Colleges need vaccine mandates

Finally, in the United States, colleges and universities are ramping up for a relatively normal school year. Most pandemic restrictions have been lifted and—barring any unforeseen new coronavirus variants—parents and students will soon be pulling up to residence halls and unloading their belongings. At many schools in “blue” states, there will be a great deal of confidence that good times are on the horizon as everyone there will have shown proof of vaccination against COVID-19. But for some public universities in “red” states, where vaccine mandates are not permitted, an aura of uncertainty will hang over the campus and the local community, a foreshadowing sense that another outbreak could be at hand.

One risk is that unvaccinated students will contract and spread COVID-19, just as they did last fall. College presidents were quick to blame student partying and socializing for the outbreaks last year, without acknowledging their own culpability. No experienced college administrator can have truly believed that students would return to campus after months in lockdown without cutting loose and socializing. This year, some students will have been vaccinated or gained some immunity from contracting and then recovering from COVID-19. But many first-year students will be immunologically naïve. This raises the specter of continued testing, contact tracing, and potential lockdowns, provided schools will be allowed to enforce them.

Another risk will come from college sports. Last month, the baseball team at North Carolina State University (NCSU) was on an unexpected run into the final games of the College World Series in Omaha, Nebraska, when its season was suspended because of COVID-19 protocols. Some players fell ill with COVID-19, and it was later disclosed that many of them were among the unvaccinated. Eliot Avent, the NCSU baseball coach, said after the disappointing suspension that “My job is to teach them baseball, make sure they get an education and keep them on the right track forward, but I don’t try to indoctrinate my kids with my values or my opinions.” It’s hard to put all of the blame on Avent—the North Carolina legislature was already working on a bill prohibiting vaccine mandates when the University of North Carolina system stated that it would not be requiring students to get the COVID-19 vaccines.

What the NCSU episode shows is that in the absence of a vaccine mandate, a testing program just isn’t enough. Beyond outbreaks like the one at NCSU, there are other worries. As Helen Branswell reported in STAT, many experts expect a powerful cold and flu season this year as masks are removed and viruses come out of hibernation. So, imagine a college campus where large numbers of students are coughing and sneezing, and even bedridden with normal colds and flu. In the absence of a vaccine mandate, it will be impossible for the college to reassure staff, faculty, and local residents that there is not a major outbreak of COVID-19. Further, many of these students who are unvaccinated could very well have severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2) in addition to whatever else ails them. This could lead to closures or substantial restrictions that could have easily been avoided if a vaccine mandate were in place.

I wrote to several higher education administrators and local government officials to ask their opinion about vaccine mandates. Although they privately agreed that every college should require mandates, no one was willing to say so on the record. They were all worried that Republican legislators will punish the universities if they come out swinging. Like other measures to limit academic freedom and circumvent faculty expertise, this is another example of politicians and politically appointed trustees overreaching their appropriate roles in higher education policy.

When Arizona State University (ASU) tried to require that unvaccinated students would have to wear masks and be tested regularly, the governor issued an executive order banning any such expectation. The order says that ASU and other public colleges in Arizona cannot “place any conditions on attendance or participation in classes or academic activities, including but not limited to mandatory testing and mandatory mask usage.” ASU has about 75,000 students across its campuses. What could go wrong?

Officials at universities and in government need to take a stand regardless of the political consequences for the institutions. Lives are at stake.

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