

Hundreds of vaccinated students test positive for COVID-19 at Duke University

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After hundreds of vaccinated students and staff tested positive for COVID-19 at Duke University, the university administration is implementing stricter measures to stop the spread of the virus.

Although Duke boasts the highest vaccination rate among major North Carolina universities and is requiring all students and staff to receive their shot by October 1, last week 349 students and 15 employees tested positive for the virus. All but eight were fully vaccinated. These cases have arisen in the context of vaccination rates for students standing at 98 percent, and 92 percent for faculty. Students are also tested weekly and those who are unvaccinated are required to take a test twice a week.

In an attempt to control the growing outbreak, the administration is placing new limits on student activities. In addition to the previous mandate requiring masks in classrooms and indoor settings, all students must now wear masks outdoors, while at the gym and generally around other students. All indoor seating for dining has been moved outside, with more than 25 tents set up across campus for meals. Faculty have also been given the temporary option of shifting classes online for the next two weeks due to many students missing class because of quarantine.

According to the Raleigh News and Observer, Duke administrators announced the new guidelines in an email saying “this surge is placing significant stress on the people, systems and facilities that are dedicated to protecting our health, safety and the ability of Duke to fulfill its educational mission, particularly our isolation space for on-campus students who test positive.”

One year ago, while classes were fully remote, only 241 students and staff tested positive for coronavirus during the entire fall semester, in contrast to the 349 positive cases just this past week. Such a substantial

increase in transmission is occurring under conditions where universities and schools are attempting to reopen under normal conditions, all while the Delta variant continues to spread throughout the population, causing more and more breakthrough cases and filling up ICU units across the state.

In fact, more than 3,700 people are currently hospitalized across North Carolina. At Duke University Hospital and Duke Health Raleigh, the ICUs are currently at capacity. At Duke Regional Hospital in Durham, two ICU beds are available. In the larger Raleigh-Durham-Chapel Hill Triangle region, there are a cumulative 12 remaining ICU beds available to treat critically ill patients.

Over the month of August, 788 North Carolinians died from COVID-19, making it the deadliest month of the pandemic since February, even though vaccines have become widely available. The state also reported over 7,200 new cases on Wednesday, with a 13.8 percent positivity rate. Of the cases that have been sequenced, 97 percent are Delta, according to the latest report from the CDC.

Other universities across the state have also begun to reopen for full in-person instruction during August, though most are not requiring students or staff to be vaccinated. At the University of North Carolina at Charlotte, from August 23 to August 30, 158 students and 16 employees tested positive. At UNC Chapel Hill, 230 students tested positive in the last week, and 468 were reported in the last month.

At Appalachian State University, where only 51 percent of students and 88 percent of staff are vaccinated, 216 positive tests have been reported. Though university testing is limited and these figures may not represent the full extent of the spread, the positivity rate has surged to 10.5 percent this past week,

the highest it has been since the beginning of the pandemic.

In response to this, more than 200 faculty have petitioned to move all possible courses online until vaccination rates increase and COVID-19 transmission rates decrease.

Across the nation, students and faculty are facing similar conditions, with University of Michigan faculty circulating a similar petition that has received over 700 signatures from graduate students, lecturers and staff.



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