

New COVID-19 cases skyrocket at University of Alabama and University of North Carolina

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The disastrous situation that began unfolding on college and university classes across the US earlier this month has continued unabated, with several universities reporting spikes in new COVID-19 cases where face-to-face learning is taking place.

On Monday, the University of Alabama (UA) system reported 566 new cases of COVID-19 since classes reopened last Wednesday, 531 of which occurred at its Tuscaloosa campus. This number is in addition to approximately 310 positive cases reported during the “re-entry” phase of returning students to campus, bringing the total of new cases this month close to 900, about three percent of university’s nearly 30,000 student population.

The UA system previously announced that re-entry testing for students yielded less than a one percent positivity rate, but its dashboard pegs the positive test rate at 1.04 percent for its Tuscaloosa campus, which has the largest number of students. These percentages do not yet include the 566 new cases reported over the past week.

The University of North Carolina (UNC) at Chapel Hill has also seen a massive increase in new cases despite the fact that the university shut down the campus for face-to-face learning last week. The school reported Monday that 31.3 percent of students tested for COVID-19 last week returned positive results. There have been 835 cases since February, and 646 of those were reported after the first day of in-person classes on August 10.

UNC reported a total of 10 clusters at its Chapel Hill campus, each of which represents five or more cases in close proximity. Across the UNC system, more than 1,500 students have tested positive for COVID-19 since the spring.

While many universities are experiencing a similar explosion in new cases as they reopen their campuses for face-to-face learning, the case of UA is especially significant, since Alabama has used its students as test subjects for a wider national reopening of universities and schools. Just last week, the president of UA in Birmingham, Dr. Ray L. Watts, was bragging about the state’s new federally-funded GuideSafe program, which he said “gives us confidence [that] if there’s a flare-up... we can find it early and we can quarantine, treat and reduce the exposure to others.”

Objective events have exposed the role that Watts and other school administrators are playing: reopening universities and sacrificing the lives of students, faculty and staff. Programs like GuideSafe are put in place not to protect students, but to allow administrators and lawmakers to wash their hands of the consequences of reopening.

While many university administrators have begun blaming students for increases in new cases at universities, UA President Stuart Bell has insisted on the opposite. He said, “Our challenge is not the students. Our challenge is the virus, and there’s a difference, folks... It’s how do we have protocols so that we make it to where our students can be successful, and we can minimize the impact of the virus.”

The protocols that Bell discussed included setting up isolation spaces and disciplining violations of COVID-19 mandates. What is not included is the closing of UA campuses and moving to remote forms of learning. The UA system dashboard, which does not reflect the giant increase in cases over the past week, shows that about 20 percent of the “isolation space” was already occupied at the Tuscaloosa campus prior to this new upsurge in cases.

Dr. Ricky Friend, dean of the UA College of Community Health Sciences, told reporters that while isolation and quarantine spaces were not yet at capacity, “we are concerned that each day that goes by, there might be new cases.” Friend reported that UA was working on getting additional space on top of the 450 beds that are already in place to isolate and quarantine students, a number which is only about half of the 900 cases reported overall this month by UA.

Despite Bell’s supposed defense of students at UA, his general response to the increase in new cases has consisted in targeting students rather than installing more protections and safer infrastructure.

The 566 new COVID-19 cases were reported just a few hours after the City of Tuscaloosa announced that it will be closing bars for the next two weeks and that bar service at restaurants must cease. Bell wrote in a letter to students that university police and the Tuscaloosa Police Department would monitor bars, restaurants and off-campus residences to enforce university guidelines. On Friday, UA announced a 14-day moratorium on all in-person student events outside of

classroom instruction.

Other universities across the US are following suit. Ohio State University announced recently that it had issued 228 interim suspensions for individuals and student organizations that had attended or hosted large parties and gatherings in the university district. Boston College also recently announced that it will utilize the Boston police to watch and break up parties in and around its campus.

Alabama has recorded more than 117,000 cases of COVID-19 and has a death toll of 2,024, placing it fourteenth among US states. Alabama Governor Kay Ivey praised both the mayor of Tuscaloosa and university officials for “acting swiftly.” Tuscaloosa Mayor Walt Maddox, a Democrat, stated at a press conference, “My hope is that this will be just a brief pause on their plans to reopen and that we can get this in our rearview mirror sooner, rather than later.”

Other universities around the US that have experienced increases in COVID-19 cases include the University of South Carolina (USC), which recently placed two buildings in its Greek Village under quarantine. The university currently reports that there are 44 active student cases and two active faculty cases. Since August 10, when testing at USC began, a total of 90 students and 10 faculty have tested positive for the virus.

The University of Southern California is also reporting an “alarming increase” in the number of COVID-19 cases among students. It identified 43 cases and has placed more than 100 students in a 14-day quarantine due to exposures. The university resumed instruction almost entirely online beginning August 17 and is limiting access to campus, but many students remain in private apartments and houses off campus, where they are still susceptible to the virus.

Towson University in Baltimore County, Maryland decided to temporarily move to online classes after 55 people tested positive for COVID-19 on campus over two days last week. Princeton University, the University of South California and the University of Notre Dame all either postponed or cancelled face-to-face instruction last week.

While university administrators and lawmakers have continued to keep campuses open in many cases, students, faculty and other staff have continued to protest the reopening measures.

Students and faculty at Temple University in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania protested the first day of fall semester classes on Monday. One student told reporters, “This last weekend was really honestly terrifying, and we don’t know what the rest of the school year is going to look like, but if it’s any predictor, it’s going to be bad.”

A group of graduate students at Ohio State University protested the return to campus Tuesday, bringing a car caravan to circle the campus in Columbus followed by a socially distanced rally around Bricker Hall. The graduate students issued demands, including the right to opt out of all in-person

activities during the pandemic, the reinstatement of cost-of-living adjustments and a meeting with administrators to discuss their demands.

More than 300 University of Georgia (UGA) faculty members signed a column published by the student newspaper last week criticizing the university’s plans for reopening. A model created by John Drake, director of the UGA Center for the Ecology of Infectious Diseases, predicts that hundreds of students were already infected with COVID-19 prior to their arrival on campus and that these will spread the virus to tens of thousands of other students, faculty and staff within the next two months.

Drake wrote: “The resumption of in-person instruction at the University of Georgia is unwise. It is not grounded in evidence nor in the recent experience of other peer universities. Regardless of the precautions taken by the University on campus, both projections and experience suggest that a widespread outbreak of COVID-19 is inevitable unless there is an immediate change in plans for the fall semester.”

University of Michigan (UM) professors are similarly opposing the August 31 reopening of their campus in Ann Arbor. A few dozen professors and community members gathered outside of the Fleming Administration Building last Wednesday to protest.

Kento Toyama, a professor at UM’s School of Information, who organized the protest, told reporters: “We just don’t understand the underlying, true motivation for the decision to reopen. I don’t think anybody other than the university administration—and even then, probably not most people—fully understand the reasons.”

The underlying motivation, which the *World Socialist Web Site* has outlined numerous times this year, is that the reopening of schools is the official policy of the American government and both big business parties, Democrats and Republicans. The policy of the ruling class, which university administrators and state lawmakers are carrying out, is to fully open the economy, which requires the opening of schools. The inevitable surge of COVID-19 infections and deaths is already underway.



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