

Students criticize University of Michigan President Mark Schlissel over reckless reopening

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20 November 2020

On Tuesday evening, the University of Michigan's Central Student Government's (CSG) 10th Assembly hosted an online Q&A with university president Dr. Mark Schlissel as part of its weekly scheduled session. The meeting resulted in a debacle for Schlissel as he faced widespread criticism from participating student representatives over the disastrous reopening he has overseen amid the COVID-19 pandemic.

The full video of the meeting was posted to YouTube by a student after clips circulated on social media highlighting students' opposition to the university's disastrous handling of the first semester of the 2020-21 academic year. After his preliminary remarks, which included hopeful praise for the development and distribution of Pfizer's recently announced vaccine, Schlissel defended the university's role in the reckless resumption of in-person learning and on-campus student housing nationally.

While feigning concern for the educational and financial well-being of students and their families, Schlissel admitted that a major factor for the decision by the administration to reopen for in-person learning was the integrity of the leases that students hold with local landlords and real-estate owners.

"[We recognized] that 70 percent or so of Michigan students don't live in the dorms, they live in town. Those of you who live in town have to sign leases almost a year in advance, so most of you are already hooked up with your place to live. We thought that even if all of our classes were online, a lot of students would still end up back in Ann-Arbor anyway. So it wouldn't really de-densify the city and the campus, so we decided to go ahead and give it our best shot at trying to provide some in-person education."

In other words, maintaining the sanctity of incoming student's tenant-landlord agreements was a higher priority than avoiding sending them into a potentially dangerous semester. It is well known to students that Ron Weiser, a current member of the University of Michigan Board of Regents and former chair of the Michigan Republican Party, is the founder of McKinley Associates, a successful Ann-Arbor based real estate company with 500 employees, according to the company's website. Weiser's son, Marc, currently sits on McKinley's board of directors.

Schlissel bolstered the hypocritical claim that there has been "almost no" spread of COVID-19 in academic facilities, including

in-person classes. Schlissel in fact has no proof of this assertion. No publicly available documentation of the transmission of the virus in classrooms at the University of Michigan exists. Citing privacy concerns, a disclaimer by the university's own online dashboard states that "notifications regarding positive cases in classrooms will not be posted or included in building notifications. Class participants will be notified directly whenever necessary."

Schlissel asserted that a large number of the positive cases at the university have occurred in undergraduate dormitories, as well as in off-campus residencies. He repeated the claim that infections were associated with students attending social gatherings and scapegoated students who "haven't been cooperative" with the university's health officials for creating problems in the administration's mitigation of the global pandemic.

"We want to help everybody be as safe and healthy as they can by providing folks with education... and many opportunities to keep themselves safe. But at the end of the day, to a degree, we all are responsible for our own safety, whether we're 18 or 20, or 62 years old like me," he said.

While acknowledging that the University of Michigan had initially faced problems implementing mass testing at the beginning of the semester, he announced the plans for the introduction of mandatory, weekly testing in the upcoming winter term. However, Schlissel bizarrely downplayed the importance of testing and contact tracing as a public health measure for fighting the spread of the virus, citing the University of Illinois' failure to contain outbreaks with similar measures.

Doubling down on the assertion that controlling the pandemic is a matter of individual responsibility, Schlissel declared: "...Testing doesn't prevent disease, it detects disease (emphasis added)." He continued, "[The University of Illinois] detected way over 1,000 cases. They did one of those two-week shelters... And then things came under control again and they were really good until about a month ago. And now this month they've been having 50-80 cases every single day. So testing helps identify people and it helps put folks in quarantine, but all by itself, it doesn't replace wearing a mask, washing your hands and those kind of interventions."

Continuing on this theme, Schlissel mentioned the 150 positive COVID-19 cases among the 800 student athletes this semester. He attempted to convey this as an example of the ineffectiveness of even the most technologically advanced forms of antigen testing.

