

Surge in COVID-19 infections as in-person classes resume at many Illinois college campuses

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As with schools across the US, many Illinois college campuses have seen a spike in coronavirus infections since the decision by state authorities to permit in-person classes. While some universities in the state have switched to online learning or to an in-person/online hybrid model, others have brought students back onto campus and are holding regular classes.

Despite promises made to students and faculty that universities would open safely, the return to campus has resulted in massive outbreaks. Lack of administrative action and reports of poor and unsafe conditions, hasty student quarantines and general negligence have evoked a substantial backlash by students.

The University of Illinois (U of I) at Champaign-Urbana, the largest university in the state with 48,000 students, opened August 24 with students on campus, but with classes being held through a hybrid model of both online and face-to-face. U of I even developed its own COVID-19 test. The test is saliva-based and is faster, easier to administer and far cheaper than standard tests.

Despite this, there has been a surge of COVID-19 cases among faculty and staff. More than 1,900 cases have been reported on campus, the vast majority among undergraduate students. Undergraduates have been urged to restrict their activities to essential ones only. This includes going out to buy groceries, attending religious events, seeking urgent medical help and receiving their twice-weekly COVID test. This temporary quarantine is set to last only until the 16th of this month. After that time, the plan is to resume normal functions, with the potential for a new outbreak.

Some Illinois colleges with later start dates are attempting to implement measures aimed at convincing students that a return to campus will be safe, without providing plans that could realistically provide a safe environment. For example, Northwestern University in Evanston, Illinois, which is set to begin classes September 24, is not admitting first- and second-year students on campus (with few exceptions) and is having them conduct all their classes online. But, third- and fourth-year students are being welcomed on campus and have the choice of taking classes in person, through a hybrid model, or completely online. Northwestern is also requiring students who plan to return to campus to get tested before arriving and regularly throughout the fall.

Yet, such caution is not the norm but the exception. At schools like Illinois State University in Normal, Illinois, with roughly 20,000 students, there have been 1,383 positive tests recorded so far. This amounts to over 5 percent of the student body. This despite the fact the school is holding all classes online except those it deems absolutely necessary be conducted in person.

No information is listed online about which classes necessitate face-to-face meeting and which do not. A student who spoke with the WSWs said classes like her metalwork and jewelry class were still meeting in person, and that she was aware of only about five classes in the art department that were still meeting. She also stated that the switch to mostly online classes came with little to no warning.

Students have reported that Illinois State is providing little guidance and withholding important information about COVID outbreaks. Sky, a student at Illinois State, told the WSWs about the total lack of

communication between the university, the resident assistants and housing staff, and the students.

She said, “There is a quarantine room right next door, which we found out for ourselves when I got off the elevator after my shift and found university blankets, tp, and sheets stacked outside my neighbors’ door.” Sky went on to speak about the difficult position of the residential assistants who are threatened with losing their housing scholarship if the university determines they are to blame for an outbreak, “Our RAs and CAs [community advisors] are having a hard time communicating with all of us because they feel very out of the loop and are afraid to lose their jobs and housing right now. I reached out to my CA when I saw the blankets outside and she said she knew just about as much as me, which was very concerning.”

At a recent press conference, Illinois State President Larry Dietz was asked if he would have done anything differently regarding resumption of classes. In effect he said “no,” stating, “What we’ve had to do is be as nimble as we can, knowing what we know at the particular time, and I think we’ve done that.” He continued, “It’s difficult to do that with a large organization and turning some things on a dime.”

Temporary, bare minimum measures have been paired with focus on students’ “personal responsibility” to avoid COVID infection. A large party thrown by YouTube influencers, the “Nelk boys,” with the participation of Illinois State students made local news when the crowd of young people reportedly had to be dispersed by local law enforcement. Dietz used the incident to scapegoat students for the recent COVID outbreak, saying he would be collaborating with police to penalize students caught on video at the party.

Many schools, including Illinois State, U of I, and Northwestern, have emphasized the need for personal protective equipment (PPE) and social distancing in all their school re-opening plans. Yet even these measures fall short of what epidemiologists consider safe.

The decision to open schools is a blatant choice to put profit ahead of the lives of people. It’s clear that campuses should not be open. Without a scientific plan for a safe return, thousands will die, including many young people and students.

There is growing resistance to this homicidal policy. At the University of Michigan, graduate student instructors are continuing their strike against the school

administration’s re-opening policy. The action has won broad support from students, RAs, faculty members, dining room workers, and local construction workers as well as workers internationally.

On Monday, nearly 4,000 clerical, maintenance, and other service workers walked out at the U of I at Chicago and medical centers in Chicago, Peoria, and Rockford after voting 94 percent in favor of strike action. The service workers joined 800 nurses who walked out of the U of I Hospital to protest understaffing, unsafe conditions, and long work hours.

This Thursday, the International Youth and Students for Social Equality is hosting an online meeting to oppose the deadly re-opening of schools. All youth and students opposed to the reckless back-to-school drive should attend and link up with students, teachers and workers around the country.



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