

UNC Chapel Hill campus mourns suicide and attempted suicide of two students over the weekend

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The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill canceled classes on Tuesday after a suicide and an attempted suicide over the weekend. One student was found dead in a residence hall Saturday morning while campus police received a phone call about an attempted suicide on Sunday.

These two events follow another suicide on September 4 and attempted suicide on September 22. Since the beginning of the semester, university police have classified three suicides, six wellness checks and one emergency commitment.

University Chancellor Kevin Guskiewicz canceled classes and declared Tuesday a “wellness day” after undergraduate, graduate and professional school student governments called for a pause in instruction on Monday and Tuesday.

“We are in the middle of a mental health crisis, both on our campus and across our nation, and we are aware that college-aged students carry an increased risk of suicide,” Guskiewicz said in a message to students. “This crisis has directly impacted members of our community—especially with the passing of two students on campus in the past month. As chancellor, a professor and a parent, my heart breaks for all those whose suffering goes unnoticed.”

Guskiewicz’s words were not enough for some students, however. Kendra Randle, a junior, expressed her disappointment that classes were not canceled on the Monday following the suicides.

“To tell students to go to class on Monday, and then the next day they can mourn is just absolutely disgusting to me,” said Randle, according to *Inside Higher Ed*.

“Tuesday is University Day, so a number of classes

were already canceled beforehand. They chose the easiest solution. What message are you sending to students by refusing to cancel class on Monday?”

Inside Higher Ed also quoted senior Savannah Shoemaker, who described a “stress culture” where students are encouraged by the university to “push themselves to the point of having a breakdown.”

“It is fairly common to see students crying around campus, in the libraries, on the way to class, in the dining hall,” Shoemaker said. “There’s a prominent sense of grief right now. ... [i]t’s become evident to me that a majority of my peers are struggling right now.”

Student government leaders voiced their frustration as well. “We are not machines with on-and-off switches,” tweeted Lamar Richards, president of the UNC Chapel Hill Undergraduate Student Government, on Sunday. “I don’t care what ‘you’re not allowed to do.’ We are students, and we need a break. On behalf of my 30,000 peers, consider us all excused.”

A petition circulated by students calling for a greater commitment to mental health care by the university has received 2,100 signatures.

Savannah Worrell, the student who created the petition, encapsulated the harsh conditions young people have faced during the pandemic when she wrote, “Last year during the height of the pandemic we were given mental health days—but, shocker, mental health struggles do not simply disappear. Not only this but the pandemic is still actively booming and that isolation and fear of contracting or spreading the virus is at an all-time high. Action needs to be taken, and the administration needs to start prioritizing the mental health of students, viewing us as people instead of a source of revenue.”

The events at Chapel Hill are indicative of a broader mental health crisis sweeping across the world. The pandemic and the murderous policies of the ruling class have caused what Clare Landis, a responder for the student support group Peer2Peer, called a “second pandemic ... with mental health and suicide.” She told WRAL-TV that she has seen a significant increase in calls over the past two weeks as midterms approached for millions of students.

According to the United Nations, one in 100 deaths worldwide is by suicide, and it is the fourth leading cause of death for people aged 15-29 years old. Reporting from the World Health Organization shows that suicide kills more people annually than HIV, malaria, breast cancer, homicide or even war.

Suicides declined by around 6 percent during the first months of the pandemic, the largest drop in 40 years. However, there are concerning signs that the suicide rate could rapidly rebound. Research from the Suicide Prevention Resource Center (SPRC) shows that suicide rates tend to decline at the beginning of pandemics but may increase over time.

The SPRC further noted that available services for mental health care that were increased in the early months of the pandemic are now being reduced or withdrawn.

In Japan, suicides among young people have been at a record high during the pandemic. An astonishing 415 school-age children took their own lives during the 2020 school year, 100 more than the previous year and the highest number since 1974.

In the United States, suicide attempts by young girls aged 12 to 17 jumped by 26 percent in the summer of 2020 and by 50 percent during the winter of 2021, compared to the year prior. Deaths by overdose have also doubled during the pandemic in the US, with many potential suicides unclassified or reported.

New research has also pointed to the role that contracting COVID-19 can play in aggravating mental health situations. A study published in *The Lancet* medical journal found that 18 percent of people who contracted COVID-19 were diagnosed with a mental health illness within 90 days, double the number of people who were not infected.

Further research from the University of Oxford found that nearly 6 percent of adults developed some form of psychiatric disorder for the first time ever within three

months of becoming infected with COVID-19.

Such figures explode the myth that young people are not affected by the virus and that schools are safe to reopen. Not only do schools act as vectors for transmission for the virus—which is killing dozens of children every week—but research is showing that young people are twice as likely to develop a mental illness for the first time if they are infected.

The surge in suicides and mental illness around the world underscores the need to oppose the deadly policies of herd immunity and “learning to live with the virus.”

The WSWs encourages all students to attend the October 24 webinar with leading scientists from around the world, which will outline the necessity of eradicating the virus and the need for an international strategy to end the pandemic.



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