

Michigan colleges recklessly reopen as Delta variant surges

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Conditions in the state of Michigan provide a glimpse of the situation unfolding in every state across the country, as K-12 and college campuses open for in-person learning. At the end of August, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) warned that every county in the state has a “substantial to high risk” of COVID-19 transmission. On September 3, the state saw 5,292 new infections and 56 deaths, with a seven-day average of 2,332 and 22, respectively. Health officials identified 356 active COVID-19 outbreaks across the state on September 1, an 18 percent increase from the previous week.

Under these conditions nearly every college campus in the state has reopened for in-person learning, bringing hundreds of thousands of students, staff and faculty back to the classrooms and dorms.

The initial impact of the reckless reopening plans is being felt immediately. At the University of Michigan, 167 new infections were identified over the past two weeks, a more than two-fold increase in infection positivity rate from the previous two weeks.

At Western Michigan University (WMU), where as much as 60 percent of students and 33.6 percent of employees are unvaccinated, eight new cases appeared between August 26 and September 1, even with only approximately 1 percent of the student body being tested. Similarly, Eastern Michigan University (EMU) reported two new cases during “move-in” week between August 26-31.

Nearly every county with a college campus is seeing an increase in cases. The health department in Washtenaw County, home to the University of Michigan’s Ann Arbor (U-M) campus and Eastern Michigan University, reported that individuals in the age groups of 5 to 11 and 12 to 17 have weekly case rates of 102.3 and 77.5 per 100,000 between August 19 and September 1. Cases for those under the age of 23 accounted for an alarming 37 percent of total cases.

Wayne County, the location of Wayne State University (WSU), has also seen a massive spike in cases. On August 27 the county’s Public Health Department was forced to reinstate mask wearing in all schools and day care centers. Public health officials in Isabella County, home to Central Michigan University (CMU), reported over 100 new cases last week, doubling the previous week’s totals.

As a result of in-person school reopening, Michigan’s health care system is once again being overwhelmed. Currently more than 1,200 adults and 20 children are hospitalized for COVID-19, more than a three-fold increase from last month. On September 1, top health officials with the Henry Ford Health System warned of their hospitals being at full capacity, hindering their ability to treat non-COVID illnesses. This comes as they are experiencing their “worst shortage of registered nurses in history.”

With few deviations, most universities either do not require vaccinations or provide a litany of loopholes if they are required. Masking is often only mandated indoors though some schools, such as EMU, allow students to get waivers even for this. Students have taken to social media to complain about the lack of social distancing, crowded classrooms and quarantining for those potentially exposed to positive cases.

At U-M a student posted at length about the ineptitude of the current testing and tracking systems, after having been informed that she was potentially exposed in one of her five classes. The university email informed her that if she was fully vaccinated and asymptomatic, she did not have to get a test and was not at risk. The student rejected the claim, pointing out that she already knew of multiple asymptomatic “breakthrough” cases among friends.

Another U-M student, in a statement to the *WSWS*, described daily experiences in classrooms:

One week into the semester, I'm already very worried about a looming large-scale outbreak on campus. Classrooms, in general, are very crowded. One of my classes has hundreds of people attending in person, all packed into a big auditorium. It's impossible to have an empty seat around you to maintain the least social distancing. Some of my classmates are not wearing their masks properly, which gets me really anxious. I haven't seen any attempt to disinfect desks and chairs in between classes either.

On September 4, the official U-M Athletic Twitter account celebrated the "achievement" of holding a football game with 109,295 people in attendance. Images of the opening football game between UM and WMU showed a sea of people packed into the stadium like sardines, almost none wearing masks, which were not required except in restrooms.

Already the impact of these dangerous and potential "super-spreader" events are being felt on campus. The university announced on September 8 that "COVID-19 activity has increased among U-M students since last week and has been primarily linked to social gatherings without masks. ... U-M student cases currently represent 25% of the cases in Washtenaw County."

The effort to "shift the blame" for cases and outbreaks onto students is already underway. But, as the International Youth and Students for Social Equality, IYSSE-UM warned last week the effort to lower the awareness of the current dangers is part of a class policy:

There is no doubt that a large section of students on campus do not understand the dangers of the Delta variant but by no fault of their own. The university administration and the entire political establishment have deliberately downplayed the threat in order to reopen schools and workplaces.

The university administration, mirroring the "strategy" of the Biden administration, has been carrying out a constant campaign to assure the public that "things are going back to normal." It has lifted capacity limits on classes, indoor gatherings and sports events. In fact, in the past three days, the university went ahead with its annual club fair, where thousands of students gathered, with at least three-quarters unmasked.

Despite the efforts to downplay the dangers of returning to in-person, opposition is growing. At U-M over 750 professors, lecturers and graduate students signed a petition demanding stricter public health measures against COVID-19 on campus. The letter correctly notes, "While vaccines provide good protection against illness, the widespread misperception among students that vaccines will provide near-perfect protection against transmission is likely to contribute to behavior that creates a higher infection rate among the students than in the general population."

Faculty and staff in both main educators' unions at EMU also openly raised concerns last week over the university's potentially dangerous reopening policies. Faculty at WMU also issued an open letter through their union to the university president, denouncing "disastrous" COVID-19 conditions and policies on campus.

In addition, educators at multiple campuses are now threatening to go on strike for better working conditions and pay increases. Lecturers at U-M's Flint, Ann Arbor and Dearborn campuses could announce a strike as early as Thursday. They currently have been working without a contract since April 20. Faculty at Western Michigan University may also strike in the coming week, over similar concerns, after their contract expired on September 6.

The IYSSE calls for students and youth to fight for a scientific policy of eradicating the virus, both on and off campus. This would entail the immediate shutting down of nonessential production and the closure of the schools to stop the spread of the coronavirus and save lives, combined with emergency assistance to all those impacted. Such a policy is not only possible but is only way to save lives.

Our student club at U-M plans to address these issues at a virtual public meeting of the IYSSE this Thursday, September 9, at 7:30 p.m. EST. Register at this link for more information.



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