

Harvard tells students with COVID-19 to “self-isolate” and conduct their own contact tracing

Kate Randall
22 January 2022

Undergraduate classes begin for the spring semester at Harvard University on Monday, January 24. In a stark departure from policies during the fall 2021 semester, students who test positive for COVID-19 will not be required to move into university-provided isolation housing but are being advised to “self-isolate” in their dorms or off-campus housing instead.

One would think that this advice had been prompted by a reduction in cases of the deadly virus on campus or in the Greater Boston area. It is not. The university’s change in policy comes as Harvard COVID-19 cases are soaring. As of January 14, Harvard reported 603 positive cases and a positivity rate of 3.36 percent for the previous seven days.

On Friday, Massachusetts reported 13,935 confirmed cases of COVID-19 and 102 deaths. The state reported 3,105 hospitalizations for COVID-19, with nearly half of those hospitalized—1,503—among vaccinated individuals. The seven-day positivity rate in the state was 19.37 percent.

As of January 13, 97 percent of Harvard employees and 98 percent of students had received two doses of the vaccine. But as the state’s numbers show, vaccination is no insurance against infection or hospitalization from COVID-19.

Harvard University Health Services (HUHS) Director Giang T. Nguyen wrote in an email: “The highly transmissible Omicron variant is driving the majority of the cases we are seeing at Harvard, as is the case nationally.” He added: “Last week we reported 970 new infections at a time when campus density is relatively low. For comparison, our case count was 140 during the first week after the Thanksgiving break.”

In another change, Harvard will no longer be conducting contact tracing and is asking students to do it themselves. Harvard University Health Services will no longer call students who test positive for COVID-19.

The university has been prompted to make these radical changes—which have the potential of driving up COVID-19 cases, sickness and death among students, staff and the wider community—“in accordance with recommendations from public health experts and guidance from state and federal public health agencies,” according to the *Harvard Crimson*.

These sweeping rule changes are directly influenced by the recent guideline changes coming from the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). In line with this guidance, Harvard will no longer require students who test positive to move into university-

provided isolation housing but will instead ask students to isolate in their dorms for five days. This is to be followed by five days of “strict mask-wearing” if they have no symptoms or symptoms that are “resolving.”

Fully vaccinated individuals who come into contact with a person testing positive will not be required to quarantine if they are asymptomatic, HUHS informed students. Those who are unvaccinated or have not received a booster shot will be required to quarantine for five days following exposure.

In an email to students, the Dean of Students Office (DSO) wrote that those whose direct roommate tests positive may apply for alternative housing if they are asymptomatic and have tested negative. Those testing negative and who are at increased risk for COVID-19 complications and who live in a suite where all other students have tested positive will be given priority for this housing. The DSO advises, however, that this alternative housing “is limited and is not guaranteed.”

There were numerous comments left on the *Crimson* article headlined “Harvard Will End Isolation Housing, Stop Conducting Contact Tracing During Spring Semester.” Nancy Morris wrote in part:

The presumptions (apparently) behind the new Harvard protocols have a certain politically inflected incoherence: The Democrats’ media friends are fighting hard to spin each day’s news cycle with themes such as “the new variant does not make people as seriously ill as its nasty predecessor.” There is data supporting such claims. But such claims conflict with the White House argument just made in the Supreme Court that the new variant of the coronavirus presents a grave threat to employees, an argument the White House claimed to be based on “the science,” and which was endorsed with claimed alarm by Harvard’s own Justices Kagan and Breyer. Why is the Harvard administration rejecting “the science” and the wisdom of its own Justices in formulating these new protocols? And why are they not explaining that rejection? Or, better, why are experts from HMS [Harvard Medical School] and HSPH [Harvard School of Public Health] not explaining that rejection?

Alasti commented:

During the past week, one in five tests in Massachusetts [has] been “positive.” Some people are being hospitalized with Omicron infections, and some are dying. Although most severe post-vaccination cases are elderly persons or those with predisposing medical conditions, we do have many hundreds of Harvard affiliates and many hundreds more cohabiting family members who are in those categories, and potentially anyone can be afflicted with subsequent “long COVID.”

