

Cornell University shuts down in the face of a massive surge of Omicron infections

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On Tuesday, Cornell University in Ithaca, New York, raised its COVID-19 alert to “red,” the highest level, due to a rapid spread of the coronavirus among the student body. University President Martha Pollack, in an online letter to students, explained that the campus’s COVID-19 testing lab had detected the Omicron variant “in a significant number of Monday’s positive student samples.”

She promptly canceled all in-class final exams, moving them to online formats. Additional measures included were the closure of libraries and athletic centers. The December 18 recognition ceremony for winter graduates was called off, and all university-sponsored holiday celebrations and social gatherings were scrapped. Only students who tested negative within 48 hours of the announcement could leave the campus.

Pollack then offered the following math in support of her decision. She explained that a variant twice as infective but 10 times less severe than Delta and that caused severe disease in only 1 percent would, after several iterations of transmission, dramatically increase the number of serious illnesses over Delta.

“It is obviously extremely dispiriting to have to take these steps. However, since the pandemic, our commitment has been to follow the science and do all we can to protect the health of our faculty, staff and students,” she concluded. However, she allowed offices and labs to remain open, a remarkable abdication of public health responsibility.

Cornell’s Vice President for University Relations Joel Malina told CNN on the same day that “nearly every case of the Omicron variant to date has been found in fully vaccinated students, a portion of whom had also received a booster shot.” The campus COVID-19 dashboard notes that 97 percent of all students, staff and faculty are fully vaccinated. A cursory review of the site provides a jaw-dropping look into the speed with which Omicron has

swept through the campus. These are just a harbinger of what will take place nationally.

In the week ending December 14, the university witnessed a massive surge of infections among students. Of the more than 26,000 students, the university reported 1,135 cases in that week. In other words, 4.4 percent of the students had experienced a documented infection. Of all these, 986 occurred in just the last four days, and a significant number of sequenced cases were consistent with the highly transmissible Omicron strain.

Maya Sauthoff, a sophomore on the campus, speaking with ABC affiliate WSYR-TV said, “We were kind of expecting it to happen at some point because the cases were going up insanely and like we had so many cases in our house, so I think it’s a good thing. Now everything is being shut down because it was insane.” All seven of her roommates tested positive for COVID-19.

The outbreak on the Ithaca campus can be traced back to the Thanksgiving holiday weekend when students returned home in droves to be with their families, in what seems to have been, in retrospect, a prolonged regional superspreading event. Shortly after students returned back to campus, cases exploded. The danger now lies with returning students bringing home the variant, thus spreading it even further.

In the face of soaring COVID-19 infections, the closure of Cornell’s Ithaca campus is only the first in a series of sudden university shutdowns, which once more underscores the dangers posed by allowing schools and universities to stay open when the coronavirus continues to spread unchecked throughout communities.

Jill Dolan, Dean of the College of Princeton University in New Jersey, followed suit, moving all finals to online formats on Thursday to allow students to return home as soon as possible. On Tuesday, in an email to students, she wrote, “We write to let you know that we’ve decided to shift all final exams to a remote format so that students

will be able to leave campus at their earliest convenience.”

New York University’s Provost Katherine Fleming wrote in a memo posted on Wednesday, “The continuous review of the data from our COVID-19 testing program has indicated a considerable acceleration in the rate of new cases in our community. It’s not a cause for alarm, but it is a cause for concern, caution, and appropriate actions.” Like Cornell, all finals were to be conducted online unless they “have a crucial in-person component,” and gatherings and events were canceled immediately. Fleming concluded with these remarks, “This is not quite how we expected to end the semester: however, if there is any consistency to the coronavirus, it is its unpredictability.” Indeed!

Other campuses such as Middlebury College, DePaul University, Southern New Hampshire University, and George Washington University are shifting to online exams. Others like Boston University, the University of Notre Dame and Wesleyan University are mandating booster shots.

Many of these institutions reporting an explosion of cases have in common extremely high rates of vaccinations among the student body compared to the rest of the country. This demonstrates the extraordinary “immune escape” that Omicron possesses. Recent evidence has shown two doses of an mRNA vaccine afford only a 33 percent efficacy against symptomatic infection and 70 percent against severe illness. Moreover, as immunity wanes over a few short months, the ability for twice-inoculated individuals to mount a response against Omicron drops to near zero.

The about-face by many of these prestigious schools runs counter to their previously professed stance that in-person education should not be disrupted. These actions must be viewed as a clear indication of the dangers posed by the coronavirus. It also underscores the lack of direction or warning from the federal government and the CDC. Ample evidence emerging out of South Africa and Europe demonstrates the calamity that is underway for the US, and every hour officials delay only compounds these dangers for the working class and youth.

During a Tuesday morning briefing, CDC officials warned that the prevalence of Omicron in sequenced genomes has jumped seven-fold. Based on their modeling data, the variant is expected to spread rapidly throughout the country, resulting in massive infections in January, placing additional pressures on beleaguered health care systems.

In the worst case scenario, which “has spooked top health officials,” according to the *Washington Post*, they anticipate that Omicron will buttress Delta and cases of ordinary seasonal influenza, leading to a triple threat. The urgency was made palpable by the chief medical officer for the Association of State and Territorial Health Officials (ASTHO), Marcus Plescia, who told the *Post*, “I’m a lot more alarmed. I’m worried.” The CDC, usually nonchalant and guarded in its recommendations, warned that “we got to get people ready for this.”

Clearly, the Biden administration is well aware of these projections and the concerns being raised in these meetings. Only 61 percent of Americans are fully vaccinated, and just over 27 percent have received the booster. But instead of sharing these concerns and providing a clear indication as to the magnitude of this threat, Dr. Anthony Fauci said only that the boosters work and “get yours.”

Hospitalizations in every region of the country are on the rise. In the Northeast, where Omicron accounts for more than 13 percent of coronavirus cases, infections climb exponentially. On Wednesday, 137,000 cases and 1,700 deaths were reported. Dr. Ali Mokdad, a professor of global health at the University of Washington, told the *Financial Times*, “We are very exposed and in real danger. We have a new variant that is very infectious and is already in the US. We are entering the holiday season, people are traveling, and we have a red-blue mentality, so mask-wearing is low, and vaccination has plateaued.”

He warned that unless the US took COVID-19 seriously, he expected health care systems to be inundated and fatalities in the US to exceed the more than 415,000 who have died in 2021. Unfortunately, university campuses and colleges provide the coronavirus the opportunity to propel itself across large swaths of the country.

Without first bringing the number of cases to *zero* through the implementation of national lockdowns and concurrently building a dynamic public health infrastructure that can respond to every case immediately, the return to all normal functions of society will be a recipe for disaster.



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