Student petition calls for reinstatement of COVID safety policies at Baylor

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A student at Baylor University, a private Christian university in Waco, Texas launched a petition that has gained close to 400 signatures as of this writing calling for the reinstatement of modest safety measures at the school in response to the Omicron surge. Baylor started classes in person on January 18, as many universities did in Texas and across the US, with little to no virtual options available for students nor safety measures in place. The student, Madi Snow, said she was at high risk of contracting COVID and developing severe illness, according to the campus newspaper the Baylor Lariat.

According to Baylor's dashboard, over 9,000 people have been infected since the start of the pandemic at the 20,000-student university.

Baylor is in Waco, which has a population of some 136,000. Surrounding McLennan County has been ravaged by the pandemic, with 46,000 cases and 827 deaths from COVID-19 to date, according to the Texas Department of State Health Services. Only a few weeks ago hospitals in McLennan County had to restrict non-emergency procedures.

The Texas COVID-19 death toll has exceeded total American combat deaths in the Vietnam War and Korean war combined, with 81,413 deaths, according to Worldometer. The current seven-day average estimate is over 25,000 people being infected per day.

The state of Texas, like the Biden administration nationally, has repudiated virtually all COVID safety measures. Republican Governor Greg Abbott banned mask mandates last year, though this was challenged in court with some school districts ignoring the governor’s anti-mask mandate.

The main demands of the petition are the reinstatement of Baylor's pandemic attendance policy and for online options for students. The petition states that the university makes “no exceptions for students who test positive for COVID-19 or are exposed and need to quarantine” and that “any student attending fewer than 75% of a course automatically receives no credit. This amounts to an average of 3 to 6 absences in most courses.” That is, students who are sick as a result of COVID-19 may fail courses as a result. No doubt many students may feel compelled, out of academic considerations, to attend school sick in order to avoid failing as a result of the university’s policy, posing a risk both to themselves and others.

Baylor also sent out an email on January 12 cited by the Baylor Lariat that “requires faculty to work with students who are absent because of ‘serious illness, accident, or death in the family,’” and that “if a student were to test positive for COVID-19 or be quarantined by the University, the University Attendance policy requires faculty to work with these students,” raising the prospect of faculty working with sick students and further spreading the disease.

The petition also calls for online options, which as it notes “w[ere] offered pre-vaccine, and the new policy is being framed as reasonable in light of decreased mortality and reportedly mild cases.” The petition continues, “Forgotten here is the reality that many high-risk people have an insufficient immunoresponse to the vaccine, or comorbidities that would exacerbate even a mild case of COVID-19 to be dangerous.”

The petition also points to cases standing “well above the average from Fall 2021” and the risk it poses it “high risk people” and those that live with and care for them, as well as the lack of guidance on campus on proper masking, reiterating the fact that Baylor previously offered remote and that it could do it again.

The petition, while correctly calling out the risk to those with comorbidities, so-called high-risk populations, does so while overlooking the risk posed both to other students as well as the broader population.

It should be noted that the 9,000 infections at the
university no doubt contributed to the spread in the broader community. To be blunt, the measures Baylor previously embraced that the petition calls to be reinstated were woefully inadequate then and are even more so now, with the more infectious and vaccine resistant Omicron variant.

COVID-19 creates a plethora of debilitating and life-threatening issues in healthy vaccinated people as well as in those who are at high risk that students should be aware of.

COVID is known to damage several organ systems including the lungs, heart, kidneys, and brain. COVID can cause blood clots which can lead to stroke and heart damage, as well as a drop in IQ often worse than lead poisoning or a stroke. It can also cause long-term breathing problems, heart complications, chronic kidney impairment, stroke, Guillain-Barre syndrome, as well as multisystem inflammatory syndrome in both children and adults (MIS-C and MIS-A respectively) that can lead to permanent organ damage and death. In children, COVID-19 has been known to cause diabetes.

A quarter of the people who die from COVID-19 have no comorbidities, meaning people under the age of 65 with no preexisting health conditions are at risk.

The reference to “high risk people,” is misleading, suggesting only a small minority comprised of those with rare genetic disorders or other very rare disorders or diseases are vulnerable, but that simply isn’t the case.

According to Johns Hopkins research published in the Journal of the American Medical Association, 33 percent and 23 percent of Americans ages 18 to 25 are obese or overweight, respectively, putting them at risk for a variety of health problems including high blood pressure, heart disease, type 2 diabetes, osteoarthritis, and cancer. This is a comorbidity, and those in this category are “high risk people.” Only a minority, 38 percent, in that age range have a healthy BMI.

The CDC states on its website that being overweight, obese, or severely obese “can make you more likely to get severely ill from COVID-19,” adding that the “risk of severe COVID-19 illness increases sharply with elevated BMI.”

One in four young adults (ages 19-34) have prediabetes, according to the CDC. One study concluded, “Prediabetes could act as a risk factor for the severity of COVID-19.”

The university, in line with the Biden administration’s anti-scientific vaccine-only policy, has used vaccinations to justify removing COVID safety measures.

In an email, Baylor President Linda Livingstone pointed to the high vaccination rate towards the end of January, which stood at 80.1 percent of students and 92.9 percent of employees, in order to justify ending weekly testing of students. This no doubt contributed to a fall in officially recorded cases.

Livingstone made the oft-repeated claim of a supposedly “mild” Omicron virus, saying in an email quoted by the Baylor Lariat, “While this semester began with several days of high case counts, those cases have generally been mild and short-lived, allowing us to manage the campus health environment effectively.” That is, infecting students, staff, and the broader community with a debilitating and lethal virus is the policy of Baylor. One might be mistaken to take the president’s idiotic comments for an advertisement for a chicken-pox party.

Much of this has to do not with health concerns, but financial considerations. A major component of a typical university’s revenues come from parking passes, on-campus housing, sports and other in-person-only activities. Many universities in Texas suffered a decline in revenue as a result of the turn to remote learning around March 2020.

Baylor does not mention in its justifications fully reopening that a student has already died at the university from COVID-19, Alicia Martinez, a 21-year-old graduate student who was studying at the School of Social Work and about to graduate. Also not mentioned are the tens of thousands of other young people and young adults across the US who have died of COVID-19.

The International Youth and Students for Social Equality calls for schools to go virtual as part of a broader strategy to fight and defeat the pandemic. Students must join with workers as part of a mass socialist movement to put an end to the pandemic, itself a product of the ruling class policy of mass infection pursued to keep workers on the job producing profits to enrich the financial oligarchy. All students seeking to fight for safe schools should sign up to join the IYSSE, and faculty and staff seeking the same should join the Texas Educators Rank and File Committee.