

Restrictions placed on student gatherings after massive COVID-19 outbreak at the University of Virginia

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A massive outbreak of COVID-19 has emerged at the University of Virginia (UVA). As of Friday, 1,335 students have tested positive out of approximately 25,000 students at UVA. While 220 university employees have also tested positive.

The outbreak emerged just a week into the semester, which started February 1. According to the university's COVID-19 tracker, positive cases began to grow on February 8 with an exponential growth that peaked at 226 new cases in a single day, February 16.

The test positivity rate spiked from 0.5 percent at the start of the semester to nearly 5 percent before settling down to just over 2 percent on Thursday. This shows that the high number of COVID-19 cases is not a result of increased testing.

In a town hall meeting last Friday, university president James Ryan and other senior leaders confirmed that the B.1.1.7 COVID variant, often referred to as the UK variant, has been identified at the university and in the surrounding community. This variant is more transmissible, potentially more lethal, and possibly more vaccine-resistant. It is expected to become the dominant variant in the United States by April, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

In response to the outbreak, the university has implemented severe restrictions on student mobility. All in-person student events, on or off campus, are banned. Libraries and recreation facilities are closed. Students in university housing may leave their rooms only for class, dining, and individual exercise. Incredibly, classes still meet in person.

The university was unable to identify a single source of the outbreak. Instead, contact tracing showed many

small clusters of ambiguous origin. Nonetheless, university leaders sought to shift the blame onto students, attributing the outbreak to students not following guidelines requiring mask wearing and maintaining physical distance. The UVA Student Council has endorsed this claim; calling on the university administration Wednesday to temporarily suspend student organizations found violating social distancing protocols.

In fact, it is the reopening of the schools themselves which drive the overall outbreaks on campuses as well as the wider areas where they are located. Numerous studies, including those published by the CDC, show major increases in outbreaks at campuses reopening in-person.

University administrators, not students, bear responsibility for the outbreak. That a significant outbreak would emerge should have been anticipated. Across Virginia, there were more than 200,000 new COVID-19 cases in January, the month before students returned to UVA.

While Democratic Governor Ralph Northam has prohibited group gatherings of more than 10 persons, most UVA classes exceed this threshold. The university's large student body primarily resides in high-density housing with shared facilities, making strict physical distancing difficult.

The experience of other universities during the pandemic has shown that the resumption of in-person classes leads to significant outbreaks on and off campus. In the fall, many large universities, including Michigan, Iowa, North Carolina-Chapel Hill, and several campuses of the State University of New York system emerged as COVID-19 hotspots. Some were

forced to move classes online just days after resuming in-person instruction. The University of Maryland at College Park, another large university which, like UVA, draws students from the Washington D.C. metro area, is currently locked down to contain its own COVID-19 outbreak.

The reopening of UVA risks an outbreak in the surrounding communities of Charlottesville and Albemarle County. While the daily counts of new COVID-19 cases have fallen in most of Virginia since January, new cases in Albemarle County have exceeded their January peak.

By reopening its campus during a lethal pandemic, UVA has subordinated student health to the profit motive. The resumption of in-person classes at universities is part of a broader push by the Biden administration to reopen schools at every level, continuing the herd immunity policies of Trump. This is despite Biden's promises during the 2020 election campaign to "follow the science." In reality, epidemiological studies have shown that closing schools is one of the most effective ways to contain the pandemic.

In Virginia, following the Biden administration's lead, Governor Northam announced on February 5 that all schools statewide should reopen by March 15. Fairfax County, the largest school district in the state, and Loudon County, the third largest, began reopening schools last week.



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