<u>Unclear Covid Procedures Create Anxiety on SUNY Campuses</u>

By: Caroline Bodan

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Amy Trainor, 19, was eager to begin her sophomore year at The State University of New York (SUNY) Oneonta, a liberal arts school with 6,500 students in upstate New York. She had just declared her major and was excited to be back on campus again after the isolation of remote learning in spring 2020 because of COVID shutdowns. Mere days into the new semester though Oneata began to shut down, and Trainor could not believe it was all happening again.

"First they shut down entire dining halls and people were not allowed in Starbucks or other school buildings and people were advised to stay in their rooms," she recalls. Things quickly turned for the worse after her first week back, as cases skyrocketed from parties where on campus and off campus students mingled.

As week two of the semester began, testing sites opened on campus. Trainor says the testing sites felt, "rushed and unorganized," with large lines, and students kept in roommate clusters. Test results took a few days to get back to students, but they continued to socialize in the meantime, without shelter in place enforcement from the school, but the mere recommendation to stick to the dorms.

Trainor ended up catching the virus from her roommate, who she was allowed to interact with under school rules, in her dorm. Many students continued to interact with other unknown infected students, resulting in a quick spread. By September 3rd, the announcement was made that the campus would close, and that all students who had tested negative had to leave campus immediately.

Students who tested positive were told to quarantine on campus until they tested negative. Once they tested negative, they were permitted to go home. However, this method was not foolproof, as students were often exposed to Covid after getting their necessary exit test, or their Covid-19 symptoms took a few days to develop. Trainor said that many students that knew that they were exposed tried to, "wait it out," quarantining themselves until they could get home. Many students were fearful of Oneonta's quarantine procedures.

"They would call you randomly and say that you have fifteen minutes to pack up whatever you can, and they would come pick you up in the red van and take you to the quarantine building," according to Trainor. Once students were at this building, she believed that guidelines were not enforced, citing the "Covid parties" that were happening amongst infected individuals in the

buildings. She notes that in this period of time, "there were no repercussions for anything. They would tell you to do something, but then not actually enforce anything."

Trainor ended up being one of the over 700 positive cases at Oneonta, though she tested positive upon arrival at home, not at the school. Since she initially tested negative at school, she was permitted to go home. Trainor was not surprised that she tested positive after her exposure, but she was glad to be able to recover at home. While sending potentially sick students home was, as Dr. Fauci told NBC, "the worst thing you could do" for students like Trainor, the lack of care and guidance for sick students on campus, and overall lack of procedures were not compelling factors to get students to stay on campus and wait for a more accurate result. In hindsight, Trainor thinks that staying put for a few weeks would have kept everyone safer. Instead, the school frantically sent students home.

This past semester has been tumultuous for all college campuses, but the State Universities of New York (SUNY) have had a particularly difficult time in making procedures clear to students and effectively curbing virus transmissions. The SUNY system comprises 64 different universities, the largest in the country, serving approximately 415,572 students. Creating comprehensive procedures across the state for such a large student body posed difficulties. Both the spring closing and the fall reopenings proved to be enormous challenges.

With the pandemic in full swing, cracks in the reopening plan emerged right away. First, SUNY policies for on campus arrival were not uniform. Some schools required testing, like SUNY Geneseo, and other schools, most notably SUNY Oneonta, did not require testing. The Campus Dashboard, a tool devised by SUNY Chancellor, Jim Malatras and Governor Cuomo to track cases system wide, launched on September 8th, though students had been on campus since mid to late August. And top leadership was in flux – in fact Malatras took on his position just a week before students arrived back on campus for the fall semester.
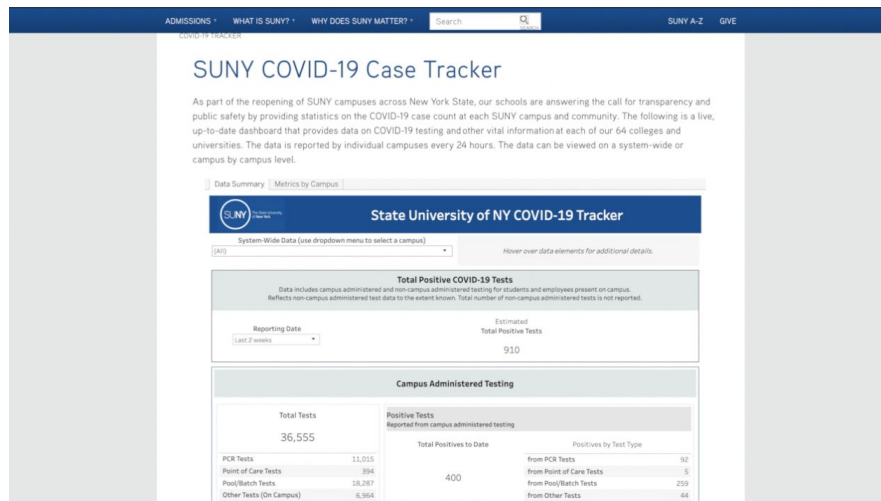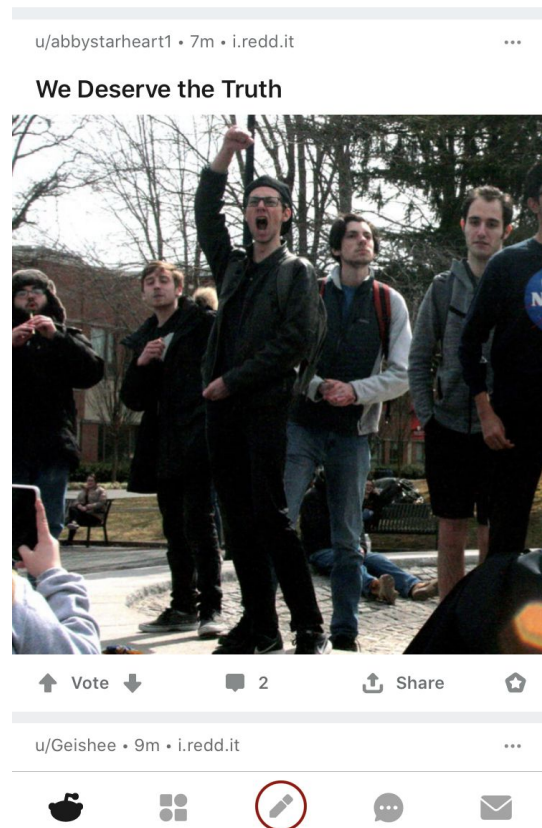
Figure 1.
SUNY Covid-19 Case Tracker wkbw.com

On top of SUNY admin problems, the New York State Department of Health which works closely with SUNY campuses to guide decision making about Covid-19 procedures, was also struggling. Benefits reports that since 2010, "At least 38,000 state and local public health jobs have disappeared since the 2008 recession, leaving a skeletal workforce for what was once viewed as one of the world's top public health systems." Contact tracing did not always prove effective or rapid enough to meet SUNY student needs.

Without strict, uniform guidelines and state support in place, there was bound to be failures across the board.

One of the first failures in Spring 2020 was at Stony Brook University, a SUNY school with approximately 26,000 students located in Long Island. The inefficiency became life threatening for some when the virus arrived on campus via the centrally located hospital, but was not reported to the students by those in charge. The students became aware of this information quickly when major news outlets like *Newsday* reported that there was a man in isolation at Stony Brook University Medical Center on March 10th, all while classes were still going on in person, and students were expected to attend. Students communicated through Reddit, trying to piece together information.

The lack of follow up from administration after such important news was released angered the students. So much so, that students went to protest lack of information on campus on March 11th, just before Governor Cuomo made the announcement that SUNY schools would shift to remote learning. The school was waiting on word from Cuomo before saying anything to the students, but the period of waiting created stress and anxiety. Daniella Smith* (name changed for privacy) noted that, "the student's safety was never the top priority. That is how I felt as all of this played out. From the professors who still held class all the way up to the state for not

reporting as soon as Covid-19 hit campus. At all levels, our safety was not considered." Later that month, *Newsday* reported that there were suspected cases of the virus on campus at the hospital as early as February 7th.

It seems that by Fall 2020, Stonybrook had learned important lessons. The school required testing to arrive back on campus. It also decided to go virtual with the exception of labs, though students could also choose to do labs at home. As a result, the cases stayed low on campus, with the school reporting only 208 positive cases for the entire fall semester.

Rebecca Williamson, a senior at SUNY Geneseo, a campus with approximately 5,500 students, was also happy with how her school handled things. Geneseo required testing for all students to return to campus, even for off campus students. However, as the semester progressed, the school also started conducting random testing in partnership with SUNY Upstate Medical University. She liked that the school was efficient at keeping students updated as well.

By Mid-September, the second reporting period revealed a total of 1,823 positive cases across campuses. Chancellor Malatras instated his first statewide policy on September 30th, about a month into the semester, cracking down on disciplinary measures for students acting in blatant disregard of Covid-19 safety procedures. Students who violated quarantine orders or hosted large gatherings could be subject to at least a year's suspension, but in some cases, could be permanently dismissed from the SUNY system, depending on the severity of the infraction.

