

THE CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION



The Student-Blaming Has Begun

Is it fair to fault college students for Covid-19 outbreaks?

WALTER FREEMAN

STUDENTS

By *Katherine Mangan*

AUGUST 21, 2020

First came the reprimand: More than 100 first-year students who had gathered in Syracuse University's quad (above), many without masks, to mingle with new friends on a warm August night had been [selfish](#) and reckless. If the university were forced to retreat to an online semester, the blame was on the students, the vice chancellor wrote.

Then, the sanctions dropped. Twenty-three students, many identified by security-camera footage, were issued interim [suspensions](#) for violating Covid-19 health and safety rules.

“We will not tolerate anyone putting the health, safety, and well-being of our campus and the Syracuse community at risk,” the university’s public-safety chief, Bobby Maldonado, and dean of students, Marianne Thomson, [wrote](#), describing the gathering as “incredibly reckless.”



Syracuse University

@SyracuseU

Message to our community from Vice Chancellor Haynie regarding Wednesday’s selfish and reckless behavior by a group of students: bit.ly/3iZMhGw



316 11:36 AM - Aug 20, 2020

[173 people are talking about this](#)

Meanwhile, in a week that saw a growing number of colleges reverse course in the wake of Covid-19 outbreaks and move classes online, colleges fearing they might be next scolded students for unsafe socializing. Student-conduct codes were hurriedly revamped to include suspension and expulsion for the most egregious cases.

The message was clear: It was students’ behavior that was jeopardizing universities’ painstaking plans to offer a safe, in-person semester.

Purdue University, one of the first to [adamantly declare](#) its intent to reopen in person, suspended three dozen students for attending a party that violated rules banning large gatherings and requiring masks. Pennsylvania State University suspended a fraternity for hosting a rogue party.

Penn State's president, Eric Barron, [asked students](#): "Do you want to be the person responsible for sending everyone home?"

The University of Maine's chancellor, Dannel P. Malloy, wrote in a message to students that "the fate of the fall semester is in the hands of our students," but that many were stepping up to the plate to lead health and safety initiatives.

At the same time that blame and responsibility were piling on, critics were questioning whether it was fair to fault college students for doing what students naturally do, especially when they've been cooped up with their parents for months, away from their friends and eager for a "real" college experience.

And should college administrators shoulder much of the blame for bringing students back in the midst of a pandemic and expecting radical changes in their behavior?

Julia L. Marcus, an infectious-disease epidemiologist at Harvard Medical School, believes they should. "What's happening on college campuses is a microcosm of what's happening in this country, which is a deflection of responsibility from the top down to the individual," she said in an interview.

"It's unconscionable for these administrators to be shaming and blaming and punishing their students for what we all knew would happen. For any of us who take a minute to put ourselves back in our 18-year-old selves, asking students to essentially lock themselves in their rooms for a semester isn't going to be an effective public-health approach."

Marcus said she isn't absolving students of all responsibility for failure to wear masks and maintain social distance. But colleges, she said, haven't provided enough safe alternatives to socialize.

Rebecca R. Ortiz, an assistant professor of advertising at Syracuse, wishes the university's response to this week's student gathering had been worded less harshly and worries that the messaging could be unnecessarily divisive. If students feel they aren't being respected, they might be less willing to report problems, and dangerous behavior could go underground, said Ortiz, who has recognized similar unintended consequences in the sexual-assault prevention efforts she studies.

“What’s happening on college campuses is a microcosm of what’s happening in this country.”

“I understood where they were coming from, having been behind the scenes seeing all the efforts and the money that have gone into preparing for the fall,” said Ortiz. “There’s going to be frustration when students are not following the guidelines. But the other side of me understands that these students came to college to have a college experience, and that experience looks very different from what they had hoped for.”

Administrators who defend the decision to crack down on unsafe socializing suggest that critics might be selling students short, assuming they aren't capable of behaving responsibly.

After a [video](#) was posted of large outdoor gatherings of students from the Indiana University at Bloomington, the university began issuing suspensions to students. In an interview, the provost, Lauren Robel, said such behavior “is unfair to the vast majority of students who do understand what it takes to go to a public university in a pandemic.”

She thinks most students will rise to the challenge. “There will always be people who don't want to play by the rules, and those people need to understand that it is a privilege to be on a college campus,” she said.

She said Indiana is pursuing a number of safe alternatives to partying, like showing movies on the Jumbotron in the football stadium or setting up tents across the campus for small performances and lectures.

