

New York City universities plan to reopen for in-person instruction amid Omicron surge

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10 January 2022

Over the last month, major universities in New York City have experienced significant outbreaks of COVID-19. Most notably, New York University (NYU), Columbia University and the City University of New York (CUNY) system have reported increases in positive coronavirus cases among students, faculty and staff. These outbreaks, part of the broader surge of the virus globally, are the result of the profit-driven decisions to open campuses for in-person learning and work amidst a raging, deadly pandemic.

A little over a month since the highly infectious Omicron variant of the coronavirus first emerged in the United States, the virus is once again wreaking havoc across the North American continent. Close to one million Americans are getting sick every day and the daily death toll stands at over 2,000. Hospitalizations due to the virus are surging, threatening to completely overwhelm the entire US health care system. New York City is an epicenter of the Omicron surge, reporting around 100,000 new cases and 200 deaths over the weekend, with a positivity rate above 30 percent. The city's hospitalization rate has risen by over 73 percent, with the number of young children hospitalized due to COVID-19 quadrupling.

According to NYU's COVID-19 tracking portal, there have been around 2,345 reported cases of the virus among students, faculty and staff since December 6. Columbia University's tracking system shows over 950 positive cases over the same period across all its campuses. The CUNY system's online COVID-19 "Safety Tracker" reports a total of 2,218 COVID-19 cases since the beginning of the fall semester in late August 2021.

At each school, the majority of these cases occurred during the last two weeks of the fall 2021 semester (December 13 to 26). In one week (December 13 through 19), NYU reported 844 positive cases among students, faculty and staff. The following week (December 20 through 26), 739 positive cases were reported. Two weeks ago, 588 NYU community members contracted the virus. At Columbia, the same two-week period saw 884 positive campus-administered tests, about nine times as many as were reported in the previous two weeks. Since January 3, over 760 Columbia students, faculty and staff have tested positive. Between December 25 and 31, 997 CUNY students, faculty and staff were reported to have tested positive for COVID-19.

All of these numbers, already alarmingly high, are significant under countings. Official numbers of positive test results within university communities are based entirely on inadequate testing and contact tracing programs. NYU, Columbia and CUNY

abandoned mandatory COVID-19 testing programs for the vast majority of students prior to the fall 2021 semester, promoting the lie that vaccinated people cannot contract the virus. The current data is largely based on voluntary testing programs at each university and COVID-19 tests administered outside university campuses.

These off-campus tests are only counted if they are reported by students and staff. Criminally, Columbia excludes off-campus testing results from its online COVID-19 tracker. Some reports indicate that the total number of COVID-19 cases at Columbia may be at least two times higher than the number reported on the university's website. CUNY, despite reporting off-campus test results on its online COVID dashboard, does not include these results in its official positivity rates. To keep its rates low, CUNY has reportedly told symptomatic community members to test off-campus.

Many New York City universities have implemented a random testing policy for vaccinated individuals. Supposedly, a certain number of vaccinated students and staff—the vast majority at major universities—will be chosen at random each week to get tested. However, most vaccinated students and staff are never asked to participate and, even with majority participation, the program would still be completely inadequate to accurately assess the spread of the virus in university communities. Prior to December 28, fully vaccinated CUNY students and staff were not able to get tested for COVID-19 on CUNY campuses unless randomly selected.

Since August 2021, enforcement of social distancing inside and outside of buildings has been largely abandoned by universities. Most classes have been held at capacity—some with more than 100 students in attendance—and many student-led organizations and clubs have been allowed, and in some cases encouraged, to hold in-person events with dozens of attendees. Little effort has been made by university administrations to warn students, faculty and staff of the true dangers of the present crisis and the extent of outbreaks on campuses.

These policies have resulted not just in thousands of infections over the last month, but in thousands more over the last academic semester. Before the emergence of Omicron, as Delta emerged and surged globally, universities in New York reported dozens, if not hundreds, of cases per week. Despite the steady rates of infection on campuses, university administrations made clear their determination to keep the classrooms open, and even blamed

students, faculty and staff for any outbreaks.

