

COVID-19 outbreaks at NYU and Columbia trigger opposition to unsafe campus reopening

John Conrad, Jesse Thomas
12 October 2021

On Sunday, October 24, The World Socialist Web Site will host an online event featuring a panel of scientists, to explain how COVID-19 can be eradicated and the pandemic finally brought to an end. We urge all those concerned about the situation in New York to register today.

Over the last month, New York University (NYU) and Columbia University, two of the largest universities in New York City, have experienced significant outbreaks of the COVID-19 virus among students, faculty, and staff. Hundreds of people at both universities have contracted COVID-19 as a result of the profit-driven decisions of administrators to hold in-person instruction amidst the Delta variant-fueled resurgence of the deadly pandemic.

Despite a high vaccination rate at NYU, the number of coronavirus cases at the university has steadily increased since the beginning of the fall semester. According to NYU's weekly COVID-19 testing data, there have been at least 540 confirmed COVID-19 cases in the university community since August 30.

This number is undoubtedly an underrepresentation of the true extent of the outbreak on campus. NYU's reported case numbers are based on the university's voluntary testing program and COVID-19 tests administered outside of the university. These outside tests are only counted by NYU if they are reported by students and staff to the university's COVID-19 Prevention & Response Team.

The available data is an exposure of the fallacy of the university's guidelines for a "safe reopening." The university's "safety" policies are nothing more than pseudo-scientific nonsense, based on the lie that vaccination and mask mandates alone can prevent infection and end the pandemic. The strategy of mitigation, promoted by the Democratic Party, ultimately has the same result as the herd immunity strategy promoted by the far-right—the proliferation of COVID-19, dominated by the more transmissible and lethal Delta variant.

NYU, with a student population of over 50,000, has abandoned any enforcement of social distancing inside and outside of NYU buildings and has eliminated its mandatory testing program for the vast majority of students, faculty and staff. Classes are being held at capacity—some with more than 100 students in attendance—and student-led organizations and clubs are allowed, even encouraged, to hold in-person events with dozens of attendees. The university has made little effort to warn students, faculty and staff of the extent of the outbreak on campus.

Early findings in a study being conducted by chemistry professors at NYU's College of Arts and Sciences indicate that the quality of air circulation in NYU classrooms is not adequate for preventing the spread of COVID-19. Levels of carbon dioxide in classrooms have

been found to be higher than what is recommended by experts.

A deceptive public memo from September 21, written by NYU Provost Katherine Fleming, Executive Vice President Martin Dorph and the Executive Leader of the university's COVID-19 Response Team boasted that in early-September, "NYU administered nearly 3,500 tests and had a positivity rate of 1.39%. These results suggest that NYU's test positivity remains low (by way of comparison, NYC's rate is approximately 3%) and is in line with what we have seen at other universities."

Data from the official New York City COVID dashboard completely contradicts the claim that infection transmission levels at NYU have ever been at an acceptable level. In fact, through the entire month of September, Manhattan's infection levels never sank below 120 positive cases per 100,000 residents. This figure is well beyond the 100 out of 100,000 threshold of "high" community transmission outlined by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's (CDC) guidelines.

Current COVID-19 case numbers in Greenwich Village and Soho neighborhoods, where NYU's main Washington Square campus is located, are roughly 105 per 100,000. These figures have remained above the "high transmission" threshold since July.

Recent coverage in the *Columbia Spectator*, Columbia's student-led publication, pointed to an outbreak of 112 positive cases on Columbia's campus during the week of September 13—a 100 percent increase from the week prior—and 117 positive cases during the week of September 20.

Criminally, Columbia does not make this cumulative data publicly available. The university's public COVID-19 dashboard only reports COVID-19 tests administered by the university and leaves out positive cases, which community members must self-report, from outside testing facilities. Yet, administrators recently encouraged students to use outside testing facilities, due to long lines and delays in on-campus testing sites.

While current numbers from New York City's dashboard for Morningside Heights and the Upper West Side are above the CDC's "substantial transmission" threshold, Columbia's COVID-19 alert level remains at "low risk."

As the outbreaks started to occur, the administration, which has relied only on vaccination and masking mandates as well as its limited testing regimen as its primary mitigation strategy, prepared to lay blame for the outbreaks on the students and their activities outside of the classroom.

Dean of Undergraduate Student Life Cristen Kromm sent an email stating that "testing and tracing indicates that the main cause is students socializing unmasked at gatherings in residence halls."

Meanwhile, Senior vice president of Columbia Health Dr. Melanie Bernitz claimed, “We were not seeing [transmission] in the classroom, and that’s borne out by data and studies that we’ve seen, actually, in multiple settings—other universities, other classroom settings, even before vaccine mandates—so we’re really confident about that statement.”