Despite crackdowns, October was rocky with several schools hitting high case numbers and closures abounding. SUNY Cortland with 101 cases, went remote for two weeks. SUNY Binghamton brought cases down from 89 in mid October with remote learning and mandatory quarantining for those with potential exposure. Since they did not reach 100 cases, the campus was able to remain open, but with students taking class from their dorm rooms.

Williamson also ran into problems in October. Her confidence in Geneseo wavered a bit when she came in contact with someone exposed to Covid-19. Her friend immediately contacted her, and she followed what the experts recommend- wearing a mask in common areas, staying in the house and maintaining distance from roommates- hoping that she would be given official instructions from her institution about quarantine procedures. However, those instructions never came. Instead, she was contacted by the department of health, three days later. She mentions that she, "was lucky to have known what to do" immediately after hearing from her friend, but notes that all students might not have the information to make an educated decision, especially when the communication of information from officials took so long. She did not even know to expect a call from the Department of Health, as the school never told students what would happen if they did come in contact with someone who had contracted the virus. Though Williamson eventually got the information she needed, telling her to quarantine for two weeks, she was still left confused at the lack of information from the school in the process. However, Williamson was glad that she never showed symptoms, and that at the time that she was exposed, school cases were at a high of 17, which was quite low compared to the other state universities.

By November, SUNY cases were under control again. But Chancellor Malatras was faced with the impending Thanksgiving dismissal. He announced the second SUNY wide policy this semester on October 27th, requiring all students to be tested before returning home for Thanksgiving break. The 64 SUNY schools had until November 5th to devise a plan for all students to get tested within ten days of Thanksgiving break. Most SUNY schools had already decided to be completely remote following Thanksgiving break, most not re-opening until spring 2021.

Many students remain confused by SUNY decisions. Genesco senior Williamson, notes that on the day of the announcement, "we got an email from our president saying that all students with a campus presence must be tested, but it was unclear as to what that meant. I don't take classes on campus or live on campus, but I participate in a club on campus." The definition was not

explained further, so Williamson was unsure if she needed a test. Additionally, it was not clear where the test would take place. She generally receives her healthcare from a local urgent care, noting that the campus health center is "understaffed."

Williamson did end up needing a test to leave campus, as did all of the students at Geneseo. The school provided pooled testing, and students had to simply sign up for a slot. She is now safely at home, finishing up finals, and hoping for smoother sailing overall next semester. For Williamson, a senior, she is confident that Geneseo will continue to do the right thing, as they have created added precautions, like mandatory pool testing for those on campus over the winter term, to keep the campus safe even when only a small number of students are present. Their fall semester only reported 103 cases overall. She hopes that cases remain low as winter approaches, noting that she, "hopes students are responsible and abide by the state rule for indoor gatherings, which is ten people," as winter gatherings between students in upstate New York will inevitably move indoors.

Overall, Thanksgiving testing was successful across the 64 campuses. Chancellor Malatras announced on November 24th that,"SUNY campuses have finished mandatory testing of students on campus with 152,788 tests conducted with a positivity rate of 0.63 percent between November 9 and November 23." 880 students were not able to travel home for Thanksgiving until they retested negative for the virus. With that, SUNY concluded its tumultuous fall semester, finally getting numbers down after months of uncertainty, and returning students to their homes for a few months. As of December 9th, there have been 6,621 total reported positive cases throughout the SUNY system. One employee died from the virus this semester.

Chancellor Malatras already has a plan in place for next semester, which begins a bit later than normal years, on February 1st. The most noticeable difference is that every student that uses a campus facility is required to present a negative Covid-19 test to come back to school. This will hopefully solve the first failure of the fall semester. Additionally, the winter term will be fully remote, catering to expectations for cases to rise this winter through indoor gatherings. In the spring, classes will be able to resume in person at reduced capacity, as it was in the fall. The students will also not have a spring break this semester to prevent case spikes due to travel. Malatras is assured that, "SUNY has devised a comprehensive plan that sets a national standard for safely supporting in-person instruction this spring with invaluable input from our students, faculty, and campus leaders. The guidance may be out, but with the virus spiking across the nation, our ongoing, open dialogue about the spring semester and combating COVID is more important now than ever."

At Oneonta, a new president has been named. Dennis Craig will be in charge in the spring, and has reduced the campus occupancy, only allowing about 1,000 students back on campus, according to Trainor. Students were given the option to request permission to return to campus, and a smaller percentage of students will be granted permission.

Trainor has decided to stay home this semester, as all of her classes are remote. She is hopeful that the new president and the test requirement will keep cases down this semester, but at this point, she seems only able to remain hopeful that she will be able to start her junior year on campus in a normal way. SUNY has a solid plan in place, but as the winter brings everyone inside, they may face an entirely new set of challenges.