

Texas A&M student dies of COVID-19 as new cases explode at Texas colleges

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Twenty-year-old Texas A&M University student Kirstyn Katherine Ahuero died from COVID-19 on September 8. Her death comes as campuses have reopened for in-person classes, and thousands of students have tested positive for the virus.

According to her obituary, Ahuero was a sophomore biomedical sciences major at Texas A&M University, College Station, the valedictorian of her high school class, and a volunteer over the past summer for the National Suicide Hotline, having decided that she wanted to be a psychiatric nurse. She loved spending time with her animals, taking trips with family and gaming with her family and friends.

Amy Earhart, an associate professor of English at Texas A&M, stated in a tweet with over 51,000 likes, “Our first student has died of covid ... and I feel horrible. No masking rules, no vaccination rules. How is this ok?”

It is not known at this time whether Ahuero was vaccinated.

In the wake of her death, no shutdown of in-person classes has been announced by the university, nor has there even been a change in safety measures.

Many of the tweets in response to Earhart’s tweet expressed outrage at the clearly homicidal policy of the Texas government, which has banned both mask and vaccine mandates in the state even as deaths spiraled out of control. As of Wednesday 20,000 new cases were confirmed, with 411 deaths reported. Almost 60,000 people have lost their lives in the state from COVID-19 as a result of the bipartisan push for reopening nonessential businesses and schools while throwing out public health measures.

Susan Chabot commented, “Exactly the reason I retired effective Wed. I can’t in good conscious work for a district that has no mitigation in place to slow the spread. Missing out on \$6000 in longevity and AP score bonuses but I can’t watch it happen day after day.” Many others expressed similar experiences and sympathy for school staff, who have been forced to choose between their jobs and their health.

Liz Norell asked what it would take for the government to change course, with Kelsey Kaye replying in a comment referencing the 2012 mass shooting at an elementary school in Connecticut, that “Sandy Hook proved that children dying isn’t enough to promote change.” She received over 2,000 likes.

Ahuero joins a growing number of young people who have tragically passed away from COVID-19 in the prime of their lives. Breanna Gray, 19, was going to be attending her first semester at Navarro College in Corsicana, Texas, when she fell ill on July 31 and died August 19.

Even as infections rise, Texas A&M ended mandatory COVID-19

testing last Friday. The university has 1,554 active cases, according to its own count as of this writing. Given the university has a combined 74,214 students and staff, that would mean that at least 2 percent of the student population is *currently* infected with coronavirus. The day of Ahuero’s death, 200 cases among students and 6 among staff were reported on the university’s website.

According to the university’s own data, within a span of just 12 days between August 31 to September 11, 5 percent of the total student body of 72,982 students, or 3,388 students, had become infected with coronavirus. The university has no numbers available for how many of those infected required hospitalization.

College Station is located in Trauma Service Area N, which encompasses 360,000 people. In this Service Area, according to the Texas Department of State Health Services, close to zero ICU beds have been available since August, with one such bed available as of this writing and just 35 ordinary hospital beds open. This situation persists for most of the state, with only 322 adult ICU beds remaining available for the whole state, which is home to 29 million people.

Other universities around the state have reported hundreds of cases in the first few weeks of school.

At University of Texas at Austin, which has around 40,000 students enrolled, classes started on August 26. From this date until Monday, 246 infections have been recorded, though given the 7-day moving average positivity rate of 6.41 percent recorded by the University Health Services and UT Health Austin, the actual number is likely far higher. Trauma Service Area O, in which Austin is located, has nearly run out of staffed ICU beds, with 6 remaining for the 2.37 million people living there.

At University of Texas at Dallas, in Richardson, with around 29,000 students enrolled, 207 cases have been recorded since the start of the semester on August 23 as of this writing. Over the summer many maintenance workers were infected on the campus as well. According to the university’s dashboard, 74 percent and 77 percent of students and staff, respectively, have been at least partially vaccinated. In Trauma Service Area E, where Richardson is located and which roughly corresponds to north Texas, 72 ICU beds remain for the 8 million people who live in the area.

Basically, if a student needs an ICU bed after getting coronavirus from in-person classes at a Texas university or for any other reason, he or she will have to either drive a hundred or more miles, wait for someone else to die or die themselves.

According to local ABC affiliate KRHD, a protest was organized for Tuesday by students on social media calling for more public health measures by the Texas A&M administration. One student planning on attending the protest, Maya Budhrani, stated to the ABC affiliate, “I

just don't think the university is taking [public health protocols] as serious as they should" and that "There's a lot of, 'yeah, you should do this,' but there's no follow-through, no consequences."

