

State University of New York publishes spring 2021 semester plans

Alex Findijs

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The State University of New York (SUNY) published its spring semester 2021 plan this week. It is a thorough demonstration that SUNY is committed to the policy of herd immunity being pursued by the ruling class more broadly and the Democratic Party in New York in particular.

SUNY has recorded close to 4,000 cases of COVID-19 during the fall semester. Major outbreaks have resulted in temporary two-week pauses at SUNY Oswego, Binghamton University, SUNY Cortland and now the University at Albany this week. SUNY Oneonta was forced to close down for the whole semester on September 3 after more than 500 students contracted COVID-19 in less than two weeks.

Despite clear signs that SUNY's policies were not working, the new plan for the spring is hardly an improvement. Most of the core points in the plan have already been in effect or add little to the existing precautions. SUNY will delay the start of in-person instruction until February 1, which will only result in a one or two week delay in most cases.

According to the plan, students will begin on time with remote learning before returning to campus on February 1. SUNY's official reason for this delay is to "minimize additional risks associated with influenza season." However, flu season will still be well underway by February 1. In fact, according to the CDC, flu activity in the US peaks between December and February, and activity can last as late as May.

Under these conditions in the US, experts are predicting that by the end of the year, close to half a million people could be dead as the death rate surges in line with caseloads. There is no doubt that the risk of catching the virus will be even greater by February, and on top of this, hospitals will be overwhelmed trying to handle COVID-19 cases on top of influenza cases with

minimal resources.

SUNY is planning to require students to quarantine for seven days upon returning to class despite the fact that standard medical guidance dictates a minimum of 14 days. This strategy was also utilized prior to the fall semester with disastrous consequences when SUNY Oneonta was forced to close within two weeks after more than 500 students became infected with the virus.

For the fall semester, only three of the 64 SUNY schools required testing before arrival to campus, in blatant disregard for the safety of students, staff and local communities. For the spring semester, SUNY is proposing only the most mild of improvements in terms of precautions.

A peculiar element of the testing mandate is that students who have tested positive for the virus within the previous three months may provide proof of infection in lieu of a test. The idea is that infected students will have immunity to the virus and so need not worry about contracting it again.

There is evidence that immunity to the coronavirus may last up to seven months. However, there have been reports of instances where infected persons have become reinfected far sooner than would have been expected. An extreme example of this was of a Dutch woman who died after catching the virus twice in a month earlier this fall. The science on the matter is far from conclusive.

All together, SUNY's updated precautions for the return to school in the spring are minimal and will likely not be enough to protect students from the coming explosion in cases that is expected to hit the US this winter.

As for remote learning, SUNY's planning consists of undefined mandates on schools to maintain "regular interaction" with students and transparency about

course offerings. They must also provide two out of the following: 1) direct instruction 2) feedback on coursework 3) information about coursework 4) group discussion 5) other instructional activities approved by the institution.

As is the case across the country, teachers and students have been starved of the necessary resources, training and planning to carry out effective online learning. Everything is left to the individual campuses to organize and implement on their own.

The entirety of SUNY's instructions on how students and educators should be given the necessary resources for remote learning reads as follows:

"Campuses must work to ensure all faculty and students have access to orientation/training opportunities to familiarize them with instructional technologies and remote pedagogies, especially those faculty for whom such technologies/pedagogies are new and for those students in vulnerable populations."

There is no indication on how this can be done safely and no resources have been allotted by the school system. There is not even any clear direction about what counts as a vulnerable population.

It should also be noted that none of these issues were addressed in the fall 2020 return plan either, upon which this new plan is supposed to improve. As in the fall, SUNY is demanding that each campus design its own plans to meet SUNY's vague and incomplete expectations, all while offering no substantive assistance to the schools to protect students, faculty and staff. SUNY is taking none of the responsibility in handling the problem and is instead diverting responsibility to the campuses and students.

These maneuvers are bound up with the politics of the Democratic Party in New York State, led by Governor Andrew Cuomo. Cuomo and the Democratic Party have employed austerity measures against SUNY students for years. Major budget cuts came in the 1990s under Republican Governor George Pataki and again between 2008 and 2012 under Democrat Eliot Spitzer, when \$1.4 billion was slashed from the SUNY budget.

Since then, Cuomo has restocked the SUNY budget with \$1.6 billion, or a 27 percent increase. However, average SUNY and CUNY tuition has risen by 40 percent since 2012, demonstrating that a large portion of SUNY's repaired budget was paid for by working class students.

Now students are being asked to be the "canary in the coal mine," in the words of Cuomo, as part of the plans of the Democratic and Republican parties to implement a policy of herd immunity, which will protect the profits of corporations at the expense of the health and safety of workers and youth in New York.

Given CDC projections and the several major outbreaks that occurred on SUNY campuses during the slowest period of the pandemic, it is well within reason to expect even larger outbreaks this spring.

The health and safety of students, faculty, staff and local communities are at risk. Students in Greece and Poland have occupied their schools and protested similarly unsafe policies in their countries. All students, workers and parents who wish to oppose SUNY's promotion of herd immunity should join the National Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee and the International Youth and Students for Social Equality and begin to fight for a working class strategy to stop the pandemic and halt the deadly reopening policies of the capitalist class.



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