Dr. Michael Mina, an epidemiologist and chief science officer at eMed, responded on Twitter to the same *Crimson* article:

Wow

Harvard will have uninfected students sleep in the same room as their infectious roommates unless they petition for a new room.

I'd be pissed if it was my kid.

A slippery slope for when cases are manageable & Harvard is trying to keep outbreaks at bay.

Harvard is requiring COVID-19 vaccination and boosters for all students, faculty, staff, and researchers.

However, a Harvard employee, speaking anonymously, told the *World Socialist Web Site* that at a unit-wide meeting they attended, employees were told that the booster requirement would not be enforced yet. “We were told that the university was still working out the enforcement for the vaccination policy enacted months ago, and so enforcing the booster mandate was unlikely in the near future,” they continued. “While almost everyone at Harvard has gotten vaccinated, it’s discouraging to hear that, in the midst of the Omicron surge, Harvard still hasn’t even figured out how to enforce its months-old mandate, let alone ensure that necessary boosters are required and made available to all.”

Late last year graduate student-workers at the university, members of the Harvard Graduate Students Union-United Auto Workers (HGSU-UAW), ratified a four-year contract with the university that resulted in a cut in real wages.

While touted as a success by the union, the wage structure in the agreement represents an effective payout of 1.2 percent this year alone, due to skyrocketing inflation. The contract does not mention COVID-19 or measures to fight it, aside from a remote work option for grad students that must be agreed to by a supervisor. The acceptance by the HGSU-UAW and other campus unions of the spread of COVID-19 has now exposed the student body and university staff to the current reckless policies of the Harvard administration.

Tuition, room and board, and estimated personal expenses for undergraduate students are in excess of \$70,000 for the current academic year. The university’s endowment now stands at more than \$53 billion. Students, many of whom must take out tens of thousands of dollars a year in student loans, now face an environment on campus where even the most minimal mitigation measures against COVID-19 are being scrapped, and the threat of infection, sickness and death from the virus are a daily threat.

Other Boston-area universities have adopted policies similar to Harvard’s:

MIT has seen the number of cases in January surpass past records

by over 10-fold. The week of January 2 to January 8 saw 1,030 cases, 12.7 times more than the record 81 cases in a week from previous variants. In three weeks of testing, cases of the Omicron variant have surpassed 500. The school has adopted the CDC’s guidance for a five-day isolation period. Classes begin January 31.

MIT student Derek responded on Twitter to a communication from MIT that praised the Institute’s community, whose “persistence during this tough phase of the pandemic has helped the Institute continue to pursue its academic and research mission.”

So happy MIT was able to pursue its mission through sacrificing 8% (over 2500 people, including myself) to COVID in just one month ...

I had it the last week of classes last semester and I had to stay up past like 5am every night to finish a final project even after telling them I had COVID.

Northeastern University is allowing students to isolate in their rooms. Roommates of students who test positive should be considered “close contacts” and monitor themselves for symptoms.

Ken Henderson, chancellor and senior vice president for learning at Northeastern, said in a memo: “While the Omicron variant has led to substantial increases in transmission, the most current data demonstrates that the vaccines remain remarkably effective in reducing the risk of severe illness.”

He added that “many students will be asymptomatic or exhibit only mild symptoms” and that “vaccines allow us to begin shifting our mindset and to approach COVID much more like a cold or flu season, which tends to be low-risk for healthy, vaccinated individuals of a college-aged demographic.”

Regarding the new CDC guidelines reducing the isolation period for those who test positive, **Northeastern University** states on its COVID-19 Spring 2022 FAQ page: “[W]e believe this is particularly appropriate for a population that is fully vaccinated and boosted. It will allow our students to return to in-person learning and campus activities in half the time, which has both educational and mental health benefits.”

Boston University President Robert Brown wrote in an email to returning BU students that “classes will be taught in-person” as originally planned when classes start on January 20 “with adjustments available, whenever possible, for students, faculty and staff who test positive or have temporary disruptions to their caregiving responsibilities.” Brown’s email was sent on January 5, as BU reported 423 positive COVID-19 cases, the highest single-day number of cases since testing began in August 2020. BU classes began on January 20.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact