

Appalachian State University faculty and students demand action after death of healthy student from COVID-19

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COVID-19 infections continue to rise at Appalachian State University (ASU) in Boone, North Carolina in the wake of the tragic death of Chad Dorrill, a healthy 19-year-old student who died September 28.

Dorrill began developing flu-like symptoms in early September. He decided to return home, where he tested positive for the virus on September 7. After quarantining for 10 days, and being cleared by his doctor, he returned to school. Soon afterward, he began suffering serious neurological problems after the COVID-19 virus triggered his immune system to attack his nerve cells, leading to his death.

An autopsy is still pending on Dorrill.

Since his death, students and teachers at ASU have spoken out against the inaction of the university administration.

Since late September student cases have jumped dramatically from 96 to 229. COVID-19 clusters, defined here as five or more cases confirmed in a two-week period, have been reported across six different residence halls and over a dozen fraternities and sororities, according to reports from local news network WFMY.

The school's football team now has 21 active cases confirmed. At least one game has been postponed since Thursday.

The recent success of the team, appearing in five nationally televised bowl games since 2015, in part spurred the university to pursue an "aggressive enrollment target" of 20,000 students by this year. This "achievement" has been criticized by sections of the faculty who point out that the university was wholly unprepared for an influx of students on and off campus amid a global pandemic.

Appalachian State teacher Andrew Korcich recently spoke out against the callous leadership of the university leading up to Dorrill's death: "You can't control a pandemic but you can control how you treat people," Korcich told website Education Dive.

Korcich was responding to the "tone deaf" remarks made by University Chancellor Sheri Everts following Dorrill's death, where she emphasized the fact that he lived off campus and took online classes. These facts have been used by the administration to skirt responsibility and push ahead with in-person classes and sporting events as usual. Faculty at ASU have long-standing opposition to the university leadership. As recently as August, the faculty senate took a vote of no confidence in the leadership of Everts. Teachers at the university have not seen much-needed pay raises in years.

As the student body swelled past 20,000, teachers have voiced their concerns over the lack of proper facilities and staff, increased class sizes and lack of materials.

Appalachian State, part of the University of North Carolina School system, saw case numbers swell at the beginning of the coronavirus outbreak in March but did not shift to online-only classes, instituting a mix of in-person and online courses. In the wake of Dorrill's death, graduate students and faculty expressed great concern that there are no plans to shut down and no transparency on what threshold would need to be passed in order to shut the campus down and move to fully online courses. Professor Vachel Miller, director of the university's doctoral program in educational leadership, as reported by Education Dive, spoke out against the administration's poor messaging in the

wake of Dorrell's death: "This is a different kind of death. It could be any student, any faculty member who is facing the possibility and the anxiety that they could be next. We're all tied into that death ... the university didn't understand or have a way to acknowledge that."

An Appalachian State biology graduate student, Chloe Dorin, recently wrote a letter addressed to Chancellor Everts and the university's board of trustees criticizing the handling of Dorrell's death and the general lack of action taken needed to slow the spread of the virus.

The letter, sent to administrators last Saturday and published this week, asks the university leadership to take bold and decisive action to halt the spread of the pandemic. The letter reads, in part:

I call upon you now to uphold our mission by taking specific steps to protect us from COVID-19 by 1) ending all athletics programs for the 2020-2021 academic year, 2) closing all dormitories immediately for at least the remainder of this semester, 3) temporarily disbanding all Greek life organizations for the 2020-2021 academic year, and 4) moving all classes fully online for the 2020-2021 academic year.

Dorin continues:

In asking that those steps be taken, I ask you to choose us. I ask you to choose every single student, every single faculty and staff member, and every single person living in the town of Boone who cannot help but be affected by our presence here. I ask you in light of the recent death of one of our students, Chad Dorrell ... I call upon you to take these steps due to the unassailable evidence that we are currently experiencing a major outbreak of COVID-19 in our community, and that without swift action, this outbreak will undoubtedly continue to grow and result in more deaths.

Dorin cites in her letter that the actual COVID-19 positivity rate on campus has risen to 9 percent despite the campus website listing it at 4.4 percent.

The university staged several "pop-up" style testing events undertaken on a fully voluntary basis as opposed to a widespread mandatory testing approach. Recent reporting reveals that only about 1,200 students and faculty are being tested each week, a number that falls drastically short of an effective testing rate.

ASU faculty started a change.org petition to move to online-only courses that currently has over 400 signatures.



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