In October, senior vice president of Columbia Health Dr. Melanie Bernitz stated 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, expresses most nakedly the views of administrators at universities across New York, the country and internationally.

The reckless profit-driven policies of the multi-millionaires and billionaires—with extensive ties to Wall Street, the military and the Democratic and Republican Parties—who make up the boards of trustees and administrations of NYU, Columbia and CUNY are in no way unique. They represent the broader subordination of higher education to profit interests. Countless universities across the country and around the world have experienced mass outbreaks, and even deaths, over the last four months as a result of similar reckless mitigation policies for a “safe reopening.”

Recently sworn-in New York City Democratic Mayor Eric Adams is pushing ahead with and expanding the homicidal reopening policies of his predecessor. Wall Street’s top cop is pushing for the full reopening of schools and workplaces, making it clear that the priority of the new Democratic administration, like de Blasio’s, is not public health, but “keeping our economy operating.”

New York City’s major universities have all indicated their opposition to a transition to online instruction for the spring semester. CUNY recently announced that, “For the Spring 2022 semester, the vast majority of CUNY courses will be in-person.” NYU, despite moving January-term classes online, has stressed in its communications with NYU students, faculty and staff that “We are planning to resume in-person instruction at the start of the spring semester in New York and at our Study Away sites.” Columbia has announced that the limited safety measures implemented this month, including cancellation of in-person events and closure of dining halls and student lounges, will be ended before the start of the spring semester.

Students, faculty, and staff at all universities will be required to get a vaccine booster shot before the start of the spring semester. As has been proven by rising numbers of breakthrough infections, this booster mandate alone will do little to stave off future campus outbreaks.

Immense opposition to the reopening of New York City universities and schools is already brewing among students, parents and staff. CUNY students recently started an online petition, “Save Online Classes at CUNY!” in which they point out the spread of the Delta and Omicron variants, poor infrastructure and ventilation and demand, “LET’S BRING BACK ONLINE CLASSES!” The petition has garnered over 25,000 signatures. On social media, one CUNY affiliate stated, “Not going in. I don’t trust anyone at CUNY to make a decision to keep me and my family safe.” One CUNY worker wrote in response to CUNY’s policies, “I have never felt less valued.”

What is required is a full, immediate transition to online learning and work. Students, faculty and staff at NYU, Columbia and

CUNY must not allow their health and safety to be sacrificed to the altar of private profit. This can be achieved not through appeals to university administrators, union bureaucrats or capitalist politicians, but by turning out to the working class and youth more broadly who are beginning to rise up against current conditions.

Teachers, students, school workers and parents across the country and internationally are taking up a courageous struggle against the homicidal reopening of K-12 schools. Three thousand students have signed a Boston student’s petition demanding a remote option for Massachusetts schools. High school students in New York City are planning a mass walkout on Tuesday across all city public schools to demand an immediate transition to online instruction “to keep students and teachers safe.” A sister petition launched by a high school student describes the city’s decision to keep schools open “unreasonable and, above all, irresponsible.” The student continues:

Physically attending school places students and staff members at increased risk of contracting this highly transmissible strain, either in the building or on public transit, risking not only their lives but needlessly contributing to the spread of the disease. Right now, students, like myself, are facing an impossible decision: either attend school despite the rising case rates or risk our education and academic standing by choosing to keep ourselves and our loved ones safe.

Chicago teachers voted overwhelmingly not to return for in-person learning earlier this month and teachers in Chicago, New York and San Francisco have launched sickouts. In Michigan, thousands of students, staff and faculty at the University of Michigan-Ann Arbor are once again engaged in a courageous struggle to close the campus for in-person learning.

Contrary to the claims of the ruling class, their politicians and media, the pandemic can be ended. A scientific strategy of elimination and eradication, which includes the closure of schools and non-essential businesses, coupled with a massive government program to roll out widespread testing, high-quality masks, quarantining, contact tracing and isolation can squash the virus in a matter of months, even weeks. However, this requires the political mobilization and intervention of the objectively progressive social force in capitalist society: the international working class. This is the force to which university students, faculty and staff who seek to oppose mass death and suffering must turn. All those who agree with this perspective should join the International Youth and Students for Social Equality and take up this critical fight.



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