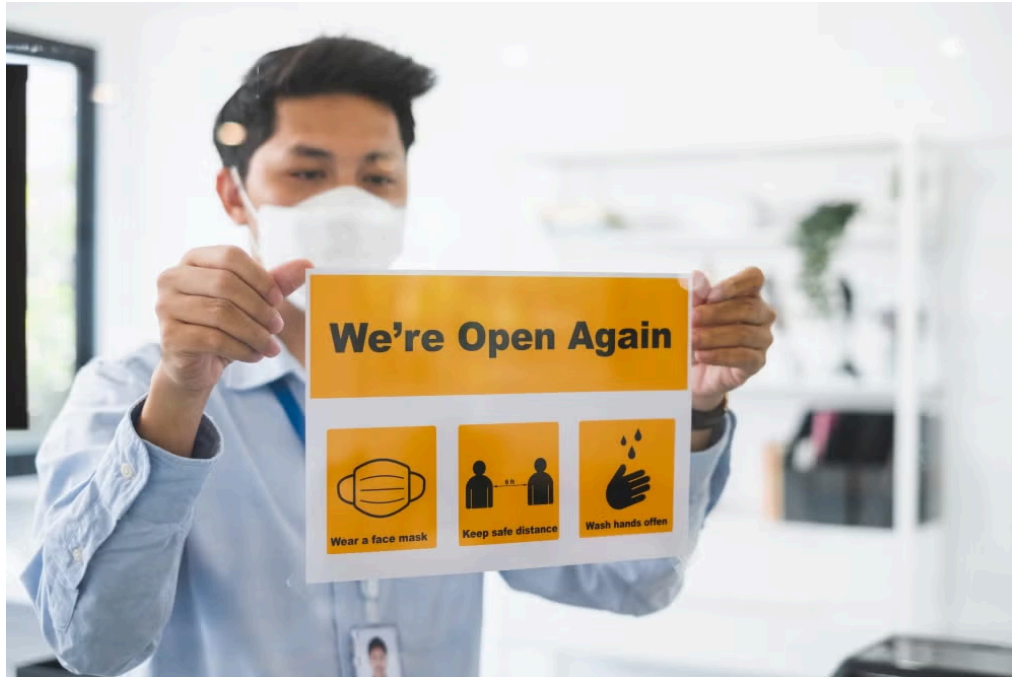


OPINION

UCSB Was Ill-Equipped For the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Reflection on Policy, Student Experiences, and Lessons for the Future

May 27, 2025 at 10:00am by Maggie Hua



In Fall Quarter 2021, I entered my first year at UC Santa Barbara, escaping into the real world after a year and a half of online courses. With the country still reeling from previous mass waves of COVID-19 cases, students were finally granted with the opportunities to see their peers in person (yet still maintaining a safe distance of six feet). The university, while attempting to limit the amount of new COVID-19 cases as two new cohorts touched the beach campus for the first time (Class of 2024, 2025), implemented a number of pandemic policies to ensure reduced exposure.

Upon stepping onto campus for Week 0 activities, one of the first pieces of UCSB merchandise that I got was a UCSB mask. Many around me followed the mask mandate, and for good reason — the pandemic had not suddenly disappeared into thin air. Suddenly, I was required to do COVID-19 Clearance Surveys in order to even step into the dining halls to eat, along with riding the bus back to my dorm in Santa Catalina. It was an honor based system, asking questions about related sickness symptoms and showing a bright red screen if you had symptoms. This became a daily reminder that

despite being stuck in Chemistry 1179 for CHEM 1A instead of Zoom for AP Chemistry, I still had to force myself to accept that the pandemic would become the new norm.

It wasn't until Winter Quarter 2022 where things would take a turn, and I began to understand how *badly* and rushed the UCSB administration was in an attempt to bring campus back into the previous norm. As the rise of the new Omicron strain started picking up in January 2022, Chancellor Yang made classes virtual for three weeks, in order to slow the spread that had already been ravaging around Santa Barbara for weeks. This was proven to not be that successful, though, as many students were already back from Winter Break, with dorm buildings turning into a quarantine nightmare as students were still able to be in constant contact with each other.



As cases started rising again upon the transition from virtual to in-person classes, so did the need for quarantine housing. On top of Isla Vista and the university's impending housing crisis, it became apparent that there would not be enough quarantine housing for those who lived in university accommodation, *despite* having a year and a half of strictly online learning during the pandemic's peak. During the transitional period in Fall Quarter 2021, it was reported that under the quarantine and isolation housing, there were only spots for 60 students—disproportionate to the nearly 25,000 students that were enrolled that school year. This strain was proven during Winter Quarter 2022, as while some were lucky enough to stay in The Club & Guest House on campus, others were placed in farther locations.

For those who were in Santa Catalina and off-campus, such as my fellow FT friends, it wasn't as simple. Quarantine housing had also bled into accommodations at West Campus, approximately a mile away from Santa Catalina and nearly 2-3 miles away from the main campus. Isolated in the vast fields, many were required to take their own transportation over in an area that many were unfamiliar with. For others, they did not even have the option for quarantine housing, especially for those who lived

off-campus in private residences, and forced to isolate in their own homes with other roommates, in an area where it is too expensive to live alone, yet alone in a double.

It wasn't until May 2022, or Spring Quarter 2022, when COVID-19 policies began to relax as the university ended its mandatory mask mandate, shifting towards more lenient policies. Upon entering the 2022-2023 school year, UCSB ended their PCR testing program on campus and ceased their quarantine housing options, and as the years went by, reduced the amount of free COVID tests that were offered to students, faculty and staff. While still enforcing a vaccine booster mandate to reduce the number of positive cases in the area, it still continues to linger as the 2024-2025 school year comes to an end. COVID-19, while not impacting our society as much as it did five years ago, still continues to linger and is now in a similar category as the common cold: merely an illness that comes and goes.

But we must not forget that despite living in an important part of history, we are doomed to repeat it again in the future. Research has shown that, statistically, we are 22-28% closer to having another pandemic as devastating as COVID-19 in the next 25 years. In Santa Barbara County, a Grand Jury report from May 25th on the Public Health Department begins with a chilling start: "Another epidemic in Santa Barbara County is not merely a possibility—it is an inevitability."

UCSB, on top of its housing crisis, must have a set plan in place in the case of a future mass pandemic, such as COVID-19 during 2020. On top of continuously providing rapid antigen kits for students in high-volume locations (eg. the UCSB library, University Center, Student Resource Building) to provide accurate statistics to determine the percentage of positive cases, we need to find alternatives for quarantine housing to reduce spread. Other universities, such as the University of Pittsburgh, University of Colorado Boulder, Northwestern University, and more, during the peak of the pandemic began designating nearby hotels as quarantine housing, allowing students to isolate themselves in a closed-door space. While the housing crisis at UCSB makes it impossible to designate a certain dorm building as quarantine housing, the university actually had contracts with neighboring hotels to fill the overload of students still waiting for a housing contract, but *not* for quarantine housing.

The university must also continue to focus on providing and expanding on resources and emergency aid if another pandemic were to occur in the next few decades. In the case for many students during the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic, they were pushed into an environment that was unstable and not secure, losing their jobs and losing the financial security they once had. Personnel must be prepared to provide student support (both financially, emotionally and mentally) with proactive outreach to ensure that every single student is sufficiently prepared. In combining this plan with instructors having the support to adapt to hybrid and/or online learning, developing a flexible, robust emergency response with rapid communication allows students to come out of a pandemic with more answers than questions.

Finally, in the making of this piece, UC Santa Barbara has failed to provide adequate quantitative data and information by hiding access to its COVID information websites and dashboard to the general public. How will UCSB students learn in the future if you are very much hiding information about how the administration handled the COVID-19 pandemic? I am fortunate in that I have had firsthand experience in understanding and seeing how UCSB administrators responded to COVID-19, but many in the future will not, emphasizing the importance of student journalism (where I received much of this information from) along with journalism in newspapers across Santa Barbara county. UCSB must remain transparent in the policies and decisions it makes in the future in order to not fuel an environment of confusion and worry.

Four years later, I am leaving behind UCSB with my bachelors in Biochemistry and a minor in Professional Writing. But I leave behind a plea for the UCSB administration: you have lived through a historical event at a time when the world was going through economical and societal turmoil. Choose to learn from history rather than hide from it.

Maggie is still reeling over the fact that she got COVID-19 twice while being at UCSB. Like, seriously?