

University of California, Berkeley reopens with hundreds of new cases, ending quarantine measures

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The University of California, Berkeley (UCB), one of the largest public universities in the United States, fully reopened for in-person instruction last week for the first time since going remote in March 2020.

In a matter of days, the university, which is home to about 45,000 students, has become a major vector for the spread of COVID-19. As students began coming back to campus in August, known cases on the university's COVID dashboard rose from 22 in the first week of August to 28 the next week, 48 the week after, 64 for the week of August 22, and 84 for the August 29 to September 4, the final week for which there is complete data.

This surge in cases is the entirely predictable result of the decision to reopen for in-person learning with few if any protections.

Liza, an undergraduate at the university, a self-described "high risk disabled, low income student," posted a story about her experience which went viral, getting 28,000 "likes." She wrote that the "university is forcing me to sacrifice my life to attend class." The administration explained that because they must be enrolled in classes to receive health care, they cannot withdraw due to COVID-19 concerns. But because they are high-risk, attending class is extremely dangerous. In short, they face an impossible choice.

Rosa Enriquez, a UC Berkeley student pursuing a master's degree in social work, explained the situation, "The students are literally rubbing shoulders with each other; that's how close they are. The school is saying that there are protections in place, but there are not. Some professors are bringing in their own masks for students because they're not being provided.

"UC Berkeley is only one of two UCs that does not require testing. And they shut down one of the two testing centers around August 20 so they could have a football game and football practice. That site that they shut down is the closest to Greek Row, to the sororities and fraternities."

In the week of August 15, students, faculty and staff conducted 16,421 tests, according to the university's COVID dashboard. This number fell by 27.3 percent the following week and by a further 28 percent the week after.

On Saturday, September 4, in defiance of its stated mission to "avoid significant spread," the university kicked off its football season to a packed stadium of 64,000 screaming fans. Officials stated that the stadium would operate at full capacity and recommended, but did not require, attendees to show proof of vaccination or a recent negative COVID-19 test. Events like these have shown to be superspreader events, bringing inevitable infection and death to attendees and those with whom they come into contact.

In a letter sent to instructors by the Berkeley University Health Services (UHS), the university coldly admitted "[t]here will be infections on campus, and we must accept that." The university advised students and faculty to practice social distancing "[e]ven though our physical environment doesn't allow for physical distancing at scale." The university's claims that its "main focus is to avoid significant spread and to avoid severe disease that puts an unvaccinated person, including young children ... in the hospital, or worse" stand in sharp contrast to its decisions to loosen campus restrictions.

"Sadly, UC Berkeley is simply pursuing the policy of allowing widespread infection that's being pursued by both the Democrats and Republicans," said David Moore, the Socialist Equality Party's candidate for governor in the recall election. "No matter what mitigation measures are in place, without a plan to eliminate COVID transmission, everyone will get infected sooner or later, with an immense impact on social well-being. We're already seeing a lot of long-term health impacts for people recovering from COVID, including teenagers and college-age students.

"We're running in this election, precisely to give workers and youth a candidate that puts lives over corporate profits."

This decline in testing and this reckless mass sporting

event are thus part of a deliberate policy by the university to allow widespread circulation of COVID-19, with transmission currently dominated by the highly transmissible and deadly Delta variant.

At the end of August, the University Health Services announced that asymptomatic, vaccinated individuals who had been in close contact with those who had tested positive for COVID-19 would not be required to quarantine, even if they tested positive. Given the well-established reality of COVID-19, this will only accelerate transmission on campus.

In the course of her personal attempts to secure remote learning accommodations, Rosa verified that this is indeed university policy. “I myself am a disabled student,” Rosa explained. “The week before classes, getting my disabled student accommodations has been a mess. Being told from the school’s social welfare to talk to the disabled students program. The disabled students program telling me to talk to university health services. University health services telling me to talk to disabled students program. The disabled students program telling me to talk to administration.

“When I asked for accommodations at the School of Social Welfare, they told me I should take a leave of absence. I told them that was not an option. I would lose my health care. I found that extremely shocking and unacceptable. I’ve heard that many other students have been told this.

“I was able to have a meeting with the three deans of the School of Social Welfare. They told me that it is UC Berkeley protocol to not have any accommodation for students who feel unsafe in classroom unless they have specific disabled student accommodations, which are extremely difficult to get.

“The medical director came and spoke to us because of all the noise I’ve been making. She only came to talk to our MSW cohort and said, ‘We’re not going to focus on prevention. We’re only going to focus on mitigating the symptoms.’ It was very disturbing.

“When I asked why we’re not testing, she said, ‘There’s no money,’ and ‘We’re kind of an experiment because of the level of vaccination we have.’”

To counter this intolerable response from the administration, Rosa released an open letter on September 1 demanding remote learning options and greater student input into the conditions they face. The letter now has over 220 signatures from students and staff.

“I was really surprised that we had staff sign this letter. It’s not just students who have these concerns. I want to reach out to the custodial staff to hear their perspectives. A lot of instructors, you can tell they don’t agree with this either, and they’re very frustrated. They feel very trapped by

their role. Their jobs are at stake. Thankfully, mine is not.”

Other students, faculty and staff have also expressed concern and anger over the decision of the university to switch this rule, as well as the entire approach of the university to going to in-person instruction. “This is literally insane,” wrote one student, Anna (@bademjanbitch, September 3). Amanda (@mandapxnda, September 3), another student, posted, “I wish I was shocked. Our campus reopening has been so poorly planned and both students and faculty members have expressed the fear that reopening so suddenly in the midst of a global pandemic has brought them due to this lack of planning.”

Millions of university students in the US and across the world are facing the same basic dangers. The International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE)—including its chapter at UC Berkeley —calls on students and youth around the country to oppose this deadly reopening of schools! We reject the lie that a mitigation-based approach will allow us to “safely” reopen while there is still community transmission of COVID-19. Take a stand with teachers and the rest of the working class in fighting for the actual end to this pandemic through the taking of the necessary scientifically guided measures to eliminate and ultimately eradicate the virus on a global scale.

Faculty in other parts of the country have already begun calling for a return to online classes as the Delta variant spreads through schools. At Stanford University, resident assistants are on strike over the insufficient protections against COVID. Meanwhile, other major universities have opened or plan to open soon, sparking opposition from students, faculty and staff who recognize the danger as the fall semester unfolds.

We call on all who agree with this perspective to contact the IYSSE and the *World Socialist Web Site* today.



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Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact