

University of Florida graduate residents expose plans to quarantine COVID-19 victims in family housing

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Students who oppose the reopening of face-to-face instruction during the pandemic should join the University of Florida chapter of the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) or contact the national IYSSE leadership to learn how to build a chapter at their campus.

Many universities across the United States opened for face-to-face learning in August, putting the health and lives of students, faculty, and staff in danger by facilitating the spread of COVID-19. This includes the University of Florida (UF), located in Gainesville, where administrators have been exposed for secretly designating vacant apartments in Graduate and Family Housing (GFH) villages to quarantine positive cases of COVID-19.

On August 22, an online petition was launched by GFH residents, opposing what they then only suspected was a discreet attempt by the university to prepare quarantine spaces within five family apartment complexes that are owned by UF.

Residents who observed suspicious behavior, such as UF workers moving basic furniture into empty apartments that were supposed to be vacant, had already called and emailed the UF Department of Housing & Residence but received no response prior to the petition being launched.

Within a few hours, hundreds of residents and their families had signed, and this precipitated the housing department finally responding with a letter addressed to the writers of the petition confirming their suspicions. The letter was also an attempt to downplay their understandable anger and anxiety. They claimed that the GFH villages would only be used “in the last extremity.”

“When residents heard the news,” the updated petition currently explains, “many were alarmed, particularly since the coronavirus is known to be far more virulent than seasonal influenza. There was no public announcement or consultation about the plan or indeed concern for the views of residents.”

Many of the families who take up residence in these facilities are international students who are bringing their families from abroad. This means that while such families have already been anxious over the uncertainties linked to the Trump administration’s efforts to crack down on student visas, they

also must now be hyper aware of their family living spaces potentially becoming hotbeds for COVID-19 cases.

Like most universities around the country, UF shifted classes online and closed residence halls in March due to mounting pressure from workers and students around the country. However, the university began reopening the campus on June 12, in their own words, “pursuant to the Board of Governor’s *Blueprint for Opening the State University System for the Fall Semester 2020*.” This of course refers to the policies of Florida Governor Ron DeSantis, an outspoken supporter of US President Donald Trump.

The official policy being pursued by UF officials can only be described as a “herd immunity” strategy. Associate Professor Michael Lauzardo, who is the director of the new “UF Health Screen, Test & Protect” initiative, wrote in a letter published on the UF Health website on August 25, “Having cases on campus, and in every segment of society for that matter is, has been, and will be inevitable until we develop immunity by previous infection or by a vaccine.”

One of the first services that the university reopened in June was on-campus day care, allowing parents to “get back to work” and bringing administrators in line with the policies of the Trump White House.

New students began moving into UF residence halls on August 21, and face-to-face courses are partially reopening today. The current UF reopening plan calls for 35 percent of course sections across all programs to be held in a face-to-face format or a hybrid version. Another 35 percent will be live, online classes. The remainder will be held in an asynchronous format.

The UF COVID-19 dashboard currently shows that 272 students and staff have tested positive for the virus and that among the 1,242 students tested at the Student Health Care Center, 18.6 percent (195) tested positive. The dashboard only states that these cases have been recorded since May 6, so there is no temporal element to show how the data is trending. One can understandably assume that this lack of detail is intentional.

Florida has been a global epicenter of the COVID-19 pandemic and ranks among the states with the highest number

of infections. At the time of this writing, Florida has reported over 621,000 cases and more than 11,100 deaths due to complications with the virus. Most of these cases have been recorded in the more populous counties containing major cities such as Miami and Tampa, but Alachua County, where Gainesville is located, has reported nearly 5,100 cases. With 270,000 residents, this means that nearly 2 percent of people living in the county have tested positive for COVID-19.

With face-to-face classes resuming today, Alachua County residents can expect that the number of cases will skyrocket as they have done around other universities in the southeastern US. The University of Alabama saw 566 new cases within just one week of reopening, and the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill reported 646 new cases of COVID-19 within two weeks of restarting face-to-face instruction, despite moving all undergraduate courses to an online format after the first week.

University officials, unabashedly, cannot emphasize enough how “excited” they are to participate in what UF President W. Kent Fuchs has labeled a “historic” period in the history of the university.

In a statement to students published on August 18, Fuchs stated, “Fall is always a tremendously exciting time in our community. We ask you to join us as we together embrace shared responsibility for one another, reducing the spread of COVID-19 and paving the way for a productive and rewarding year.”

It is not difficult to understand why President Fuchs is so excited to relaunch in-person classes this week. He consistently lands on *Forbes*’ top-10 lists of the highest paid public university officials, and in 2017 he received a salary of \$1,102,862. Fuchs lives in a \$2,000,000 mansion located across the street from Corry Village, one of the GFH villages where the university was secretly preparing to quarantine COVID-19 cases.

In a letter to “fellow Gators” on August 18, Fuchs asked students, faculty, and staff to take a pledge to “promote safety both on campus and off campus.” The university has launched a social media hashtag, #Gatorswearmasks, and President Fuchs stated in his August 18 statement that “personal responsibility is key.” The only safety measures being taken are “to promote facial coverings, physical distancing, staying home when sick, frequent handwashing and other proven COVID-19 prevention measures.”

Other university officials have echoed Fuchs, insisting that the response to the pandemic is merely a matter of personal responsibility. Vice President for Student Affairs D’Andra Mull wrote in an email to students on Friday, “I, personally, am excited to embrace the *normalcy* that the routine of classes brings” (emphasis added). Referencing an address by Fuchs earlier that week, she emphasized that the “ultimate task of our campus community is for us to be kind.” She then proceeded to claim that “kindness” means upholding personal responsibility policies on and off campus.

The words of Fuchs and Mull are utter rubbish. A pandemic, by definition, is an outbreak that is prevalent throughout a whole country or throughout the whole world. The response cannot be addressed simply at a personal or even a local level. It requires national and international coordination driven by scientific knowledge.

The shift of all responsibility to the individual level has a definite social character. Following the example of schools like University of Alabama, Ohio State University, and Boston College, the UF Police Department is coordinating with the Gainesville Police Department on what they call “party patrol.”

UF spokesperson Steve Orlando told reporters last week that they will severely discipline students who attend large gatherings or parties, claiming that it’s a student conduct issue. “It’s not one of those things where we want to come on with a heavy hand, but we want to help educate students and help them understand why it’s important not to do these things.”

Apparently, for UF administrators, “educating students” means arrests and possible beatings or killings by police. This is made considerably more abominable by the fact that 2020 has seen mass international protests against police violence and killings, and US police have already killed 656 people so far this year.

It is not ultimately the students who will bear responsibility for the spread of coronavirus but the administrators who brought thousands back to campus under conditions of a still raging pandemic. As the *World Socialist Web Site* has elaborated time after time, the reopening of major universities like UF is part of the official policy of the ruling class to fully reopen the economy. This requires the opening of schools, which will inevitably be accompanied by new surges of COVID-19 infections and deaths.



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