Amid catastrophic spread of COVID-19: Florida colleges and universities open with in-person learning

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31 August 2021

All of Florida's colleges began their fall semesters in August amid a devastating spread of COVID-19 throughout the state and a catastrophic growth of hospitalizations and deaths. Although the latest wave is proving far more deadly because of the highly more infectious and transmissible Delta variant, school officials and administrators have elected to pursue in-person learning while repudiating even the most minimal public health precautions on campuses.

After more than a year of closures due to the dangers of the pandemic, an overwhelming majority of Florida's public universities and colleges, comprising more than 1.1 million students and hundreds of thousands of faculty and staff, are deciding to shovel teachers and students into environments where the chances of major outbreaks occurring throughout the school system are all but inevitable.

Students at virtually all the major universities will be returning to in-person classrooms at normal capacity, with no requirements or tracking for vaccinations. Unlike the 2020-2021 school year, when all colleges reopened with safety measures such as mask requirements and social distancing in the pandemic, mask-wearing in the classrooms and around campus are merely "recommended" but will not be enforced on school grounds.

The Florida Board of Governors, which oversees the state's public universities, recently issued health guidelines to university officials recommending everyone on campus get fully vaccinated and wear face masks indoors. However, the guidelines make clear that vaccines or face coverings while on campus can go unmandated, leaving every college to jettison even the most basic precautions. The shift in policy in higher education is entirely in line with the state's reopening of K-12 schools that was spearheaded by Governor Ron DeSantis, who is continuing to issue threats of fines and penalties for districts that implement mask mandates despite immense and growing opposition from educators and staff.

These policies are creating the conditions not just for outbreaks on the campuses, but a devastating growth of infection in surrounding communities and the entire state, which is already experiencing a horrific health crisis being fueled by the Delta variant. On Monday, Florida reported 31,164 additional COVID-19 cases and 902 deaths to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, according to *Miami Herald* calculations of CDC data.

All but eight of the newly reported deaths occurred after August 2, with 70 percent of those people passing away in the last two weeks. Meanwhile, the CDC reported this week that every county in the state is witnessing a "high" level of community transmission, a development that will certainly be worsened by the reopening of some of the largest universities.

Florida State University in Tallahassee reverted to "normal, pre-pandemic operations" after classes resumed on August 23. Spokeswoman Amy Farnum-Patronis said in a statement that the university "expects" people to get vaccinated and wear masks even if they've received the vaccine, but mask wearing will not be required within classrooms or other group settings.

The University of Florida, the fifth largest school in the US, is also resuming classes in a total in-person format along with pre-pandemic operations for events this fall. Before the start of classes, the university initially released a statement saying that "fully immunized adults need not wear masks." However, officials were forced to revise their lax policy last week because of the explosive growth of cases and hospitalizations among local residents, while citing "large numbers of people who are unvaccinated."

In the absence of any government-imposed restrictions or even joint planning across Florida's college and university systems, schools are formulating their policies on a campus-to-campus basis, with very little concern for the health and safety of the most vulnerable populations. At Florida A&M University, students are required to show proof of vaccination or a negative COVID-19 test result to live in

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dormitories or other on-campus housing, which is completely inadequate for preventing infections since students can still capture and transmit the virus after testing negative.

At the University of South Florida, residents have been mandated to undergo a COVID-19 health screening with a mask and can be allowed to live on campus with just a negative test result and no vaccination history. However, a spokesperson for USF told *Florida Phoenix* that proof of vaccination history or COVID-29 testing is not required to move into residence halls but will be based on the preferences of the resident, who can "bring those items for their own preferences." This policy is sure to undermine any tracking system for vaccination in case of an outbreak among residents.

Emboldening the anti-scientific protocols driving the reopening campaigns on the college campuses are the efforts of Governor DeSantis to impose a slew of anti-democratic and reactionary legislation which has stripped localities of any authority to implement public health measures. In May, DeSantis signed bill SB 2006 into law, which bars all educational institutions from requiring students or residents to provide any documentation certifying COVID-19 or post-infection recovery for attendance or enrollment.

In an email to *Florida Phoenix,* the governor's press secretary Christina Pushaw expressed her approval of the policies of the colleges and said that they don't violate another bill that prohibits businesses and government institutions from regulating vaccine status in their facilities. Pushaw called the option invoked by some colleges that students show a negative COVID test instead "acceptable under SB 2006, because students have the choice to show a vaccine passport or not."

While vaccines have so far been mandated for students or employees for 730 higher education institutions nationwide, only six schools in Florida have required vaccinations. Even for several of these schools, vaccinations are only mandatory for employees and not students, including the University of Miami, Jacksonville University and Nova Southeastern University.

Although many critics of the DeSantis administration have sought to place the blame for the reckless reopening strategies of the universities on the Republicans and their hysterical opposition to limited health measures, complicit are also the trade unions and Democratic Party, both of which have done nothing to challenge the reopenings but have instead capitulated to the Republicans and even sanctioned such measures.

The United Faculty of Florida, one of the largest trade unions representing 25,000 faculty at all 12 of the state's universities, have resorted to impotent and mealy-mouthed requests to DeSantis and university officials to put in place better health protections for their membership. In a press conference leading up to the first day of classes on August 23, UFF co-president at the University of Florida (UF), Paul Ortiz, pleaded that the university "take a leap of faith and do the right thing" instead of endangering the lives of millions.

Similar pronouncements were issued by officials of the Graduate Assistants United Union, who asked university leaders to require the first three weeks of classes be online, vaccines be required, and transparent and frequent UF COVID reporting be carried out.

Instead of mobilizing the tens of thousands of faculty members whose lives will be placed at risk in classrooms and waging a real fight against the universities' policies, the unions are placing confidence in administrators to reverse their policies. Andrew Gothard, president of the UFF, said in a phone interview with *Florida Phoenix,* "Our hope is they will come out and do the sensible thing and do a mask mandate." Rather than take strike action against shut-down classrooms, Gothard suggested campuses "could facilitate vaccine drives" for students and faculty.

The rejection of safety protocols on the campuses has been strengthened at the federal level by the Biden administration and the Democratic Party, who have taken no serious stand against the homicidal measures of governors like DeSantis and Texas Governor Greg Abbott, while championing "mitigation" strategies that will do little to nothing to prevent the spread of COVID-19 in schools, let alone eradicate the virus overall.

In its latest July 23 guidance for higher education, the CDC gave the green light for administrators to forgo mask and physical distancing requirements. The CDC said this was permissible if students, faculty and staff "are fully vaccinated prior to the start of the semester," something most schools are refusing to track or require on campus.

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