

Appalachian State faculty call for shift to online classes as COVID-19 cases surge

Appalachian State International Youth and Students for Social Equality
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More than 200 faculty at Appalachian State University, in Boone, North Carolina have called on university administration to move all courses online until vaccination rates increase and test positivity rates decline on campus and across the surrounding area.

Watauga County, where ASU is located, is currently under a state of emergency and 216 cases have been reported among students and staff since the beginning of classes in mid-August. As of today, only 52 percent of the student population, and 89 percent of staff are reported to be vaccinated. According to public data available on the university's COVID dashboard, case positivity rates have surged to the highest they have ever been during the pandemic since classes began last month. Though university testing is limited and only encompasses cases reported through university services, positivity rates have risen from 10.4 percent to 10.5 percent during the last week of August.

Although the pandemic is quickly approaching the same level of severity as last winter, the university administration has removed most, if not all safety measures it previously put in place to prevent community transmission. Although the mask mandate is still in place for classes and indoor settings, there is no social distancing in classrooms, where students are packed closely together. Previously, campus dining facilities were socially distanced and "to go" options were offered with minimal contact. Other safety measures, such as the covering up of personal water fountains to prevent indirect transmission of the virus, have all been removed.

The administration permitted famous country artist Luke Combs to perform on campus, Saturday, September 4, attracting 32,000 people to Boone, a gathering that is almost double the town's 17,000 residents. This super-spreader event, where most

attendees did not wear masks while they are in town, threatens an even greater surge of the pandemic across Watauga County.

In response to these events, the faculty petition was sent to Chancellor Sheri Everts on August 26 via email, requesting that the university move all classes online until vaccination rates reach 70 percent, and community transmission declines to 5 percent. The petition garnered 214 signatures and called on university administration to: "rise to meet this moment through courageous, compassionate, and moral decisions in the interest of the health and safety of our students, faculty and staff, and community."

However, Chancellor Everts is continuing to push forward with in-person classes. In the most recent COVID-19 Update, sent to all students and staff over email, Everts reiterated: "At this time, there are no plans to move the university's in-person classes online. The key to managing the severity of the impact is the COVID-19 vaccine, as vaccinated individuals are less likely to contract COVID-19, and for those who do, the vaccine reduces the severity of the illness, lowers the stress on our medical system and allows the university, our community and our state to remain open and fully functional."

Though the vaccine is a useful tool, it has been proven by recent events, as well as peer-reviewed scientific studies, that it alone, alongside masks, will not prevent the spread of the highly contagious Delta variant. The variant is too transmissible and vaccine resistant for vaccinations alone to stop the virus. A recent theoretical model by Dr. Malgorzata Gasperowicz at the University of Calgary estimated that with 64 percent of the population fully vaccinated and assuming the vaccines have 60 percent efficacy against the Delta variant, the R (reproduction) number

would likely remain at the highly elevated 3.7. Her model found that only through the combination of vaccinations and public health measures including lockdowns would the R number be reduced to 0.86.

Recent data from Duke University, just three hours from Boone, also shows that vaccines alone are not enough. 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. Students are also tested on a weekly basis and those who are unvaccinated are required to take a test twice a week. In contrast, current safety measures at Appalachian State as well as vaccination rates do not begin to measure up to those of Duke University.

Students, faculty, staff and the broader community must be warned: as long as classes remain in-person, regardless of the vaccination rate, the outbreak will continue to accelerate. The demand for a 70 percent vaccination rate among students, though admirable, must be raised to 100 percent and even then, classes must be moved online for the safety of all students and staff until the virus is brought fully under control. Continuing with in-person classes under present conditions presents a grave danger to the Boone and Appalachian State community.

Under present conditions it is not a question of if, but when students and staff fall ill and die. One student, 19 year old Chad Dorrill, has already died due to the administration's reckless actions. The continuation of in-person classes amid the rampant spread of the virus is a callous disregard to his memory.

In this struggle, Appalachian State staff are not alone. All across the country and internationally, students, faculty and staff are beginning to fight back against the unsafe reopening of schools, universities and workplaces. Just this week, students and staff at the University of Michigan have begun to circulate a petition and have threatened to go on strike over the continuation of in-person classes. Staff at Syracuse University in New York are also threatening a walkout and faculty at UNC Chapel Hill are circulating a petition to move classes online.

To fight back against the pandemic and implement a genuinely scientific public health strategy, faculty and students are beginning to stand up against the reckless

reopening of schools and workplaces across the country. The *World Socialist Web Site*, the Socialist Equality Party and International Youth and Students for Social Equality are actively assisting workers, teachers, and faculty in these efforts by helping form rank-and-file committees, independent of the trade unions and the Democratic Party across all workplaces. Appalachian State students, faculty and staff must begin to organize upon and expand the demands laid out in last week's petition and join the fight against the dangerous conditions caused by the reopening of schools across the country!

Faculty and staff interested in learning more about setting up a rank-and-file committee should contact the WSWS and the education newsletter. For those interested in more information about the International Youth and Students for Social Equality, the youth section of the Socialist Equality Party, click here.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact