Boston-area colleges and universities report COVID cases and outbreaks despite testing programs

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18 September 2020

On September 1, Boston underwent its annual "move-in day," when tens of thousands of college students move in from across the United States and world into apartments in advance of the beginning of their fall semesters. Additionally, many students move into on-campus housing shortly before this chaotic day.

On a typical year, the influx of students and vast number of leases ending on August 31 and starting September 1 create immense amounts of traffic and piles of furniture and other discarded belongings on sidewalks. This year, the annual ritual also portends a terrible COVID-19 outbreak.

Despite the ongoing pandemic, colleges and universities across the Greater Boston area have made the reckless, profit-driven decision to reopen their campuses. This has endangered the lives of not only university students, faculty and staff, but residents of the area as well, as cases will inevitably spike and hospitals become at serious risk of becoming overwhelmed by an influx of COVID patients.

COVID-19 outbreaks have taken place across the country as colleges have seen surges in cases after reopening. Over 88,000 new cases have been recorded at nearly 1,200 colleges since the criminal reopenings, according to the *New York Times*. Of these schools, more than 150 colleges are reporting more than 100 cases, and more than a dozen report 1,000-plus cases.

College websites claim that the health and safety of their students and faculty are of paramount concern and are informing all decision-making. However, at the root of all safety decisions of day-today operations lies the fundamentally deadly one of opening schools in the first place.

A sharp class line is also emerging among schools in their separate and anarchic plans and precautions to allegedly keep students, faculty and the surrounding communities safe. At most state and community colleges, these measures include the paltry addition of hand sanitizer, recommendations on wearing masks, and telling students to stay home if they feel sick. Meanwhile, some elite universities have actually built the infrastructure to test thousands of students per day, are requiring every student to be tested and are conducting internal contract tracing.

Boston University (BU) has developed the ability to give over 5,000 tests per day on campus and is testing more than 4,000 students and faculty daily, having performed 96,499 tests since July 27, with 91 positive tests. They also have in-house contact tracing teams. The Massachusetts Institute of Technology has done nearly 46,000 tests since August, 11,700 of these done in the first week of September, with 22 positive results.

While the elite universities test thousands of students per day, state and community colleges either have bare minimum testing or no testing at all. Bunker Hill Community College has no testing and is allowing students and faculty on campus if they are not feeling sick, requiring check-ins and -outs to assist with contact tracing. Baystate, Massasoit, Northshore, and Roxbury Community Colleges will also have no testing.

At Framingham State University, 1,226 students are taking at least one in-person course, with a total of 52 faculty members and 158 staff working on campus. The university is working in coordination with the state Department of Higher Education and Department of Public Health to implement testing, resulting in an average of only 82 tests per day. As of this writing, a spike in cases has already begun, with 10 out of 429 tests resulting positive on September 8, compared to only 5 positive tests out of all 1,600 tests beginning August 21.

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Revealing their complete lack of care and preparation for the situation, following the 10 positive results on September 8, as of September 15, they had only tested once, on September 11, conducting just 114 tests.

Salem State University is likewise doing only limited testing, requiring all resident students to be tested at move-in, followed by a rotating segment of the resident students to be tested every other week. It is not clear how large this segment will be. Additionally, commuting students with on-campus classes, jobs or in-person field placements are not required to take tests prior to coming to campus and are given the option to electively take tests on campus, if so desired, only once every two weeks. They have tested only 1,109 students thus far, and 104 employees, resulting in 1 positive case.

Boston College (BC), with medium testing capacity, is already seeing exponential growth in new cases going from 3 positive cases out of 7,681 tests August 16-23, to 8 of 10,127 tests August 24-30, 26 of 4,322 tests August 31-September 6, and 67 out of 2,954 tests on September 9-12. In other words, BC has gone from a >0.1 percent positivity rate to over 2 percent in three weeks. This trend has no reason to slow. Just two weeks after opening, San Diego State University reported 64 positive cases, which spiraled into a staggering 513 cases just one week later.

Northeastern University (NU) has created the infrastructure to test students and staff, requiring students be tested every three days. Even with strict limitations on social interaction and robust testing, early signs of increased rates of transmission are developing at NU. September 8 saw its highest number of positive cases and positivity rate, with 8 cases out of 6,947 tests.

The as-for-now slow burn of on average more than three cases per day at NU, while in itself an unforgivable cost, is an experiment with the potential energy for near spontaneous combustion. Regular testing alone, while important, cannot stop transmission of the deadly virus. If specimen collection is not done perfectly, or if tested at an early stage of infection or partial recovery, test samples may not contain enough viral material for a positive result. This could lead at any time to large spikes, especially since students feeling emboldened with negative results will undoubtedly socialize with each other off-campus.

It is clear that even at schools with state-of-the art testing capacities and facilities, as well as other precautions, viral transmission is taking place at varying degrees, with the potential for large spikes, far-reaching community transmission, and a situation that could easily spiral out of control.

Also made clear from the Boston-area campus testing is the criminality of the state and federal response to the pandemic. A handful of universities with a few tens of thousands of students have surpassed the testing capabilities of the entire state of Massachusetts, one of the wealthiest states in the US, with nearly 7 million people.

In addition, the anarchy of each school developing and following its own protocols is so irrational in stopping the spread of the virus more broadly that the internal contact tracing program at BU, for instance, will only contact close contacts of a positive case if they are a student or faculty member of BU. Any other member of the public at large is of no concern to the BU administration.

Wealthy university testing and tracing programs, isolated from a state, national and global program to fight the pandemic, are not the solution. Even with these programs, the decision to open schools has left students at these campuses at risk. They should never have been opened in the first place. Only a global and coordinated response can stop this virus in its tracks.

The struggle to close schools and implement the proper safety measures to stop the pandemic must be linked to other schools, workplaces and industries, across state and national borders, in rank-and-file safety committees independent of the school administrations and authorities, big business parties and trade unions. The International Youth and Students for Social Equality and the Socialist Equality Party are fighting to build an independent movement and leadership of the working class to support all students, teachers, parents and workers who are taking a stand against the homicidal drive to reopen schools.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

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