Protesters spoke to local CBS affiliate KBTX about their reasons for attending. Ellis Howard, a junior at Texas A&M, stated, "I do feel like I could catch the virus and pass it on to some family members of mine who are less fortunate, and they are immunocompromised."

Monica Dhingra, a freshman, stated, "My parents came here from India, so we have a lot of family and friends there. When the COVID situation got really bad there, especially with the Delta variant, a lot of people we knew passed away. ... We're just very aware of the medical downsides of getting COVID, regardless of age." As of July, India had seen over 4 million COVID-19 deaths, with the virus spreading rapidly among children .

The university issued weak excuses in response to the protests, blaming the Texas government's reactionary measures for the university's inaction while placing responsibility on the shoulders of students.

Texas A&M Chief Operations Officer Greg Hartman declared, "I think when we walk through all the things that we're doing, which I think is everything we can be doing given the state guidance we've been provided as a public institution of higher education in Texas," the university is "listening."

Meanwhile, Texas A&M Student Health Services Director Dr. Martha Dannenbaum placed the blame on the students and general public. "It is very difficult for an institution to implement safeguards, beyond what we can do of course, when the community maybe is operating under a different standard."

Both of these excuses are false.

The Texas A&M University System reopened in 2020 in the midst of the pandemic, causing mass infections on its campuses, with the *New York Times* tracker documenting 2,767 cases in 2020 and 5,576 as of May 26, 2021.

While the Texas government has banned mask mandates, the government did not force A&M to reopen for in-person learning; the administrators did it themselves. The blood is on their hands, along with the state government, local officials, the Democrats and the Biden administration, which have promoted school reopenings.

Furthermore, mass support exists for public health measures, as there is well placed fear over the very real consequences of the spread of coronavirus. The claim that "the community" is "operating under a different standard," i.e., that it opposes basic public health measures, is patently false.

The majority of the public supports masking. An August 2021 survey by the Texas Politics Project, a joint project by the University of Texas at Austin and the *Texas Tribune*, found that 46 percent strongly support requiring masking of university students and staff on campus, with another 10 percent somewhat supporting it. This is in contrast to 29 percent strongly opposing and 5 percent somewhat opposing, while the rest either did not know, did not support either position or had no opinion.

More importantly, the August survey also asked what the number one issue in Texas was, and the greatest number of responses was the coronavirus (23 percent), followed by political corruption (14 percent).

The university "strongly" encouraged but did not require masking for all students and staff on campus, according to its guidance on face coverings. It is currently providing a raffle for those who are vaccinated, offering \$14,500 towards education-related expenses, and

for employees a \$500 gift card, among other incentives.

Texas A&M, like most universities and schools, has no comprehensive program for contact tracing, relying instead on individuals to determine if they have been in close contact with an infected person.

On Monday a petition was launched demanding the implementation of basic safety measures; it now has over 400 signatures as of this writing. The measures included contact tracing and notification, online option for infected individuals and those at "higher risk," better quarantine measures, increased testing, and treatment on campus for those who are sick.

These safety measures, while a marginal improvement if implemented, would still be completely inadequate for combating COVID-19. The very notion that schools can be "safely reopened" in the midst of the pandemic, as is incessantly advocated by the Democratic Party, corporate media and the unions, is completely fraudulent and must be opposed by students, staff and faculty alike.

This fact is shown most sharply in the case of Duke University in North Carolina, which experienced an outbreak involving 349 students and 15 employees, despite 92 and 98 percent of staff and students being vaccinated, respectively, and a mask mandate for indoor settings and classrooms. That is, vaccines, while being a powerful tool against the pandemic and for preventing deaths, are not a silver bullet, and neither are masks.

University staff, students and workers must turn their attention away from this false notion of "mitigating" the virus and towards that of eradicating it. Polio, syphilis and malaria have all been eliminated through the dedicated application of public health measures. The notion that in the 21st century that humanity should have to live under the constant threat of a deadly and evolving disease, taking away people in the prime of their lives and leaving others with long-term symptoms, should be rejected with the contempt it deserves.

Any attempt to address COVID-19 without demanding the closure of in-person education and nonessential businesses, that is not solidly based on a scientific analysis and is instead based on immediate political considerations, will flounder upon the objective fact that a highly contagious airborne disease has no regard for pragmatic political considerations.

Students, faculty and staff alike must join and build rank-and-file committees, independent from the Democrats and Republicans as well as the unions, none of whom has issued any statements on the deaths of educators and students. In fact, they have championed reopening at all costs. In order to put an end to the pandemic and save lives, the entire working class must be mobilized to shut down all schools and nonessential businesses.



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