

University of Wisconsin-Madison and La Crosse quarantine students after infections

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After a reported surge in COVID-19 cases among the student body at the University of Wisconsin-Madison (UWM), the school administration ordered 2,230 students living on campus in the Witte and Sellery dorms into a two-week quarantine. A total of 1,800 students have now tested positive for COVID-19 at UWM.

The affected students were given the choice of returning home to live with their families or remain on campus and live in the crowded COVID-infested residence halls for the duration of the quarantine period. For the less privileged students, those with no other housing option, or for those who did not want to risk infecting their families, there was no other option but to quarantine on campus and risk COVID-19 infection.

The University of Wisconsin-La Crosse (UWL), which has a student body of around 10,500, is having a similar outbreak of COVID-19 cases. On the same day as the UWM quarantine orders, UWL also issued a “shelter in place.” Students living in the Coate residence hall are under restrictions after dozens of students tested positive for COVID-19.

With the sudden announcement at UWM, panic and uncertainty quickly set in as it was unclear to students how they would acquire basic necessities. Many of them rushed to the nearest grocery stores to stock up on supplies. Others resigned themselves to their predicament and took the time to take one last leisurely walk.

As the restrictions went into effect, students found they were only allowed to leave their dorm floors for scheduled food deliveries three times a day. These meals will cost students \$4.99 apiece. The university is claiming students get a selection of many different entrées along with appropriate sides and a fountain

drink. Students, however, are reporting that the meal is less than adequate. Sometimes consisting of only sandwiches on some days while on others breakfast was water and a banana or muffin.

Students have been voicing their dissatisfaction and confusion in interviews conducted by local news network WKOW 27. Freshman Grainne McDonagh, who lives in Sellery, spoke on how information and instructions are not clear. She said, “Because things aren’t in-person, it’s very ambiguous through email so we’re still trying to figure out what we can and can’t do exactly.” Another freshman, Isabel Burgos said, “We’re all kind of wondering what the next step after we get out of quarantine will be.”

In August, before the reopening, Chancellor Rebecca Blank and a group of top UWM leaders held a town hall to address questions about their plans for the campus community. Questions were prepared in advance so that the school could control the discussion and support the narrative that the reopening could be done safely.

Chancellor Blank argued for the importance of “some” on campus in-person instruction, and that the knowledge they had gained would allow them to do so. She claimed that outbreaks at other schools were due to lack of proper knowledge and adequate testing protocols.

However, despite their attempt to convince students otherwise, the meeting was simply a shameless promotion for reopening. Blank remarked, “nonetheless, being on campus does mean there will be interactions among students in the dorms in the residence places of students on and off campus.” She continued, “It lets people meet people from different countries and cultures. It lets them have some of those intense late-night discussions that are a very important

part of exploring who you are and where you're going as you're in this phase of your life in college."

While attempting to come off as a defender of a quality educational experience, Blank was in fact tacitly admitting that if campuses reopened an outbreak would occur.

Chancellor Blank made a callous and revealing statement in an interview with PBS Wisconsin on September 11 where Blank admitted knowing an outbreak would take place. "We knew that there would be some spikes. ... Students would come; there would be some partying. The amount of that rise was steeper and faster than we expected, and steeper than some of our fellow schools in the Big Ten."

In essence, students, workers, faculty and the community are being subjected to an involuntary experiment in complete disregard for the protection of human life. To the administrators and the rest of the ruling elite, however, it is simply the cost the populace must bear for the sake of big business.

In a similar manner in a shared statement published in August by the leaders of La Crosse's higher education institutions, including UWL, Viterbo University and Western Technical College school officials wrote, "We are prepared for the inevitability of COVID-19 cases on our campuses. As we have seen in recent months, no corner of our community is immune from the virus." Looking to distance themselves from responsibility they continue, "Our campuses have developed testing and tracing protocols to help us pinpoint when and where cases arise, and take immediate action to prevent further spread. We have also secured isolation space, on and off campus, where infected students can safely recover. We implore everyone in our community to exercise caution. Heed the advice of health experts: Watch your distance, wear a face covering, wash your hands, and if you feel ill, stay home."

The experience at UWM is not an isolated incident, but part of a global drive by the ruling class to abandon attempts to control the pandemic and return to "business as normal" no matter the cost to human life. The resumption of in-person classes is being done in defiance of warnings by health experts of the potential for a catastrophic resurgence of the virus.

Teachers, workers and students of Wisconsin's education system must take a stand in defense of health and safety. There is a growing movement against the

deadly reopenings. In Michigan, graduate student instructors are striking, while in Iowa, students are conducting a sickout and 4,000 service workers at the University of Illinois walked, out joining strikes by 800 nurses at a University of Illinois hospital in Chicago. This struggle must be expanded into a broader fight of the entire working class against a social and economic system, capitalism, which subordinates the needs of society to the accumulation of profit by and for the rich. This requires a political program that is independent from the pro corporate trade unions and the two big business political parties on the basis of a socialist program.

The International Youth and Students for Social Equality in the US is holding a national online meeting Thursday, at 8 p.m. EDT to organize this struggle against the reckless reopening of schools. We urge students and youth to register for the event today.



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