

SUNY Cortland suspends in-person classes for rest of semester after seeing continued rise of COVID-19 cases

Alex Findijs
6 November 2020

The State University of New York (SUNY) at Cortland has decided to suspend all in-person instruction for the remainder of the semester this week. The decision came just days before the planned reopening on November 4 that would have ended a month of suspended on-campus activities.

To date, SUNY Cortland has recorded 604 COVID-19 cases, more than the three largest SUNY schools—Albany, Stony Brook and Buffalo—combined. After temporarily switching to remote learning on October 7, the school continued to see a steady rise in COVID-19 cases throughout October despite no large gatherings being linked to the outbreak.

The SUNY system's metric for halting in-person classes is at least 100 positive COVID-19 tests on campus in a two-week period. Any school that records more than 100 cases within a set two-week period must suspend on-campus activities for 14 days.

As the *World Socialist Web Site* has noted, this formula for testing is unscientific, creating the illusion that positive cases are declining if enough negative cases appear within a prior 14-day period.

With this decision from SUNY Cortland, students will be allowed to return home if they test negative within five days prior to their intended departure date and must leave within 48 hours of submitting a negative test online. The campus itself will remain open with services available to students who stay.

Cortland's early departure policy is an extension of the broader SUNY policy that ends all campus activities during the week of Thanksgiving and switches the whole system to remote learning for the rest of the semester. Cortland students will have until November 20-23 to vacate their dorms if they choose to

stay until then.

The main question regarding this policy is how all Cortland students will be tested. As of writing, Cortland has conducted 10,458 tests since the start of the semester. However, 10,006 of these have been pool tests.

Pool testing has been shown to be effective and efficient in testing large groups of people, but there are some critical limitations to this method. Pool testing takes samples of several people and tests it using the material for one. This cuts costs and time but carries the risk that using too large of a group will dilute the viral sample and return a false negative.

The correct proportional number of people in a group is not entirely clear. However, studies of pool testing, including one published by the *American Journal of American Pathology* and another by the National Center for Biotechnology Information, estimate the most reliable group size to be about four people for the COVID-19 prevalence that Cortland and SUNY are showing.

Cortland is planning to pool test students in groups of up to 12 students. While this group size can still be effective, it will have a higher risk of testing false negatives and is likely more about cutting cost than scientific certainty. With students at Cortland coming from all around the state and elsewhere, SUNY should be seeking to establish 100 percent certainty that students are not transmitting the virus back home.

Regardless of the accuracy of the testing, it is clear that university administrators understand the danger of having students spread the virus to their homes or back to the campus when they return.

The irony of this policy is that it admits that it is too

dangerous for students to freely return home from campus. This is an inadvertent admission that under the current conditions it is too dangerous for students to return for the spring semester, and that it was dangerous for students to return to campus in the fall. Cortland was one of the 61 out of 64 SUNY schools that did not require testing before students arrived for the fall semester.

Despite this, SUNY has made no plans to move to remote learning in the spring. With the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention predicting a total of 400,000 deaths from COVID-19 by February, it is criminal that the SUNY system has not already made provisions to move to full remote instruction for the spring semester.

With Democrats and Republicans alike pursuing the ruling class' "herd immunity" policy, there is no reason to believe that the pandemic will be under control come the restart of classes in late January. This will be the height of the pandemic, exactly one year since the virus arrived in the United States, and it will put students' and educators' lives at risk to return them to campus.

Similar conditions have driven students in Greece and Poland to protest the unsafe conditions that they and educators are being forced into. With the coronavirus infecting tens of thousands of students and teachers across the country, it is necessary for SUNY students and staff to organize to protect their health and education during this crisis.

Sign up to join the National Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee today. Contact the author on Facebook and Twitter to report conditions at your school or email Educators@wsws.org.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact