

# The Binghamton University COVID-19 crisis and the way forward for students, faculty and staff

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COVID-19 continues to spread across State University of New York (SUNY) campuses. Six weeks into the semester, more than 4,000 students and staff have been infected.

Several campuses have seen a high percentage of students infected, including SUNY Cortland (5.7 percent of the campus population); SUNY Geneseo (5.6 percent); SUNY Delhi (3.6 percent); and the University at Albany (3.2 percent). Binghamton University, with 677 cases, has had the highest number of positive cases, infecting 4.5 percent of its on-campus population.

For the spring semester at Binghamton the university raised campus capacity to 85 percent, limiting the available space for isolating students. Once the available space to isolate and quarantine students began to fill up, the university took to drastic measures. According to students, as isolation housing became scarce, buildings and apartments were hastily chosen to make room, effectively mixing healthy, sick and potentially infected students. Multiple students have reported that several residents of the Hillside Community apartments were given four days to pack up their belongings and relocate to another dorm in order to make room for quarantining students.

A student who spoke to the WSWs reported a similar experience, “They also emptied an apartment building near me to make more room for isolation, and as of today those people have gone. I fear that may happen to me as well. I am under a lot of home pressure to move to an online student and come home, however I do not want to continue to pay for an apartment. I guess if my life is at risk I will have no choice.

“I have packed up a lot of my things and am living out of a suitcase at this point, afraid that at the drop of a hat we could be told we need to leave our dorms for more QI [quarantine and isolation] housing.”

The shortage of isolation housing has been so dire that the university reportedly began offering some students \$1500 housing credits if they agreed to return home to quarantine.

Incentivizing potentially ill students to return home could spread the virus to far flung communities and exacerbate the situation more broadly.

Some students who tested positive were told to return to their dorms to await further instruction about where they would be sent for isolation, putting fellow residents at risk of infection. Multiple students also reported that they did not receive food during part of their time in quarantine. When trying to get help from administrators, they ran into significant bureaucratic hurdles.

Rather than taking measures to lower transmissions, including shutting down all in-person classes, the university has placed blame for the outbreaks squarely on students. In a campus-wide email, Brian Rose, Binghamton University’s Vice President for Student Affairs, asked students, “What are you going to do to allow us to stay together for the rest of the semester?” Rose added, “Be a member of the campus community and not just a consumer of our services.”

After outbreaks began, the university initially took limited measures to help slow the spread of the virus. A few weeks into the spring semester, the university suspended campus activities and made dining halls take-out only. However, last Saturday, officials reopened recreation and non-academic activities and opened dining halls to 25 percent capacity. In-person instruction was never suspended, as had been done during the fall semester.

Students have taken to social media to express their frustration with the handling of the outbreak. One widely up-voted post by a student on the Binghamton University subreddit stated, “I want some tuition money back, I want my friends in the dorms to be able to get out of their insanely overpriced housing contracts, I want in-person classes canceled so that people have the option of getting the hell out of here, and, more than anything else, I want an acknowledgment that the student body is being asked to bear the entirety of this load with *zero* slack. We are here right now because the college is worried about its solvency, full

stop.”

Several students on social media and in comments to the WSWS remarked that they believe that Binghamton only remains open in order to maintain revenue. In response to a question as to why the university continues with in-person classes, a student told the WSWS, “Money. The school lost an insane amount of money due to suspending in-person classes last spring semester.”

Another Binghamton student told the WSWS, “the lack of care for human life is appalling. [University officials] do not care who lives and dies as long as they can have the money and comforts they had before. They do not care about the student workers who have not been able to find jobs or the ones who are working and are being put under severe strain or risk of illness. We should not be open. We should not have schools open. We should not have student activities open. We should not be in-person. The only way I can see this even remotely working in the current environment is if they vaccinate every single person on campus.”

With universities across the country facing a collective \$183 billion budget gap and little if any public financing forthcoming, many colleges cannot afford to shut down in-person classes, which would lead to most students studying at home, forgoing expensive campus housing and dining. With billions of dollars in cuts to state funding over the past several decades, the SUNY system is largely supported by tuition, fees and housing payments that it cannot afford to lose.

The reopening of colleges and universities is also bound up with the drive to reopen public schools and the broader economy. While health experts have warned against relaxing restrictions, especially with more infectious and potentially vaccine-resistant variants spreading rapidly, the Biden administration is following in the footsteps of Trump and pushing for a reopening of the economy before the pandemic is brought under control.

Despite constant rhetoric about helping students who have fallen behind and those with mental health needs, neither capitalist party has provided the necessary resources for education. For decades, these same parties have slashed budgets for public education and social services by billions of dollars. Their primary concern is the protection of the profits of the corporations they represent, not the social needs of workers and students.

Lauren, a student at SUNY Fredonia, also spoke to the WSWS about the issues with school reopenings.

“I don’t think any teacher should be pressured to teach in person if they’re not comfortable doing so, especially because many teachers have not been able to get vaccinated yet. The move to hybrid teaching seems good on paper, but from what I have seen, it is actually incredibly stressful on

the teachers. My brother is a middle school teacher in Nevada and he works nonstop.

“While I am sure the kids would learn a lot better if they went fully in-person, I think with the spread of more dangerous strains, we need to put the lives of our teachers and children before something like learning. Risking human lives is not worth it for any reason, in my opinion, especially not when half a million people have already died.”

She added, “[New York Governor] Cuomo cut the SUNY funding by millions recently and it could mean my tuition could go up. Overall, I am disgusted by the way politicians, including President Biden, are valuing the American economy over American lives. Nothing is worth the death of American citizens. The economy can rebound, but you can’t bring people back from the dead. Putting the economy before people is an ethical and moral act of treason, in my opinion.”

SUNY administrators and New York politicians, including principally Democratic Governor Andrew Cuomo, bear direct responsibility for the ongoing outbreaks at SUNY. Despite numerous outbreaks in the fall semester, in-person classes were allowed to proceed this semester, leading to the predictable mass outbreaks now unfolding.

To contain the pandemic, students, faculty and staff must organize independently of the corporatist trade unions. We encourage students, faculty and staff at Binghamton University and all SUNY schools to join the National Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee, which demands the shutdown of all in-person classes and non-essential production, full funding for quality online education, along with full income support to all workers and small businesses affected, until the pandemic is brought under control. Such a response must be paid for by the major corporations and banks, which have been provided trillions by the federal government in bailouts.

*To report on unsafe conditions at your campus or join a rank-and-file safety committee, contact the WSWS here or contact the author on social media.*



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