

THE AGENDA

OPINION | CORONAVIRUS

States — Not Universities — Should Decide When Campuses Reopen

Universities will gain financially from reopening, but it's the surrounding community that will bear the costs of an outbreak on campus.



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Universities across the U.S., especially residential institutions of higher education, are under tremendous financial strain plus pressure from students, parents and alumni to open in-person this fall. For university officials, the costs of not re-opening are enormous: Many colleges **may not** survive without revenue from dormitory living and tuition if they opt for pure on-line teaching.

So far, most campuses appear to be leaning toward reopening. Over 65 percent of the 600 institutions tracked by the [Chronicle of Higher Education](#) report that they “plan to reopen in-person.” While some public universities, like the giant California State University system, have **announced** that they will conduct classes online in the fall, many others, including elite institutions such as Harvard, MIT, [Yale](#), and Stanford, are still weighing their options.

The stakes are high — and go well beyond university campuses. Any campus outbreak would jeopardize not just students’ health but also the lives of faculty and support workers including maintenance and food service employees. An outbreak would also almost certainly spill over into the surrounding community, especially when the university is in an urban area and students use mass rapid transit.

If universities end up sparking new Covid-19 outbreaks, they will likely be forced to close again, precipitating new lockdowns in the towns where they are located, compounding the crippling economic losses we have experienced over the past three months, and potentially spreading the virus back to students' hometowns as they leave campus.

That's why this decision should not be left up to university officials alone. Congressional committees are holding hearings this week on the problem. Members of Congress should be concerned about the possibilities that by reopening, universities will capture private gains (money, alumni support, campus spirit) while externalizing the costs of an outbreak to surrounding communities who would inevitably be severely impacted by a major Covid-19 outbreak on campus.

As a result, university openings should be strictly regulated by state public health officials, with plans approved only once they meet what's known as "gating" criteria: adequate hospitalization capacity, low rates of new infections, and testing capabilities for all universities in the state. Such conditions are likely to be met only during one of the final phases of a state's back-to-work policies, when the epidemic will be well-controlled and the background risk of infection is low, with less than 2 percent of Covid-19 tests coming back positive.

CORONAVIRUS: WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

President Donald Trump and Melania Trump **have tested positive** for Covid-19.

Confirmed U.S. Cases: **7,292,422** | U.S. Deaths: **208,068**

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Once the overall Covid-19 situation in the surrounding city and state has been brought under control, here is what governors and mayors should require universities to do to reopen:

Provide universal, repeated testing to all students, faculty and staff.

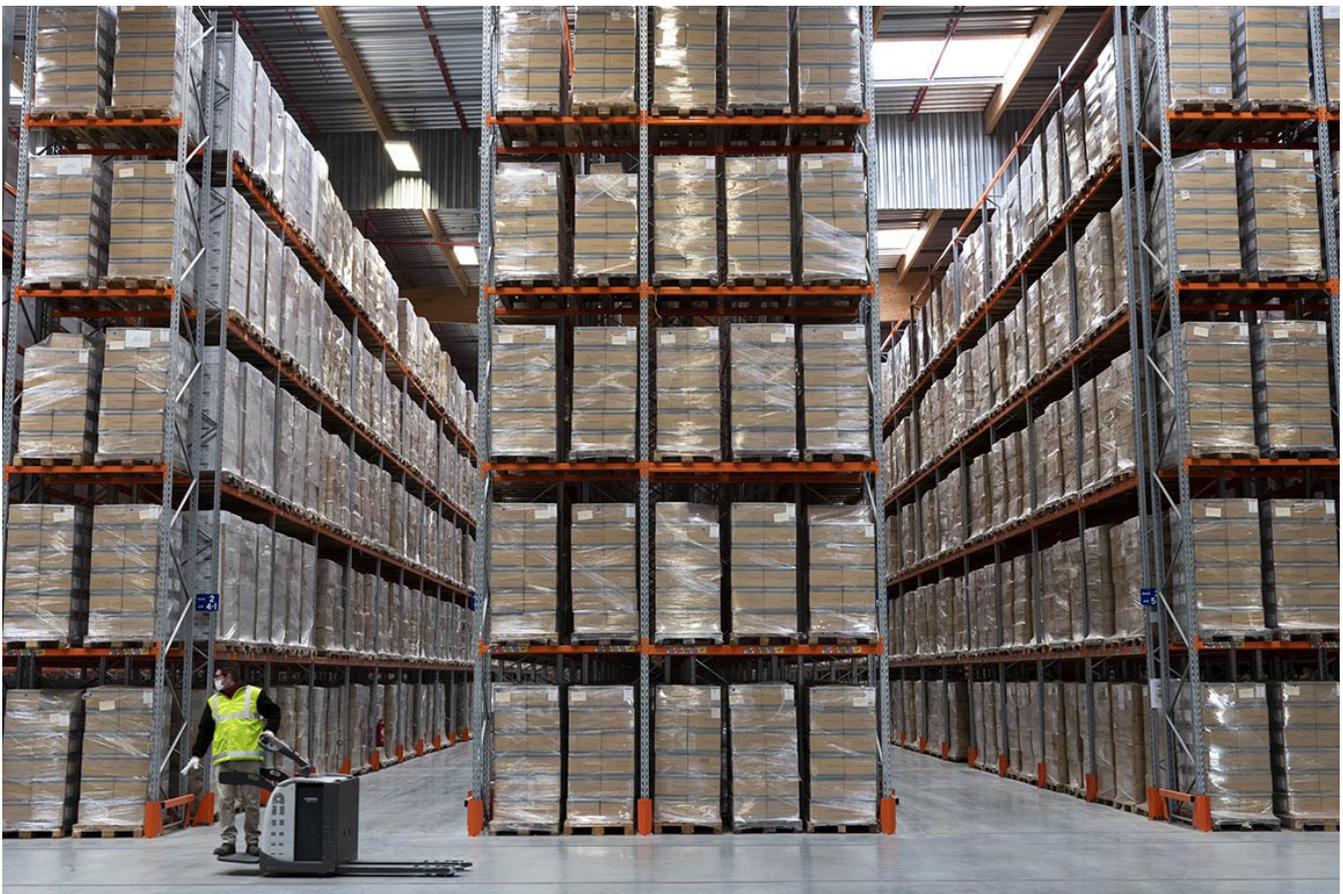
All incoming students should be tested for Covid-19 upon their arrival and then again seven days later, especially as a large share of those infected will be **asymptomatic**. Students, essential workers, and faculty will need to be tested regularly during the fall, perhaps as often as weekly, and quarantine space provided for those who test positive.

This is no small endeavor. Connecticut has estimated that this will require **200,000-300,000 tests** in late August and early September if students are to return safely to that state's campuses. The numbers will be even larger in many other states. Current *total* Covid-19 testing in these states amounts to only a fraction of what is needed and what universities are saying they will provide.

The example of Northeastern University in Boston, which has already declared

its intention to [reopen in-person this fall](#), illustrates these challenges. Northeastern has over 37,000 students plus thousands more faculty and support staff. Weekly testing alone at the current average cost of \$50 per person could require Northeastern to lay out about \$2 million up front and many additional millions during the fall semester — at a time when Northeastern and many other colleges are facing [severe financial stresses](#). The initial push to conduct 37,000 tests at Northeastern alone would consume about half of all Covid-19 tests conducted in Massachusetts over the past seven days.

The level of testing to open and keep open the 101 colleges and universities in Massachusetts, with a total student enrollment of 340,000, is staggering. The same story holds in each of our 50 states. This is why universities are now starting to face up to the [magnitude of the challenges](#) of mounting widespread and repeated testing as a precondition for safe residential life in the fall. Universities need to move aggressively to activate and obtain certification of their own [academic labs](#), which are currently idle, to [ramp up testing capacity](#) or seek to take advantage of other new but [unproven testing technologies](#).



Stock of masks in the Marolles depot, eastern France, after the first delivery of masks coming from China in March. | Thomas Paudeloux/ECPAD via AP

Stand up contact tracing. To address any outbreaks, universities will need to have adequate personnel and technology to conduct [contact tracing](#) and extra housing and support services for safe isolation of infected students and employees. Again, most universities will need to scramble in the next few months to organize the [needed infrastructure](#). It is widely accepted that statewide contact tracing systems will not be able to cope with the demands from universities, and institutions of higher education with schools of medicine and public health are well placed to roll out their own tracing programs. University-run “test and trace” can then be networked with larger state efforts via integrated databases. Still it will take time, money, and expert management to stand up contact tracing from scratch at each university, training and employing dozens of workers.

Make mask usage mandatory for everyone on campus. Well-designed

cloth masks used consistently have [been shown](#) to cut Covid-19 transmission by half or more — the [costlier surgical and N-95 respirator masks](#) are not required and should in fact be reserved for health care workers in university hospitals and student health centers. Universities will need to stock up on a [range of masks](#) for students and other employees at higher risk of infection, but most students can also bring to school half a dozen [cloth masks](#) that fit them comfortably and can be washed after daily use, and that cost less than \$10 each.

Create and enforce physical distancing for classrooms, dormitories, cafeterias, libraries and other common areas. Universities' physical spaces need to be reimagined and redesigned to minimize the risk of Covid-19 transmission.

Ideally, students should have single rooms, alone or in larger suites. Classrooms will need to be “de-densified” by spreading out students more than 6 feet apart. Larger lectures may be impossible to organize in person and will have to be converted to remote Zoom format. Student meals will have to be shifted to takeaway or “grab and sit” in a well-spaced dining hall — no more food counter service and salad bars. Student flow through libraries will also have to be limited and closely monitored. Common areas like student lounges are high risk zones and should probably be closed for the coming semester.

Likewise, activities like campus concerts, parties, and fraternity events need to be kept off the calendar, along with most athletic contests. (Universities like [Notre Dame](#) claim that they will create safe conditions for the high profile competitive athletics which are much loved by students, alumni, and the television networks and their advertisers — but how this can be done safely is still unclear.)

Develop shutdown plans. Lastly, each university must have a serious and coherent plan for shutting down quickly and in an orderly fashion during the semester should there be a resurgence of Covid-19 that cannot be contained.

Students will need to know in advance what will happen to their classes, their belongings and how they can travel safely back home.

Beyond such extensive and detailed plans, there is also the issue of compliance — in fact, compliance might turn out to be the biggest challenge of all. Will students wear their masks? Will they maintain social distancing? Will they avoid the temptation to organize a covert dorm party? The experience of the [March spring break](#) in Florida, when students from around the country flocked to beaches just as the pandemic was hitting in force, doesn't bode well. University presidents will have to design a range of carrots and sticks to enforce compliance, and have dorm proctors, student leaders, and campus police enforce them vigorously.

If we hurry to reopen universities without these needed plans and safeguards in place, we will be putting at great risk the progress we have made over the past two months in stopping Covid-19. University officials may justifiably worry about losing money if they stay closed, but the rest of us may lose much more — unless they do it right.