Faculty at University of Delaware describes unsafe conditions on campus

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Earlier this month the University of Delaware sent an email to faculty instructing them not to inform students when one of their classmates tested positive for COVID-19. The University pushed out this policy as case numbers were rapidly rising to 376 that week, up from 77 the week before.

The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke to a member of the university faculty who has been affected by the policy. The faculty member described the contradictions between what the university was saying and the inadequacy of the measures they're taking. We started by discussing his reaction to the recent letter.

"I actually thought I must have misunderstood what the email was saying. It was only until I was talking with another colleague later, that I realized I had actual read it correctly: that we can't tell our students when a student is positive," said Sam, who used a pseudonym to protect his identity.

The letter instructed professors to instead tell their students, "Given the current incidence of covid-19 on campus, we should assume that we may have contact with individuals who are shedding covid-19, perhaps unknowingly." This generic statement gives the students no actionable information and indicates that the university is prepared to let the pandemic spread without check through the Newark campus of nearly 25,000 students.

Commenting further on the letter, Sam said, "From their perspective it's an impossible task. On the one hand they have to keep students in classrooms because otherwise financially they'd take a massive hit, and on the other hand they have to convince students classrooms are a totally safe environment. So there's no real straightforward way of saying anything. They have to dance around every issue as a consequence. It's clear that they need to have students in the classroom to make money, so they're going to have students in the classroom. That seems a lot more logical than anything they're actually saying."

Sam explained further that he's only allowed to take action if he is directly contacted by the university's contact tracers. He's already had one student in his class test positive and was forced to sit on his hands while the student isolated. "Fortunately it seems like they caught things kind of early, and had gotten the test very quickly and had isolated themself. But class just continued, and now they're catching up."

The university has implemented a pass system where anyone coming to campus on a given day has to take a survey beforehand describing their vaccination status, when they were last tested, and any symptoms. Individuals can then be issued a green pass giving them full access to campus, a yellow pass allowing them to come to campus only to receive a COVID test, or a red pass requiring them to stay home.

Sam told us that he has not been required to show his pass at any point to access a building, nor is he aware of any of his students or colleagues being required to show their passes. "I stepped into the gym the other day to fill up my water bottle at the water station there, and they had no one checking passes. There were people there at the front desk watching people scan in their ID cards to make sure that they're paying for the gym or that they're students, but they're not checking the passes."

In his opinion, students are using the pass as a self diagnostic to guide their behavior. He's had several students email him to say they've received a yellow or red pass, for which he's given them an excused absence and told them he'll help them catch up when they're allowed to return to campus. He said he didn't get specific instruction from the administration to excuse

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students who have been instructed not to come to class, but decided to do that himself to encourage his students to be responsible, and “honest about their health.”

Sam said that he thinks students are trying to be responsible and keep their classmates safe, but are generally in an impossible situation: “I think they're doing their best within a framework that is not always clear, and where the structures of undergraduate education such that blowing off steam, finding a way to de-stress is often oriented around social activity. I think the pandemic is a very stressful thing for them, in addition to coursework. So I think at some point all of the incentive structures of undergraduate education funnels them to doing social activities, to going to parties.”

While he did think that parties and other off campus events could be driving the recent spike in cases, when asked about the university's claim that their contact tracers had determined no infections had occurred in classrooms, he replied, “I'm just not seeing how the classroom can't be a vector for it.”

Sam explained that while he and his colleagues were upset about the situation and were trying to speak up to the administration, he said “I think that's a pacifier more than anything,” and that they didn't know what else what they could do.

He described that many professors were worn out by trying to teach virtually the last school year. “I think teachers and professors gave it their best shot, but inasmuch as remote learning becomes a normalized activity within the educational sphere, I think it's bolstering an increasingly corporatized academy, burdened by administrators whose jobs are to basically betray certain educational and academic values writ large.”

When asked whether the university could have taken measures to help students and faculty succeed with virtual learning the previous year, he answered, “I think there are things they could have done. The problem is it would take an administration rethinking the entire way they think about how the university operates and what the point of an administrative body in university even is, and it would be to their detriment. It would run contrary to their economic incentives.”

“Just to give you one example, at the beginning of the pandemic, I was talking to someone in an administrative function. I asked them, right now seems the exact sort of time where extremely large research universities with large endowments would think, if there was ever a time to tap into the endowment, to take a variety of actions that would make outcomes better for students, for remote learning, for graduates students, for adjunct faculty, etc. up and down the line, this would be the time do it, and he said they will never ever touch the endowment.”

“Not even a global pandemic of economically existential proportions could get the administration to tap into the endowment. So there are things I could think that they might have been able to do, but it runs so contrary to instincts and incentives of administrators up and down the university structure that it would just never happen. You would have to rethink the entire way an academy is set up.”

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