

Organize against the continuation of in-person classes!

Appalachian State faculty member issues open letter against administration's reckless COVID-19 policies

Appalachian State International Youth and Students for Social Equality
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This week, students at Appalachian State University in Boone, North Carolina received an email from the university administration warning that faculty may be sharing information opposed to the university's current COVID safety protocols.

The email was sent in response to an open letter, written by a professor in the Sustainable Development program, condemning the reckless attitude of the administration in their drive to fully reopen the university to in-person instruction. The letter, when released, was circulated widely on social media and found broad support among students and faculty who share the same concerns.

The professor, who previously worked at the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) currently conducts research in the realm of public health, called out the administration for its negligence towards the health of students and faculty.

He wrote, "In so many ways, the Appalachian State administration has failed us throughout this pandemic and now, despite a month of warning that we could face another major covid surge, they have done virtually nothing to set us up for a safe, undisrupted semester.

"There are many things they could do, including requiring vaccines and boosters, providing better masks, better testing and tracing, clearer and more thorough quarantine requirements, clearer guidelines and support for faculty for dealing with student sickness and prolonged absences, and possibly beginning online temporarily to ensure an orderly semester. It seems extremely unlikely, however, that the university will make any policy changes that protect us beyond the CDC's minimal guidelines.

"The Chancellor even refused to meet with faculty to discuss these measures and told the Faculty Senate that the university's safety officers would never take questions again. Given this leadership vacuum, the only hope left is us. You and me. Students and faculty.

"If App's leaders are no more capable of delivering a safe,

undisturbed, high quality learning environment now than they were two years ago, then it's up to us to become our own leaders..."

In response, the administration lashed out, deeming the letter's information false and even harmful:

"Dear Students, It has come to our attention that some faculty might be sharing misinformation about university COVID safety protocols, procedures and decision-making that are inaccurate and potentially harmful. Please be aware that the definitive source for COVID safety protocols is the university's COVID website. Last week, you received four official university email messages that detailed COVID safety protocols for the Spring semester."

The administration, to keep revenue flowing, is coming into direct conflict with science and the concern of students and staff with their drive to return to pre-pandemic conditions, no matter the cost to public health. In this it is following the lead of the Biden administration, which has demanded since taking office that K-12 schools and universities remain open, no matter the cost to public health and human life.

More broadly, the negligence of the administration, and developing concern of faculty and the student body can only be understood within the context of the current public health crisis, with first the Delta and now Omicron variants of COVID-19 surging across North Carolina, the United States, and the globe.

The state, where 1,975,543 have tested positive for the virus so far, and 19,850 have passed away since March 2020, is now being engulfed by a tidal wave of infections.

According to the News and Observer, this week has seen both single day case counts, as well as hospitalizations, break all previous records during the past two years of the pandemic.

On January 13 alone, 44,833 new cases were confirmed in North Carolina, and hospitalizations rose to 4,275, a total that has more than doubled in the last month. The state positivity rate is now 30.1 percent, six times the 5 percent goal state officials have deemed safe.

On Wednesday, more than two dozen hospitals released a joint statement calling for aid in response to the sharp rise in hospitalizations across the state. “Your personal decisions about how to coexist with the virus directly affect the health and well-being of your family and community.” According to the CDC, 99 percent of all new COVID-19 cases in the Southeast were attributed to the Omicron variant as of January 8.

Though no official data is available from the university, as the administration has purposefully postponed publishing official numbers until January 18, the AppHealthCare dashboard reported 538 new cases over the last five days in Watauga County, where ASU is located. Since the beginning of the pandemic, 8,124 cumulative cases have been recorded, and 44 people have died across the county.

Yet what is the administration doing to keep the university, as well as the broader Watauga County population safe as numbers rise? In lock step with the policies being pursued by the Biden administration, they offer only vaccines and masks, while scrapping all other safety measures and pushing for a return to normal.

In a revealing statement made on Friday, university officials declared that they expect to see a rise in cases in the January 18 report, “Tuesday’s data update will show an increase in case counts over the low numbers reported at the end of last semester, which was prior to the surge in Omicron variant cases. We expect to continue seeing an increase in cases; however, we also expect to continue seeing milder cases, as our vaccination rates continue to increase, and as those eligible continue getting boosted.”

A similar message was heard at North Carolina State University this past week, where the same policies are in place. On January 11, Dr. Meagan Kittle, a professor at NC State tweeted that the university’s Student Health Services was overwhelmed with more than 500 cases each day. In subsequent tweets she reported:

“The Director of Student Health says, ‘Our public health colleagues no longer talk about *if* We are going to get Omicron. We talk about *when* we are going to get it.’ It’s just that contagious, and it’s everywhere...”

“I think the COVID dashboard here is doomed. Provost stated plainly today, ‘We will keep the dashboard with case counts, for now. But frankly the UNC System isn’t interested in the numbers. They are no longer relevant,’ referring to how contagious but ‘relatively mild’ Omicron is.”

The reference to “mild” Omicron is disingenuous. In fact, there is little hard evidence to back up the claim that Omicron is less dangerous than previous COVID-19 variants. Nonetheless, the claim that Omicron is “mild” is being used as a screen to justify the rejection of health and safety precautions such as remote learning.

While it is true that young people are less likely to become severely ill or die from COVID than older age groups, they are

not immune, and the Omicron variant has led to a surge of “breakthrough” infections among all age groups.

In fact, at this very moment, more young people are hospitalized from this variant than at any point in the pandemic thus far. According to CDC data, a record number of youth aged 18–29 are currently hospitalized, standing at a seven-day average of 1,433 new patients.

At Appalachian State, all measures must be taken to prevent countless students and staff from falling ill, possibly putting them, as well as their loved ones’ lives at risk. One student, 19-year-old Chad Dorrill, has already died due to the administration’s reckless actions.

In the fight for safe campuses and workplaces alike, it must be made abundantly clear to all students and university staff: a “vaccination alone” strategy is not sufficient to keep COVID-19 in check. The growing opposition among educators and students must become part of an international movement of workers and youth to close schools and nonessential workplaces as part of a global strategy to eliminate the virus.

In this struggle, Appalachian State staff will not be alone. Everywhere, students, staff, faculty and teachers are beginning to fight back, including thousands of students in Chicago, Seattle and Portland this week. On Thursday in France, teachers launched a one day strike to keep schools safe, and on Tuesday, thousands of New York City Public Schools students walked out in opposition to the unsafe reopening of schools.

At the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, thousands of students, staff and faculty are once again engaged in a struggle to close the campus for in-person learning, where they also are in direct opposition to the administration’s reckless policies.

The *World Socialist Web Site*, the Socialist Equality Party and International Youth and Students for Social Equality are actively assisting workers, teachers and faculty in these efforts by helping form rank-and-file committees, independent of the trade unions and the Democratic Party. Appalachian State students, faculty and staff must begin to organize against the dangerous conditions caused by the reopening of the university and join the growing fight for a scientific policy to eliminate and eradicate COVID-19!

For those interested in more information about the International Youth and Students for Social Equality, the youth section of the Socialist Equality Party, [click here](#).



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