

University of Chicago students denounce in-person classes and inadequate safety measures as Omicron spreads

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Like universities across the US, the University of Chicago (UChicago) is seeing an eruption of COVID-19 cases across its campus. The resumption of in-person learning since the fall has triggered this wave of infections, placing the health and lives of students, faculty and staff and the surrounding community at risk.

UChicago resumed in-person classes and all campus services January 24, following a three-week shift to remote instruction after the new year in response to the surge in cases. The university's COVID-19 dashboard shows that 307 total cases and 189 close contacts were confirmed for the week of January 21 through January 27, compared to 245 cases and 105 close contacts the week prior.

Its weekly surveillance testing program, which tests mainly individuals without symptoms, climbed from 23 positive results to 163 within three weeks from December 10 to December 31. Positive test results from the program have trended downward during the remote instruction period yet have still stayed above the levels reported in the first three weeks of December.

UChicago's testing program of those with symptoms reported 148 positive test results as of January 26, and it is not known over how long a period the data has been collected. Overall, the symptomatic testing program shows a high positivity rate of 25 percent, indicating many infections are occurring which are not being reported.

In response to UChicago's reckless decision to reinstate in-person instruction, students, staff and faculty penned an open letter addressed to University President Paul Alivisatos, Provost Ka Yee C. Lee, and Executive Vice President Katie Callow-Wright, "An

Open Letter to Admin on Conditions of Return to Campus." The letter was authored by the group UChicago In This Together and published by the student newspaper *The Chicago Maroon* on January 20. As of this writing, it had received nearly 1,000 signatures.

The letter begins by exposing the university administration's silence on the group's efforts to seek "clarification regarding the process and measures by which the conditions of our work, teaching, and learning in the face of surging COVID infection rates are being decided."

It explains that the University of Chicago Medical Center, among other hospitals in the city, is being pushed past its breaking point and dispels myths that infection by any variant of COVID-19 is mild. Across the city, just 13 percent of ICU beds are available, and 211 ICU beds are occupied by COVID-19 patients as of January 27, according to the chicago.gov Hospital Capacity Dashboard.

The group listed three "requests for immediate consideration and action:" the postponement of in-person learning until at least February 14, "transparent disclosure of the public health metrics by which the administration would determine that in-person teaching is safe beyond February 14," and "an open forum for the discussion and appeal of the administration's decisions regarding our shared conditions of work, teaching, and learning."

One day after the publication of the open letter, Provost Lee sent a message addressed to all university staff, students and faculty on January 21. In a display of blatant disdain for the concerns of students and staff, the message stated, "After more than a month of

closely monitoring the impact of the Omicron variant nationwide and in Chicago, the University is moving forward with plans to resume in-person instruction on January 24, in consultation with experts at the University of Chicago Medicine.” It remains unclear who the unnamed experts were or what evidence prompted them to believe that it was safe to resume all in-person activities on the campus.

Like University of Illinois at Chicago (UIC), the UChicago administration claimed that it could justify a return to in-person learning because overall infections in Chicago had decreased since January 1. This deliberately glosses over the critical fact that the struggle of Chicago Public Schools against in-person learning after the winter holidays forced the shutdown of in-person schooling citywide. Furthermore, major universities in the city such as UIC and UChicago itself delayed the start of their winter quarters due to the spread of the Omicron variant in the US throughout the holiday season.

The university has also touted a number of inadequate safety precautions, including “expansion of the on-campus UChicago COVID-19 Testing Program to include symptomatic and exposure testing; limiting dine-in service on campus; updates to UChicago’s exposure protocols with the most recent CDC guidance; encouraging travelers to schedule tests before and after returning to the city; and revisions to the non-instruction meeting guidance.” UChicago also requires booster shots for all students, faculty and staff on campus, with limited exemptions.

Another inadequate measure as part of the “safety theater” at the university that has been called out by students is the announcement that free surgical-grade masks would be available for students, staff and faculty entering all university buildings.

A user on the r/uchicago Reddit forum posted: “Most other universities I know are distributing KN95 masks and some even making it mandatory to wear a well fitted respirator. The new CDC guidelines are reinforcing the same. Weird how they still decided to not go that route—especially if the rationale is to reduce costs, given the shit ton of money they have.” Another commented in response, “I’m not even surprised at this point, their ‘safety measures’ are beyond arbitrary, then they’ll act shocked at an outbreak.”

UChicago Student Government has begun to

distribute KN95 masks to undergraduate students in the absence of support for adequate masks from university administration. Like campuses across the United States, the attitude of the University of Chicago administration toward student health and safety is to let the virus rip, with every student and staff member left on their own to protect themselves from the highly contagious and life-threatening Omicron variant.

All of this reveals that the primary concern of the highly paid top administrators like Provost Lee, Chancellor Robert J. Zimmer and President Alivisatos is to satisfy the business interests of the millionaires and billionaires on its board of trustees, which includes millionaire Microsoft CEO Satya Nadella; Thomas J. Pritzker, billionaire brother of Illinois Governor J.B. Pritzker; and billionaire Kenneth C. Griffith, the wealthiest man in the state and head of the hedge fund Citadel LLC.

It is clear that the administration is fully devoted to carrying out the “herd immunity” policy of the ruling class which they serve, allowing the virus to infect as many people as possible worldwide. They are more concerned with inflating their stock portfolios rather than spending resources on the public health measures necessary to halt the pandemic, which would need to include full funding for remote learning.

UChicago students and staff who are ready to take up the fight for remote learning and a Zero COVID strategy must turn to the working class, the social force which comprises the majority of the population and which has suffered the brunt of the pandemic and its consequences. Join the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) and the Chicago Educators’ Rank-and-File Safety Committee today to learn about how to build the critical connections with teachers, other workers and students in Chicago Public Schools and schools and workplaces worldwide to lay the groundwork for this fight.



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