

University of Illinois Chicago downplays danger of in-person learning amid Omicron surge

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The University of Illinois Chicago (UIC) hosted a virtual town hall last Wednesday to address “questions and concerns” held by students, faculty and university workers regarding the plans to resume in-person learning in the midst of an unprecedented surge of the Omicron variant across the country.

The town hall came just days after UIC hastily announced the university would return to full in-person instruction on Monday, January 24. This return to in-person learning means over 30,000 students and 10,000 workers and staff will be forced back onto the university campuses where they will inevitably spread the virus.

The lead speakers of the event, Dr. Susan Bleasedale and UIC Chancellor Michael D. Amiridis, spoke on the return to school and downplayed the ongoing dangers of the pandemic. Such downplaying of the dangers of the pandemic is in line with the policies of the Biden administration nationally, which has pushed for school and university reopenings with the help of the unions. In Chicago, Democratic Mayor Lori Lightfoot conspired with the Chicago Teachers Union to reopen the Chicago Public Schools despite widespread opposition from teachers, parents and students.

Dr. Bleasedale and the panelists made the specious argument that in-person education would be safe because of the relative decline in cases and test positivity rates over the past few weeks, largely due to remote learning. The panelists claimed that vaccination, testing and masking would prevent the spread of the Omicron variant on the campus and beyond.

The panelists also justified the reopening with pseudo-scientific claims that denied the possibility of contracting COVID-19 within a classroom or on campus. While the panelists addressed how many students and workers may have “concerns and fears” about returning to campus

amid a raging pandemic, they largely downplayed the risk of campuses becoming superspreaders for the virus as they have throughout the pandemic.

One attendee at the town hall event asked the UIC panelists about the danger of the surge of the Omicron variant: “COVID numbers in the current wave are on a downslide, yet several times they were as high as at the highest point of the Fall/Winter 2020-21. I don’t understand the insistence that we go back to class next week. Wouldn’t it make sense to delay a few more weeks, when COVID trends indicate it will be substantially safer?” No serious answer was given and instead the panelists cited the mitigation efforts by the university.

Resuming in-person learning at UIC and other universities and schools at present will only accelerate the Omicron surge. The current seven-day average for cases across the country is at 713,007. Over 2,000 people are dying every day and at least 866,000 people have lost their lives to the virus in the United States alone. In Chicago, at least 22 people continue to die every single day, with the current average of daily cases at 2,454. Hospitalizations in the city remain elevated at 183 people per day and the positivity rate remains above 10 percent.

UIC’s own dashboard shows that there have been over 1,852 positives for students since school reopened last fall and over 2,250 employees have tested positive since then. Cases surged in the month of December when Omicron began to spread across the country and the region. Even though cases have since subsided due to students staying temporarily remote after the end of winter break, a rapid surge can only be expected in the days and weeks ahead.

Despite the widespread surge last month, Dr. Bleasedale dismissed the possibility of student-to-student transmission through aerosol spread in indoor classrooms

on multiple occasions by brazenly saying, “Virus transmission inside classrooms does not pose a threat” and “data from the past month shows us that transmission happens outside of classrooms.”

Dr. Bleasdale’s claims fly in the face of more than two years of data showing schools and universities are vectors for transmission and community spread. A *New York Times* study in the fall of 2020 of more than 200 counties with large college student populations found that COVID-19 deaths rose faster in those counties than other counties.

A study of over 30 colleges published in the peer-reviewed journal *Computer Methods in Biomechanics and Biomedical Engineering* found that college campuses are superspreaders of COVID-19. At least half of the colleges studied reported infection spikes of 1,000 COVID-19 cases per 100,000 people within the first two weeks of classes. The study concluded, “These findings suggest that college campuses are at risk to develop an extreme incidence of COVID-19 and become superspreaders for neighboring communities.”

Last month, Cornell University saw an unprecedented surge of the Omicron variant that forced the campus to shut down and go remote. Even though more than 97 percent of students were vaccinated, over 986 infections among Cornell students occurred in just four days.

When an anonymous attendee asked the UIC panel, “How are we supposed to social distance when there are classes of 95-100 people?” the panelists admitted that it would not be possible.

According to the UIC administration, social distancing is no longer necessary. In an email sent to students and staff addressing this same concern, the administration stated, “Our classroom seating arrangements, which follow the Illinois Board of Higher Education and the Illinois Department of Public Health’s guidance, do not require distancing. In the fall, we did not see transmission within classrooms. Masking is our primary prevention, and masks are required in all classrooms.”

At the town hall, Dr. Bleasdale spoke on UIC’s “prevention” plan, which consists largely of mask enforcement. Instead of distributing the most protective and effective masks to students and staff, Bleasdale even went so far as to state that high-quality N-95 masks are “overkill” in classroom settings and that cloth or surgical masks are protective enough.

UIC administrators have made it clear that they have heard and received the concerns of students, faculty and university workers. Yet students and staff are being forced

back into a situation where they have to choose between their education and potentially catching a deadly virus. Student workers who make less than minimum wage are also battling COVID-19 while working for the university that puts them in danger.

The administration has sought to silence UIC’s community as well. Students and staff have absolutely no say in what UIC chooses to do to them, as UIC has continuously ignored all voices of opposition. Removing remote learning also means disabled, immunocompromised students who do not return to in-person learning will be forced to choose between education and their safety.

The university has demonstrated its total lack of concern for the lives and health of its students and workers. The decision to return to in-person learning is not for the sake of its students or their education, but to ensure that the high costs of tuition and room and board are justified.

Since the onset of the 2020-21 school year there have been multiple petitions circulated online to demand UIC lowers its obscene tuition costs during remote learning. One petition with over 10,000 signatures states that “the students of UIC hereby request the University to refund all students the difference between the costs of in-person and online instruction.”

While the president of the University of Illinois system racks in an annual salary of over \$700,000, students are going into debt over high tuition rates that do not reflect the actual cost of online (or in-person) learning.

Students, faculty and UIC workers opposed to the unsafe reopening of the campus for in-person learning should take matters into their own hands and join with the Chicago Educators Rank-and-File Committee and the International Youth and Students for Social Equality to demand a return to remote learning until community spread of the virus is eliminated.

UIC students can contact the IYSSE to learn more or fill out the form below to join the Chicago Educators Rank-and-File Committee.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact