.

At one station, I received a fabric mask and a bag filled with one digital thermometer, two pairs of thin plastic gloves, a small bottle of hand sanitizer, and one disposable paper mask. I then completed a nostril swab test. I expected to receive the results at the end of the day but did not. I should note that my father and sister were not tested, only receiving screening, which does not account for asymptomatic cases.

Finishing check-in, we drove to the Seaton dorm hall where I would be moving in and living with a roommate presumably until late November when classes end.

Inside the dorm building we found tight, crowded hallways which lacked proper air circulation. There were large groups unable to social distance and some individuals not wearing masks. The elevators were off-line due to social distancing, making the thin stairwells the only way for me to reach my dorm on the top floor.

Later, once I was alone in my room, I noticed how filthy the room was. I found dirt, dust and grime in every corner of the room and around furniture. My only "assurance" that the room had in fact been cleaned came from a sticker on the door indicating that staff had "cleaned" it days prior.

Exploring the rest of the dorm building later in the day, I discovered that there is only one water fountain, meaning that it will become a hot spot for

potential infections.

The laundry room, which only had a few machines operational and will likely not be disinfected regularly, will probably be another point of infection.

Finally, there are the shared bathrooms and showers, which already showed signs of uncleanness. I have serious concerns over my safety when using the stalls and the cramped showers given that these facilities are fully public and only cleaned once a day. The sinks were also not updated with sensor activations, meaning spread is possible from the handles as well.

Day 2, 11 days until classes start

Date: 13/08/2020

Today is my first full day of living on campus. At noon, I entered the dining hall where a staff member sitting behind a plastic barrier directed me to follow a line of "six-feet apart" stickers on the ground. Currently, all students must choose a to-go meal option until classes start.

But, already, students are eating in groups. The administration expected students to get their food and eat alone in their dorm rooms. In other words, they expected students to act like machines for the whole semester.

Later in the day, I happened upon a poster advertising a scavenger hunt for roommates in which they would travel around campus looking for locations to photograph. While Albion asks students to stay as isolated as possible before classes begin, they, at the same time, actively encourage students to freely walk around campus.

Day 3, 10 days until classes start

Date: 14/08/2020

I finally received my test results today, and I tested negative for the virus. Of course, it is possible that I and others on campus have already been exposed to the virus since getting tested.

However, I received an alarming email from Albion's president announcing a positive case on campus. The email didn't give any information as to whether the person was a staff member or student, or what dorm they lived in if they were the latter. It only stated the person never came in contact with anyone longer than fifteen minutes in the last 14 days (no closer than six-feet with or without a mask), which I assume the school expects us to think means that no one has been exposed.

Recently, I've noticed in the past few days a growing concern among those on campus regarding the app called Aura which Albion is using for contact tracing. Students have raised concerns over the app's invasive big-brother style tracking of users' locations. While contract tracing is necessary, I am alarmed at the potential the app has for enforcing a jail-life environment for students on campus.

Day 4, 9 days until classes start

Date: 15/08/2020

Albion's president informed us again by email that another infection has

appeared on campus. This time, however, the administration admitted that the positive individual had come into contact with other members of the community.

As expected, the administration failed again to provide any information on the identity, living location, travel locations or occupation of the infected individual. The same is the case for those whom the school has identified as exposed individuals, who will be contacted secretly by the school. This secretive process is keeping vital health information from students, faculty and staff.

Given the speed and lack of understanding of the spread on campus, I don't think it's out of bounds to say Albion is in the early stages of an outbreak. While those who know they are infected will remain in quarantine rooms on campus for 14 days, others unknowingly exposed to the virus are spreading the virus further than administrators and students are aware.

If a widespread outbreak occurs and the school decides then to shut down the campus, presumably, all students face bringing the virus home with them. My mother is over 50 and suffers from asthma, making her at risk of severe health repercussions if infected. I'm sure I'm not the only one in this situation, and I can't imagine the devastation this will cause, all of which we could have been avoided with online learning.

It is alarming that cases are rising this early when classes have not even started yet, most of which will be in-person. Whether infections are spreading primarily among the student or staff body will not matter once the two collide in classrooms five days a week, starting on the 24th.

Day 5, 8 days until classes start

Date: 16/08/2020

There have been no new announcements of new COVID-19 cases on campus, and, perhaps more critically, no word on the scale or spread of currently announced cases. The student body, and presumably the faculty and staff, have been left in the dark by the administration.

I have come across new advertisements for in-person events today, this time a flowerpot planting. Once again, I cannot wrap my brain around the contorted and dangerous logic on display in these ads. The school is publicly advising students to stay safe, socially isolated, and not gather with their peers, and yet they promote activities violating all three.

By bringing students back to campus, they were already playing Russian roulette, and these advertisements are essentially encouraging students to put another bullet in the cylinder.

Day 6, 7 days until classes start

Date: 17/08/2020

Things are continuing to deteriorate. For instance, while the school should be refilling hand-sanitizer dispensers regularly, today, I noticed most were running empty in my dorm building. I also saw paper towels empty in the bathroom.

In an email I was sent today, the president reinforced the narrative of student responsibility for controlling the spread of the pandemic, stating, "It will take ALL of us working together to be able to remain at home on campus for the semester," adding, "following the Together Safely protocols and policies is both an individual and community responsibility."

The president also revealed the school's growing fears of their policies falling apart:

I want to acknowledge that over the last few weeks, inaccurate, misleading, and, in some cases, false information about the Together Safely plan has been shared. Some have tried to encourage the press to investigate our approach to suggest we are incapable of being together safely. Others have suggested reporting violations of our Together Safely protocols and policies to the Calhoun Department of Public Health (DPH). I hope that

you will join me in showing them we can, and will, succeed.

Day 7, 6 days until classes start

Date: 18/08/2020

The president of Albion released another statement today blaming students for potential outbreaks on campus after two incidents, a small party and a gathering near the dining hall, occurred. The introduction of the email directly referenced the administration's real fear, a campus shutdown, as it referenced outbreaks at the University of North Carolina Chapel Hill and Notre Dame.

The president, gaslighting students, stated that two incidents involving Albion students risked "undermining public trust in a way that could lead to the Calhoun County Health Department or the Governor's office ordering us to close." This comment reinforces the fact that the administration's focus is not on our safety, but whether or not they can remain open and continue to draw in revenue from students.

He then vaguely expresses that the administration will punish violators of protocol: "Students who are alleged to have violated College standards, including our public health protocols, are subject to the College's judicial process."

This last message only makes clear that if we bite the bullet during their forced game of Russian roulette and contract COVID-19, we will be the ones to blame.

Unquestionably, there is growing distrust and discontent among students. I found a petition online calling for the "safe reopening" of Albion, which includes the expansion of online learning options, lower costs, and the improvement of assistance from the college administration. While it is lacking in a few areas (e.g., not calling for a shutdown of in-person living and learning, not mentioning the safety of faculty and staff, and veering into identity politics), the petition has attracted nearly 200 signatories (one-tenth of the student population), most of them from today.

If Albion refuses to close before an outbreak occurs and forces a shutdown, the virus will run rampant throughout the campus. When a shutdown finally does happen, students will return to their homes across the country and internationally, spreading the virus further. My fear of bringing the virus home to my high-risk mother may soon become a reality if Albion is not closed immediately.



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