Robel said she's "cautiously optimistic" the campus won't go the way of universities like UNC-Chapel Hill, North Carolina State, and Notre Dame, which have reverse course and moved online — the latter at least temporarily.

But that trend, which many expect to continue, is worrying plenty of administrators. In a [message](#) on Wednesday, Vanderbilt University's chancellor, Daniel Diermeier, and provost, Susan R. Wente, wrote, "Every student must know that the parties and disregard for face masks, physical distancing and gathering size causing universities to abandon in-person classes *will not be tolerated at Vanderbilt.*" They added, "One person's decision to shrug off their responsibility for a night of fun can be the reason an entire class misses its senior year, or why a student, for whom Vanderbilt is the safest home they know, is forced to leave."



Vanderbilt University
@VanderbiltU

An urgent message about the start of classes from [@vu_chancellor](#) Daniel Diermeier and [@vu_provost](#) Susan R. Wente.

Every student must know that the parties and disregard for face masks, physical distancing and gathering size causing other universities to abandon in-person classes will not be tolerated at Vanderbilt.

Daniel Diermeier

Chancellor

Susan R. Wente

Provost and Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs



223 5:31 PM - Aug 19, 2020

[78 people are talking about this](#)

Flouting public-health requirements could result not only in student-conduct violations, but criminal penalties that “will follow students and derail their future chances” of attending graduate schools or securing their dream job, they warned.

The backlash to that message was swift on [Twitter](#), where critics faulted the university for inviting students back during a pandemic and then expecting them to comply with what they considered unrealistic health and safety rules.

Michael Sorrell, president of Paul Quinn College, who made the decision early on to shift to a virtual semester, suggested that universities should look at their own responsibility for outbreaks that are occurring as students return.



Michael Sorrell

@michaelsorrell

Dear administrators who are scolding students for messing up your ill-conceived plans: instead of blaming the students, perhaps we should analyze why you put them in that position in the first place.

818 8:57 AM - Aug 21, 2020

[195 people are talking about this](#)

A similar message came from Holden Thorp, former chancellor of the UNC-Chapel Hill and former provost at Washington University in St. Louis. He tweeted that college fundraisers rely on alumni’s fond memories of the socializing they did on campus. Criticizing today’s students for partying, he wrote, “doesn’t ring true.”

One consultant who advises colleges on risk management said his clients feel that they’re in a no-win situation. “The threaten and blame game so many campuses are resorting to now just isn’t constructive or effective,” says Brett A. Sokolow, chair of TNG Consulting.

“First, it is unreasonable to expect students to be meaningfully compliant with all safety protocols in large enough numbers to contain the spread,” he wrote in an email. “Just

from a developing late-adolescent brain perspective, they're still developing the ability to process and internalize the cause-effect relationship and relationship to consequences and translate that to protective action."

Even if colleges discipline students for flouting safety rules, Sokolow added, "they've already potentially contributed to the spread." His group is helping campuses develop social contracts for students to sign, working with local landlords to stop off-campus parties, and expediting the hearing process so college conduct panels don't get bogged down.

Those panels are likely to be busy. Purdue University's student code of conduct was updated to include sanctions, up to expulsion, for students who violate what it calls the [Protect Purdue Pledge](#).



Purdue University

@LifeAtPurdue

Purdue announced Wednesday (Aug. 19) that students who violate the requirements of the Protect Purdue Pledge are subject to disciplinary action via the university's Regulations Governing Student Conduct, Disciplinary Proceedings and Appeals. [#ProtectPurduepurdue.university/319WhXq](#)

Purdue adds violation of Protect Purdue Pledge to student code of co...

Purdue University announced Wednesday (Aug. 19) that students who violate the requirements of the Protect Purdue Pledge are subject to [purdue.edu](#)

107 1:04 PM Aug 19, 2020

“Generally, issues with compliance will be addressed with care, understanding, and information sharing,” Purdue’s [compliance document](#) states. “The overarching goal with compliance will be to de-escalate rather than intensify a situation.”

In a [message to students](#), the dean of students, Katherine L. Sermersheim, made it clear, however, that “if you don’t abide by the rules, there is no place for you here.”

In a statement emailed to *The Chronicle*, Sermersheim said that with one party or event that doesn’t follow the rules, all the hard work Purdue has done planning for a safe semester “can be undone in the blink of an eye.”

If you have questions or concerns about this article, please [email the editors](#) or [submit a letter](#) for publication.

STUDENT LIFE

ADMINISTRATION



Katherine Mangan

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