The *Spectator* also reported that Columbia would shift away from an “absolute prevention of infection” policy, with Dr. Bernitz stating during a University Senate meeting, “It’s unrealistic to expect we will never have positive cases...It’s unlikely that we will eliminate every case, at least in the near future.” This statement that students, faculty and staff must live with the constant spread of the virus, and the sickness and death that comes with it, received deserved backlash and opposition.

In line with the university’s dropping of mitigation efforts, Columbia recently announced they will allow mask-less indoor dining at all dining halls on campus starting on October 13. Scott Wright, vice president for campus services, justified this with twisted logic. “The longer we don’t have dining rooms or events on campus, the more likely it is people will go off campus where it’s not a fully vaccinated community and that I worry about.”

The reckless and negligent policies being implemented by NYU and Columbia are being met with growing concern and opposition from students, faculty and staff. A recent *Washington Square News* (WSN) article titled, “Packed classrooms provoke COVID concerns,” cites students speaking out against the NYU administration’s COVID-19 policies. NYU students reported the impossibility of socially-distancing under conditions in which classes were filled to capacity, as well as a lack of enforcement of masking mandates.

Students bemoaned lecture halls with hundreds of seats and cramped classrooms being completely full. One student told WSN, “I have a few classes that are in conference rooms... that aren’t even real classrooms and my professors have said how stressed they are about it because there is no ventilation because there are like 15 people in one small conference room...It’s a room with a big circle table where everyone is sitting within an inch of each other. I’ve had a lot of professors complain about it.”

In an extensive interview with the WWSWS published last month, an NYU senior described his experience, noting, “In my math class, in an auditorium that fits 50-60 people, there were 50-60 people in there. There were only four empty spaces in the entire auditorium. Everywhere else it was packed with students, shoulder to shoulder. I sat down and felt someone cough on my neck.”

“I started to have a panic attack and had to leave because it reminded me of my experience contracting COVID. All I could think of was the loved ones I had lost to COVID and how the NYU administration is just so unconcerned about student health and more concerned about profit.” He added, “I don’t think there’s been one student that I’ve spoken to who has been in favor of in-person classes.”

At Columbia, students pushed back against the admin’s narrative of blaming students for the outbreaks. Speaking to the *Spectator*, one student spoke of classes with hundreds of students “packed into a tiny lecture hall,” concluding that it “just feels like maybe the burden is being put on the students rather than the University as a whole.”

“Everyone’s here now. There are so many people, and it doesn’t feel like their infrastructure for COVID testing and tracing and all that is necessarily able to handle that. It just feels like it’s not sustainable. You know, if there is an outbreak, it would spread really easily. It

feels weird like how packed classrooms and dining halls and dorms are. So I guess the main concern is what are they going to do in the event of an actual crisis?”

Responding to Columbia’s new policy which accepts the continued spread of the virus, Joseph Howley, an associate professor of classics and University senator, spoke with the *Spectator*, saying, “I immediately think of all of the ways in which it would still be catastrophic for me to contract this infection. I would pass it on to my unvaccinated children, or because someone else in my position might be even more vulnerable as a faculty member than I am.” He also criticized the university’s lack of transparency when it comes to outbreaks, leaving many to ask, “exactly what is the state on campus?”

One student worker and member of the Student Workers of Columbia, who are fighting for improved working and living conditions, told the *Spectator*, “It absolutely seems like implicitly, they have decided that we are all just expendable. And if we get COVID, we get COVID.”

The situations at NYU and Columbia are not unique. Both universities, run by boards of multi-millionaires and billionaires and strongly tied to Wall Street and the state, represent the broader subordination of academia to the profit interests of the ruling class.

Academic institutions around the world have sacrificed the health and lives of students and staff to fill their coffers. Duke University, where 98 percent of students and 92 percent of faculty are vaccinated, the University of California Berkeley, the University of Michigan, and numerous other schools have reported hundreds of new cases since fully reopening. Last week, the University of Michigan even refused to cancel classes despite the threat of a mass shooting.

The reopening of universities is part of the larger, homicidal campaign by the ruling class in the US and internationally to fully restart the production of profits by herding children into unsafe schools and workers into COVID-infested factories and workplaces. In the US, this policy, spearheaded by both the Democratic and Republican parties, has killed over 730,000 people and destroyed the health of millions. In New York City there is currently a massive cover-up of COVID infections in K-12 schools, and the administration is determined to keep the schools running fully in-person no matter the cost to the lives of children.

Students and workers in New York City looking for a scientific alternative to the policies of continued sickness and death should get involved with the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) and the New York City Educators Rank-and-file Safety Committee, and register to attend the critical October 24 meeting “How to end the pandemic: The case for eradication.”



To contact the WWSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact