

New York University announces in-person reopening for spring semester 24 hours after former librarian dies from COVID-19

John Conrad
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New York University (NYU), one the largest private universities in the United States, announced on Wednesday that the spring 2022 academic semester will be held in-person. This announcement came amid record numbers of new coronavirus infections and hospitalizations and 24 hours after it was reported that Dr. Jennifer Steenshorne, a former NYU librarian and American history scholar, died last week from COVID-19. Dr. Steenshorne, in her early-to-mid 50s, was fully vaccinated and had previously recovered from an infection early in the pandemic. Her tragic death underscores the immense danger of in-person classes and work amidst the continued surge of the coronavirus pandemic.

Dr. Steenshorne worked in the enormous NYU Libraries system in several capacities, starting as a clerical staff member at NYU's Stern Graduate School of Business Library in 1990 and then working as a reference associate at NYU's Elmer Holmes Bobst Library until 1993. After receiving her PhD from the University of California, Irvine's History Department, she returned to NYU to work as Manager of the Stephen Chan Library at the Institute of Fine Arts from 1997 to 2000.

In addition to her work at NYU, Dr. Steenshorne taught courses in early American history at John Jay College, LaGuardia Community College, St. Francis College and Queens College. Dr. Steenshorne also worked as a librarian and researcher for various prestigious institutions, including the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. She served as an editor of the collected private and public papers of John Jay at Columbia University and was director and editor-in-chief of the George Washington Papers collection at the University of Virginia. Dr. Steenshorne lived in New York City with her husband.

Dr. Steenshorne is one of the millions of human beings internationally whose lives have been tragically cut short by capitalist governments' criminal policies to allow the highly infectious and deadly coronavirus to rampage unchecked through the population. Yesterday, over 890,000 Americans reportedly contracted the virus and over 2,000 people died from COVID-19, bringing the official total number of US deaths closer to 900,000. Hundreds of thousands of people across the US are being hospitalized every day, putting immense strain on the rapidly decaying health care system.

New York City is once again one of the global epicenters of the COVID-19 pandemic. Over the last five days, close to 200,000

new cases and 581 deaths were reported in the city. The city's hospitalization rate has risen significantly over the last month, with the number of young children hospitalized due to COVID-19 quadrupling. Over 6,000 people in the city are hospitalized with COVID-19, close to 800 of whom are in intensive care units.

Dr. Steenshorne's death further exposes the utter fallacy of the claims of NYU administrators, parroting the lies of capitalist politicians and the bourgeois media, that the new mutations of the virus are "mild" and that the population can "learn to live with the virus." She had contracted and recovered from COVID-19 early in the pandemic and was fully vaccinated, having received two vaccine shots last year.

Announcing her second infection on Twitter, Dr. Steenshorne wrote on December 28, "Just took a home Covid test. Positive. I've had two shots, so not so bad aside from the exhaustion and cough. Booster in January. I haven't left the house in 2 months, so exposure was via my husband. I also had an early case of Covid." The next day, December 29, she tweeted, "My Covid Cough makes me feel like I have been slammed in the ribs by baseball bats." This was her last social media post before her death last week.

Breakthrough infections and deaths have been steadily increasing over the last year as the virus spreads and is allowed to continue mutating. Reports continue to emerge that tens of thousands of vaccinated individuals in the US contract COVID-19 daily and as many as one in five US deaths are breakthroughs. Recent studies have shown that individuals who have received booster shots are not entirely safe from infection. Medical studies indicate that the best vaccines have only about 75 percent efficacy against the Omicron variant.

Vaccines are a critical tool in combating the coronavirus and saving lives. However, they are not a magic bullet that alone will bring about an end to the pandemic. Saving millions of lives and stopping the further spread of COVID-19 will come about only through the implementation of a science-based strategy of elimination and eradication. This includes mass vaccination, the closure of schools and nonessential businesses, coupled with a massive government program to roll out widespread testing, high-quality masks, quarantining, contact tracing and isolation, which could eliminate the virus in a matter of months.

