

The deadly impact of US college reopenings in the fall, a balance sheet

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As the university and college campuses in the US begin to wrap up the fall semester, the devastating impact of campus reopenings for in-person classes in the middle of the worst pandemic in a century is becoming ever more clear.

According to new data collected by the *New York Times*, American college campuses have officially reported nearly 400,000 cases of COVID-19 since the beginning of the pandemic in March. More than 85 campuses have reported at least 1,000 cases each—with some registering well over 5,000. More than 75,000 of the cases have come since early November alone.

Those cases include more than 90 deaths involving college employees and students.

Contrary to many nefarious statements from school administrators seeking to shift the blame of the outbreaks on students, spread of the virus on campuses has very little to do with misguided social gatherings or partying. The conditions in student dormitories, and even off campus housing, are simply not conducive to proper social distancing.

Furthermore, according to census data, more than 1.1 million undergraduates work in health-related occupations, including more than 700,000 who serve as nurses, medical assistants and health care aides in their communities, putting them at higher risk of contracting COVID-19.

As was predicted well before the fall semesters began, the spread of the virus among students and faculty was not contained to college campuses. Towns and cities with colleges that reopened for in-person learning, or which, for one reason or another, allowed large numbers of students to return to their dorms, quickly become some of the worst hot spots in the country.

The *Times* data comprises an analysis of more than 200 counties with substantial college student populations. According to the data, the overall COVID-19 deaths have risen faster in these counties than elsewhere in the country. In fact, deaths in those counties have doubled since the end of August, compared with a 58-percent increase elsewhere.

The experience over the last four months in the schools,

both K-12 and college campuses, has produced incontrovertible evidence that in-person learning has led to an increase in community spread, hospitalizations and deaths.

The University of Alabama at Birmingham logged 972 cases, amounting to roughly four percent of the student population, by September 1, less than two weeks after the start of classes. Before opening, the university had claimed that an expansion of “in-house” university-owned testing, combined with rudimentary tracking and mask wearing would prevent an outbreak. The outcome of the Alabama “experiment” proved to be a complete disaster. The city of Birmingham in particular, and the state of Alabama as a whole, became leading coronavirus hot spots by mid-September.

The University of Iowa and Iowa State University, whose campuses are about two hours apart, were both home to massive outbreaks of COVID-19. In Story County, where Iowa State is located, almost 4,000 individuals tested positive for COVID-19 by the end of September. The University of Iowa alone reported a staggering 1,804 total cases by September 15. Subsequently, Iowa held one of the top positions in the country for the worst outbreak of the pandemic per capita for the last two weeks of September. Colleges and universities in Iowa have since reported a total of 9,031 cases at 27 schools, and counting.

San Diego State University’s reopening led to more than 700 COVID-19 cases among students within the first month. By November, the total number of cases among students since the start of fall instruction reached more than 1,700. As students began testing positive in large numbers, the university put hundreds of students into “isolation dorms” with no more than 10 minutes to pack up after staff in hazmat suits arrived at their doors.

On the University of Michigan campus in Ann Arbor, Michigan, nearly 2,000 graduate student instructors, with widespread support from faculty, student workers, and the community at large, went on strike against the administration’s reopening plans. After the strike was

abruptly shut down on September 16, at the behest of the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), cases on the campus skyrocketed. In October, county health authorities were forced to order the whole campus to shelter in place.

This exercise could be repeated for almost every single university and college campus in the US, and in fact, internationally. In every case, the university administrations, backed by local and state politicians, played criminal roles in supporting reopening plans, downplaying outbreaks, and scapegoating students.

As a result of this reckless reopening of schools, and the economy more broadly, the pandemic is now raging out of control in the US.

This week, the US passed the grim milestone of 300,000 deaths. Nearly 3,000 people are dying every day. Hospitals and Intensive Care Units (ICUs) are being overwhelmed throughout the country. Nurses and doctors are being forced to make the choice of who will receive care and who will not. And new cases continue to rise each day.

Despite the dire state of the pandemic, the deadly experience of the fall semester, and the immense amount of scientific evidence advising against reopening, many colleges are still planning to bring thousands of students back after Christmas break in January for the spring semester.

Princeton University, for example, is offering dormitory space to thousands of undergraduates, a tenfold increase from last semester. The University of California, San Diego is expecting to board more than 11,000 students in campus housing—about 1,000 more than it housed in the fall. Harvard is expecting to double the number of students on campus in the spring compared to the fall. Cornell University expects about 19,500 students will be living on or around campus in Ithaca, New York.

The reopening of campuses amid the mass death taking place across the country is nothing short of criminal, particularly when one considers that coronavirus vaccines are expected to be widely available around the time of the end of the spring semester.

In other words, with a medical solution to the pandemic in sight, colleges and universities are taking action that will serve to maximize the number of deaths before it can be realized.

Behind this reckless decision is a broader campaign, spearheaded by the Trump administration but supported by both Democrats and Republicans, to reopen the economy and prevent any loss in corporate profits. There is no doubt that in the fall universities were also driven by profit concerns (having in mind tuition, college sports, dormitory real estate contracts, etc.), prioritizing their bottom line over the health and safety of students and the broader community.

Now with Democratic President-elect Joe Biden ready to take office on January 20, the same deadly policy is being pursued. In a speech last week, Biden stated that reopening schools would be a “national priority.”

Opposition to the reopening of schools in the spring, both on the college level as well as K-12, is already beginning to forcefully emerge among students and faculty.

Over 70 faculty members at University of North Carolina Chapel Hill signed an open letter this week, published in the student newspaper, that predicted a repeat of the fall debacle in the spring. “We have every reason to expect that the university will—once again—be overwhelmed by infections when classes resume,” the letter said.

Anger and frustration among students at the University of Michigan has only increased since the shutdown of their strike, often erupting in fierce denunciations of the administration in public meetings. These sentiments are shared by students, teachers, and school staff throughout the country and around the world.

As for K-12, the *World Socialist Web Site* has facilitated the creation of rank-and-file safety committees, independent of the corporate-controlled trade unions, in dozens of cities and states to organize educators and students in the fight back.

As the spring semester approaches, there is no doubt that hundreds of college, university and K-12 campuses throughout the US will once again emerge as central battlegrounds in the fight to contain the COVID-19 pandemic. In this fight, teachers, students, faculty, and staff stand on one side of the barricades, fighting for an end to the reckless policies of in-person learning, for resources to be allocated for safety measures and online learning, and for policies based on science, that put life over profit.

On the other side of this fight stand the university administrations, the corporate-controlled trade unions and both the Democrats and Republicans.

We urge students and workers to draw the necessary conclusions from the last nine months of the pandemic: if there is going to be opposition to the policy of the ruling class it will only come from the working class, organized independently with its own socialist program.



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