As students have correctly pointed out earlier this year, the decision to allow sports to reopen in the first place stemmed from the administration's drive to keep revenue flowing to the university, and not to ensure safety.

That outbreaks have occurred among student athletes is not an expression of the limitations of widespread testing as a public health measure. Rather, these infections are a serious indictment of those responsible for the resumption of the non-essential sports programs during a global health crisis.

As soon as the university president concluded his opening remarks, he was met with an onslaught of criticism. Several students angrily referred to the 1.9 percent tuition hike this summer, which was implemented despite the challenges which resulted from the administration's drive to force students back on campus without serious regard to safety concerns.

Several other students cited the vote of no confidence in Schlissel by the faculty, which was conducted in the aftermath of the sellout of the Graduate Employees' Organization (GEO) strike in September. The campus-wide action received massive support by students, faculty, staff and other sympathetic workers who were working on the campus. Directly addressing Schlissel, one student said, "The faculty voted that they did not have any confidence in you... Why should we be trusting you... as a leader?"

Another student questioned Schlissel's role in the filing for a legal injunction against the GEO during the September strike. Citing Schlissel's growing list of admissions of fault by the administration in reopening the fall term, the student demanded to know if Schlissel would disavow the legal threats he made against striking student workers earlier this year.

Schlissel clarified, "I wish I was smarter when the semester started, and we may have done things differently. But I honestly don't have regrets."

He continued, "I'm really disappointed that GEO ended up striking... but the reason why we ended up filing for an injunction... is because the whole semester was threatened by the inability to see the resolution of a strike..."

He denounced the GEO for violating a pledge that they had made in the summer not to strike as part of its negotiations with the university.

"In the first week of the strike there was an agreement that the members voted down. The second week of the strike, there was adherence to the fact that unless we disarm the police and gave money to other things they weren't going to go back to work. We felt the integrity of the semester was threatened, and we had promises to tens of thousands of undergraduates to actually teach them. And so, the GEO had to go back to work. And that's what we had to do..."

Another student stated his opposition to a long summary of decisions made by Schlissel and the administration from the beginning of the semester, which included the blatant disregard of, and lack of enforcement of proper health and safety measures. Another student voiced his agreement, demanding to know why stronger action was not taken before the beginning of the term. He also stated that he believed that the majority of the Assembly agreed with the criticisms.

"Thank you for your point of view. You've expressed it with

clarity. I disagree with most of what you've said," Schlissel responded. "I gave you the logic of each of the steps we did... I'm not sure what sums up the overall lack of confidence other than that fact that we're in a global pandemic and everyone's pretty upset... I couldn't have planned next semester back in August. We couldn't have had the capacities or the knowledge that we have now."

Students should reject with contempt the narrative that the spread of coronavirus infections on the University of Michigan campus, as well as on colleges across the country and the world, were unavoidable. Rather, they were the results of the criminal policies dictated by the mandates of a parasitic financial elite.

As early as late-February of this year, the International Committee of the Fourth International called for a worldwide mobilization of resources, across national boundaries to stem the spread of the coronavirus pandemic. Additionally, global public health experts warned that without such efforts, deaths could accumulate into the hundreds of millions.

No serious struggle for the safety of students and workers can be waged without a political assault on capitalist property relations. While Schlissel has clearly illustrated that the University of Michigan administration's primary concern is to protect the institution's bottom line as well as the business interests in the surrounding area and beyond, students, faculty and staff have shown that they are driven by different concerns. These are, first and foremost, the safeguarding of the health and safety of themselves and their loved ones.

The September strike led by the GEO was politically strangled by the trade union bureaucracy, which is politically tied to the corporate Democratic Party. It represented, however, merely the beginning of what is possible for students seeking to defend their right to a safe education, as well as a democratic rights as a whole, if they make the turn to socialism and political empowerment of the working class.

We urge students, campus employees, faculty and staff wishing to take up this fight to join the International Youth and Students for Social Equality, build the Socialist Equality Party, and become involved today.



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact