

University of Iowa will not require masks or vaccinations as students begin fall semester amid a surge of Delta variant

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Monday, August 23 marked the first day of classes at the University of Iowa in Iowa City, Iowa, with tens of thousands of incoming freshmen and returning students arriving on campus for in-person learning from all across the state, the country and internationally.

This influx of students and the accompanying pre-semester activities, such as residence hall move-in, are being done with no mask mandate requirement from the school. While new university President Barbara Wilson has asked students to wear masks and get vaccinated, the rulings of the Iowa Board of Regents in regards to safety from the pandemic on campus are much more revealing.

Earlier this summer, the Board declared that it was unlawful for the three largest universities in the state—University of Iowa, Iowa State, and Northern Iowa—to require mask mandates or proof of vaccination for students and faculty during the fall semester. As for the University of Iowa, it remains the only school in the Big Ten to not require a mask mandate in class. Social distancing will also not be enforced and classes will be filled to capacity with only classes containing 150 or more students to be held online. Perfunctory measures which do not hinder the spread of the airborne COVID-19 virus, like extra hand sanitizer and plexiglass shields, are being implemented along with a free vaccine clinic and free masks to be distributed around campus.

Wilson noted in a recent interview that the school's rulings regarding COVID-19 were “not a political issue, but a health issue.” As has been said numerous times by the *World Socialist Web Site*, the COVID-19 pandemic and the social crisis that continues to this day is one of enormous political stakes which exemplify the

irreconcilable class tensions in society between the capitalist ruling class and the working class. As with many other corporations and institutions, the aim is not to protect students and faculty but instead to risk their lives by forcing them back to work and to school in person to maintain the profits of these billion-dollar universities.

And, also like many other reopenings, there has been considerable resistance on the part of educators and students alike. When the University of Iowa announced its plans for the semester earlier in the month, over 500 employees (including hundreds of faculty) signed a petition to the Board of Regents pushing for more stringent policies to mitigate risk. The petition also asked for more online or hybrid teaching options for the fall given the rapid spread of the more infectious Delta variant. The Regents in response said they would only relent to those different teaching methods “when there is a legitimate business rationale that serves the best interest of the institution.” In other words, the decision to return to remote learning would only occur if the university loses profits in conjunction with the lives and health of its workforce.

The effort to hide the immediate lethal threat of the Delta variant and COVID-19 in general from workers and students was apparent in the guidelines sent by the university to faculty regarding their ability to speak about masks and vaccinations in the classroom to students. The original guidelines called for teachers to only discuss these matters in explicit regards to a student's health and not in any other capacity. It also stated that any faculty member discussing mask usage or vaccination would only be able to describe their own personal feelings regarding their own decision, not as a

statement regarding the use of masks or vaccination in general. A flurry of angry responses from faculty citing this blatant restriction of free speech caused the guidelines to be taken down within only a few days. The university was forced to revise the guidelines and remove this section in the subsequent weeks.

Meanwhile, Iowa City has implemented a mask mandate for indoor spaces throughout the area, meaning the university will be the only place in the city where a mask mandate is not required. This inconsistent and disorienting atmosphere will contribute to the already arbitrary and unclear methods being raised by the university to stop the spread of the disease. In regards to the whole state, K-12 schools are not being required to enforce mask mandates, meaning the other schools in Johnson County, where the university is located, will also not be enforcing mask usage or social distancing.

As with many other universities, the University of Iowa has claimed the minimal measures it has put in place are sufficient and instead places the blame squarely on students in regards to the success or failure of the in-person semester.

Christine Petersen, Director of the Center for Emerging Infectious Disease at the university, said on Iowa Public Radio that she is much more worried about the disease spreading in off-campus gatherings and parties among students than in the classroom which she says is a much safer environment. In a direct address to students she said, “We know that college is supposed to be fun and free years of life, but it’s also when you’re making that transition into adulthood. And we really need you to be grownups and take responsibility for your body.”

The ruling class and its representatives have repeatedly sought to blame students and the working class as a whole for the pandemic’s continued spread. There is no mention of the destructive and obfuscating policies—under the rubric of so called “herd immunity” or mitigation—which have allowed the disease to spread rampantly amongst the working class, leading to at least 650,000 unnecessary deaths.

On Sunday, August 22, the *World Socialist Web Site* held a meeting with leading scientists from around the world to discuss a scientific program for eradicating COVID-19—involving lockdowns, the closure of schools and non-essential businesses with full

compensation, in coordination with a global massive vaccination campaign, until the virus is stamped out—as the only course of action which will end the pandemic.

As the pandemic continues to escalate in even more dangerous ways, the actions taken by institutions like the University of Iowa show a true contempt and disregard for human life by the capitalist class. Students, workers and educators must unite under a program of socialism under the leadership of the international working class in order to save lives. The policies by the University of Iowa and other states and institutions forcing young people and workers back in person with total disregard to their health and safety must be opposed at every turn. Contact the Socialist Equality Party and the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) today to join this fight.



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