This is the strategy completely rejected by the multimillionaire

and billionaire trustees and administrators who run NYU. In a recent communication to the university community, the NYU administration outlined a series of mitigation measures that the school will be employing this semester, including a booster requirement, “mask policies,” and random testing. The school has also announced that dining halls, public lounges and study spaces would be temporarily closed.

These are the same “safety” measures that have failed to stop mass infection among students, faculty and staff over the last year and a half. These measures will not make up for the fact that NYU, with a student population of over 50,000, has abandoned any enforcement of social distancing inside and outside of university buildings and will continue to hold classes at capacity, some with more than 100 students in attendance.

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. As for the university’s random testing policy for vaccinated individuals it is wholly inadequate.

Since the fall of 2020, when NYU first initiated its “safe reopening” policies, thousands of students, faculty and staff have been infected with COVID-19. In the last two weeks of the fall 2021 semester at least 1,583 students, faculty and staff—the vast majority of whom are vaccinated—contracted the virus. According to NYU’s official COVID-19 tracking system, the university’s COVID-19 positivity rate is presently 20 times higher than one month ago, with 18.29 percent of tests conducted between December 27 and January 2 coming back positive. The present official city-wide seven-day average of people testing positive is 27.65 percent.

These numbers, already alarmingly high, are a significant undercounting of the true extent of the virus’s spread. NYU long ago abandoned its mandatory testing program, relying largely on a voluntary testing program and self-reported off-campus tests. NYU’s COVID-19 Prevention & Response Team has made little effort to warn students, faculty and staff of the true danger and extent of the outbreaks on campus.

All of NYU’s “safety” measures are based on the same pseudo-scientific nonsense that has been pushed by the right-wing Democratic Biden administration over the last year. NYU administrators openly admit in their communication to the university community that the beginning of the semester will result in an explosion of cases, writing, “our NYU community will likely experience high case counts that are consistent with trends in NYC ... In all likelihood, we will see greater numbers of positive cases per week than we have previously experienced.”

For the spring semester, NYU is pushing an optional “Tuition Protection Purchase” on students. In addition to paying over \$30,000 in tuition and fees for the semester—most NYU students receive a bill of close to \$80,000 annually—students who pay an extra \$318 receive a higher chance of getting reimbursed “up to \$30,000” if they are forced to withdraw from classes due to infection. In addition to empty promises of reimbursement, students and their families who fork out the extra cash are assured

of “peace of mind” and easier access to “24/7 assistance for emergencies.”

Students, faculty and staff at NYU must not allow their health and safety to be sacrificed to the altar of profit. The terrible death of Dr. Steenshorne and millions across the globe demonstrate the tremendous danger of a return to classrooms and workplaces. Everything must be done to ensure an immediate transition to online instruction and work!

This requires not an appeal to university administrators—tethered snugly to Wall Street, the military and the state—or capitalist politicians, but an appeal to the working class.

Internationally, the working class and youth are on the move. Thousands of educators and students in Oakland, Boston, Portland, Seattle, Chicago and cities and towns across the US have organized protest actions against school reopenings. On Tuesday, over a thousand New York City K-12 students—joined by many teachers and parents—at over 30 schools staged a walkout protest. In France, thousands of teachers, parents, students and workers initiated walkouts against the reopening of schools

Thousands of students and staff at the University of Michigan-Ann Arbor are once again engaged in a courageous struggle to close the campus for in-person learning. Over 25,000 City University of New York (CUNY) students, faculty and staff have signed an online petition to demand online classes. Hundreds of thousands of workers, from India to South Africa to the US to China, have gone on strike against current, intolerable conditions over the last year.

This is the social force to which NYU students and staff who seek to end mass death and suffering must turn. The implementation of this science-based strategy can only come through the political mobilization of students, youth, teachers and the entire working class against the rotten social, political and economic system that is the fundamental cause of the current crisis: capitalism.



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