

Michigan's largest colleges end COVID-19 tracker notifications

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The administrations at University of Michigan (UM) and Michigan State University (MSU) announced on September 14 that they were ending their COVID-19 case notifications for classrooms and building spaces barely two weeks into the semester. The two universities collectively enroll over 100,000 students, who have been sent recklessly back to campus for in-person learning along with thousands of staff and faculty while case numbers are climbing and hospitals are overflowing.

The University of Michigan began sending notifications of possible exposure to COVID-19 based on positive cases in university buildings back in August 2020. The decision to end the notification program was announced during a week where statewide case numbers increased sharply.

The state's two-day average infection rate rose to 3,302 on Friday, a level not seen since the last major wave of infections in early May. At least 62 COVID-19-related deaths were identified in the state between Monday and Wednesday. All 83 counties currently confirm positive cases, and at least 74 school outbreaks were documented as of September 13. Reports are emerging this week that ICUs and ERs across the state are reaching full capacity due to the crisis created by the spike in infections.

The reopening of all K-12 and college campuses amid the Delta variant surge is undoubtedly fueling these infection spikes. Cases are expected to increase in the coming weeks, despite varying levels of mitigation.

At UM, there have been over 400 confirmed positive cases among students and staff between the last week of August and the second week of September. At MSU there have been at least 178 confirmed cases during approximately the same time frame.

Both the MSU and UM administration notices cited the supposedly “confusing” and “limited benefit” of sending notices to students and staff who occupy the same classes or buildings of those who test positive. To this the UM

announcement cynically added that “simply attending the same class or being in the same building as someone with COVID-19 does not qualify as a close contact requiring quarantine or testing when all individuals are wearing a face covering and the vast majority are vaccinated.”

The UM statement also alleged that “Classrooms have not been associated with COVID-19 transmission due to the university’s masking requirement, high vaccination rates in the U-M community and ventilation standards.”

The university provided no scientific reports or data to support these claims. To the extent that there is actual “confusion” about the notifications, it stems from their intentional ambiguity. Students had already expressed concern that the notifications would only inform them of possible exposure but not provide specific information on where the possible exposure occurred.

The decision to end COVID-19 tracking at the state's two largest colleges reflects a national effort by both major political parties to ensure schools stay open at all costs. That tens of millions of people, including millions of children, are needlessly exposed to the virus is part of the price that must be paid for oiling the cogs of Wall Street. The moves at UM and MSU are part of a broader effort by the ruling class to downplay the public health danger triggered by the return of in-person instruction at colleges. The goal is to try to “normalize” coronavirus infection among students and staff.

The UM announcement was also accompanied by a report that COVID-19 testing on campus declined for the third straight week. Campus-wide testing in Ann Arbor dropped by nearly 40 percent from 6,838 during the first week of September to 4,295 tests in the second week. Meanwhile, the UM campus now accounts for 30 percent of all cases in Washtenaw County, up 5 percent from the previous week.

The declarations by Michigan State and University of Michigan administrators that classrooms and events are

safe is a blatant lie, intended to shift blame for eventual outbreaks onto the students and staff.

Social media posts from both campuses have been filled with complaints about near-capacity classrooms and maskless large events, as well as the emergence of “breakthrough” infections on both campuses among the vaccinated. UM’s football stadium—the largest in the country, holding over 109,000 people—has hosted three consecutive capacity football games to start the semester. MSU has also held a football game in its 75,000-capacity stadium. Neither school requires masks for those in attendance. Driving this reckless disregard for health is the fact that college football programs, such as those at UM and MSU, often bring in over \$100 million in annual revenue.

Faculty and graduate student instructors at both campuses have been vocal in their opposition to the present policies. At UM, over 800 instructors and staff signed an open letter voicing opposition to the fact that only very limited mitigation protocols are in place. The letter cites several medical studies which point to the growing dangers of the Delta variant and points out among other things, the limited efficacy of vaccines on their own, the higher rates of transmission of the Delta variant, and the lack of any serious metrics for campus shutdown as the situation becomes more dangerous.

One UM faculty member commented “feels a little as though we complained that working conditions could be made safer and they retaliated by making them less safe.”

At MSU, the Graduate Employees Union denounced the end of tracking notifications. “There are still graduate students who aren’t being paid or who don’t have the health insurance that [MSU] is contractually obligated to provide us, yet they have no problem forcing us to risk our lives to teach in-person classes. MSU couldn’t care less about us.” They plan on holding a protest on Tuesday against current conditions on campus unless the university changes its policies, encouraging the Twitter hashtag #SPARTANSWILLDIE.

Typical was a comment earlier in the week on Twitter about conditions at MSU. “Y’all have COVID-positive students quarantining in the dorm with students who 1) haven’t been notified of exposure and 2) do not have COVID. Y’all are legit just spreading the shit in these dorms?”

One student from UM told the WSWs: “Thursday morning I was in class, and my professor told us multiple students were quarantining due to covid, and later that same day I got an email saying my professor for a

separate class was also quarantining due to covid.”

These developments also emerge as members of the Lecturers’ Employee Organization (LEO) at UM are reviewing a tentative contract agreement proposed by the university administration and union leadership. The LEO educators have gone nine months without a contract, and major disputes over better pay and job security at the Dearborn and Flint campuses, in particular, have been at the heart of the fight. However, none of the public announcements by LEO thus far have raised the issue of ensuring that lecturers are fully protected from the reckless in-person teaching policies. The lack of such protections in the contract should alone disqualify it from any serious consideration by lecturers.

Contact tracing and other mitigation efforts are a vital part of controlling community spread of COVID-19, and the university’s decision to end their notification program is completely unjustified. But on their own, mitigation measures are of only limited value.

As epidemiologist Dr. Malgorzata Gasperowicz explained in an expansive interview with the WSWs: “[T]here is mitigation, which attempts to place temporary public health measures and different controls to slow down the spread. It is essentially a reactive strategy used to prevent overwhelming health care systems...”

But what is needed are what the scientific community defines as “elimination” and “eradication” policies, which aim to end the virus entirely, and not allow it to mutate or persist in “igniting a wildfire all over again.” Such a strategy is entirely possible—and is even being moderately pursued in some countries—but requires mass vaccination programs and aggressive public health measures. This would include keeping schools closed to in-person until the virus is eliminated.



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