

Further evidence of the perils of US college reopenings

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A recent article published in the science journalism web site *Science News*, “How 5 Universities tried to handle COVID-19 on campus: Fall semester was the start of a big experiment,” shows that in-person education remains a breeding ground for the spread of the pandemic. It lays out much of the growing evidence that the SARS-CoV-2 virus spreads easily through indoor and community living.

Science writer Betsy Ladyzhets found a 56 percent increase in COVID-19 cases during the three-week period of in-person instructions in comparison to the three weeks before, when the universities offered remote learning. The piece also found that in the same counties where universities offered remote learning, COVID-19 cases dropped by almost 18 percent. The author states, “With these kinds of risks, a college campus seems like one more dangerous place to spend time.”

The author looked at five large universities: University of Wisconsin, Madison; North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University; University of Washington, Seattle; Colorado Mesa University; and Rice University in Houston, Texas. Data was extracted from university staff self-studies and university dashboards during the fall semester of 2020. Growth in new daily cases on a 7-day rolling average supported the evidence that in-person instruction increased COVID-19 virus spread significantly.

Some universities experienced late-semester peaks in infection from Halloween parties while others from surges in nearby cities. Each of the schools failed to fix the spread of the virus, even at the University of Washington, where the student and staff population was a fifth the normal level. Levels rose despite all schools cobbling together some type of mandatory PCR testing and mandating mask-wearing and restrictions on

public gatherings. A large number of these efforts were initiated by the student “health ambassadors” to protect themselves, their friends and teachers, and loved ones at home.

This high risk is further corroborated by an analysis reported in *Computer Methods in Biomechanics and Biomedical Engineering* on January 13, 2021, which showed that at 30 large universities COVID infections spiked in 14 colleges within 14 days of class, with seven-day incidences well above 1,000 per 100,000, an order of magnitude larger than nationwide peaks of 70 and 150 during the first and second waves of the pandemic.

The danger is not only to college students, but to surrounding communities. In December, the *New York Times* reported that infection rates have risen faster than the national average in counties where students make up at least 10 percent of the population.

The *Washington Post* in a recent article, “As U-Va. and U-Md. try to curb surge in coronavirus cases, neighbors brace for impact,” reported that these schools have seen an alarming surge of new COVID cases after reopening in-person. The article stated that University of Maryland and University of Virginia officials claimed that they had not seen incidents of viral transmissions in the classrooms. While U-Md. temporarily cancelled in-person classes after coronavirus infections surged past 60 cases a day, U-Va. kept classes open even after it logged in 229 cases in a single day. In fact, Jim Ryan, U-Va.’s president, said at a virtual town hall, “We knew that if we went too far or were too aggressive, it would feel like we are living in a totalitarian state and it contravened our foundational culture of trusting students to govern themselves.”

According to the U-Va. and U-Md. officials the

outbreak and surge in cases could not be traced to a single source. They claimed that the spike in infections was due to widespread noncompliance with the health guidelines and protocols, specifically blaming large student gatherings, not wearing of masks at dinners, holding in-person recruitment events by student sororities and fraternities, other social meetups, and the possibility of more infectious variant in the campus. The majority of the U-Va. and U-Md. COVID cases were from students living off campus, and the officials reported that there was no link to cases spreading from their students to the wider Charlottesville or Prince George's County communities that surrounded these universities.

On March 1, the *Erie Times-News* posted an article on the Edinboro University of Pennsylvania that reported a dramatic surge of COVID cases at its campus in the last week of February. Out of only 420 students living on-campus this semester, about one-third the usual number, 58 students and 3 university employees tested positive for COVID-19. It was also reported that only 16 university students and one employee had tested positive for COVID-19 previously in this semester.

This spike caused the university to stop all in-person classes. Dale-Elizabeth Pehrsson, university interim president, said in the letter to university students and staff, "Our contract tracing had not revealed any evidence of transmission from in-person instructions" and "The decision to impose the 10-day pause is being made out of an abundance of caution for our students, faculty and staff. We plan to resume in-person classes and approved activities on Monday, March 8."

The *Times-News* article further noted that Erie County saw 98 new cases on Saturday and 29 new cases on Sunday of this past week. The county reported that the amount of COVID-19 virus detected in the samples from the Erie Wastewater Treatment Plant had increased for the second straight week in a row. The estimated cases per day based on the sampling had risen from 40 to 120 in the past two weeks. The concern of the county officials was that fewer people were getting tested and these untested people could spark off an increase in COVID-19 cases and hospitalizations over the next two weeks.

Another article posted on 6 Action News reported an alarming spring surge of over 70 COVID cases a day at

the University of Delaware, where the count was 134 a week in the prior semester. A spokesperson for the university said based on their contract tracing a lot of transmission is happening because students are taking off their masks and are in larger groups in the dining halls, are not following protocols, and are meeting in large gatherings. Here as well, the officials reported a lack of evidence in transmission of virus from in-person instruction.



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