

Delta variant has college professors 'freaking out' about fall 2021 semester

 [usatoday.com/story/news/education/2021/08/10/delta-college-professors-fall-2021-semester-mandates/5514304001](https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/education/2021/08/10/delta-college-professors-fall-2021-semester-mandates/5514304001)

For Elizabeth Kostal, the last 18 months have been “utterly terrifying.”

The nursing and health sciences professor at South University in Virginia Beach has such severe heart and lung issues, she has a pacemaker. She says she’s “fought my entire life just to stay alive and maintain my health.” So when a deadly virus started circulating the globe in early 2020, Kostal feared for her future.

COVID-19 forced the education world to pivot, moving classes online and shuttering campuses across the country. Kostal breathed a sigh of relief. But now, as most colleges plan not just a return to campus but a required return for faculty and staff, Kostal is worried again.

She’s got plenty of company. Most college employees will not go to the lengths Kostal is going. In late July she filed an Equal Employment Opportunity Commission complaint after her request to continue with remote work was denied, which she and her attorney say is a violation of the Americans with Disabilities Act; a lawsuit against the school could follow. But even if they aren’t prepared to take legal action, staff and faculty across the country are concerned about returning to on-campus work, particularly as the Delta variant causes a surge in cases nationwide.

At least 675 colleges are requiring students or staff to be vaccinated, according to the Chronicle of Higher Education, but many are not. Mask mandates are scattered, and sometimes not enforced, leading to an uptick in anxiety for thousands of faculty members in America’s higher education system.

Many employees are asking universities to require the vaccine or let them work from home – and not hearing much in response. Meanwhile, colleges are pushing for workers to recreate the residential, on-campus experience traditional students are used to.

Kelly Benjamin, a spokesperson for the American Association of University Professors, says AAUP is hearing from members all over who are worried – and he can relate to the stress.

“We’re all freaking out,” he says.

Impossible choice between 'physical and financial health'

Kostal’s situation is somewhat unique. Because of severe reactions to past vaccines, including inflammation of the heart, her doctors have recommended she not get the COVID-19 vaccine. Her husband and 12-year old daughter have been vaccinated, but her 8-year-old, who’s twice

contracted pneumonia, is not yet eligible.

In the spring, Kostal says she was forced back to campus to continue remote learning from her office, putting herself at risk for no discernible benefit to her pre-nursing students, who were taking the class online. By leaving her home and driving to campus — which she did while double-masking and wearing gloves — Kostal essentially just changed her Zoom background.

“Students were logging in from wherever, their kitchen table, their couch, their bedroom,” she says. Why, she wondered, couldn’t she have done the same?

Currently, South University is not requiring students or staff to be vaccinated. The school is encouraging mask use, especially for unvaccinated people, but “it’s all on the honor system,” Kostal says, which worries her.

Kostal and her attorneys estimate the EEOC complaint process, which is the precursor to filing a lawsuit, could take a few months. In the meantime, Kostal will continue to teach an online class from her office, despite her concerns and objections. She’s not in a financial position to quit.

As the start of the term gets closer, Kostal says she’s heard from numerous colleagues, many of whom have reached out to thank her for taking a stand, telling her they fear retaliation if they were to voice their fears.

“It’s an incredulous position for anyone to be placed in by their employer, to have to pick between their physical and financial health,” she says.

South University did not respond to multiple requests for comment.

No vaccine or mask mandate

From her home in West Virginia, Kristin Moilanen has watched COVID-19 cases climb in her community and state with a creeping sense of dread. She lives close to a trauma center, and during the height of the pandemic, the thrum of helicopters and sirens of racing ambulances became a daily soundtrack.

The child development professor at West Virginia University does not envy any of the decision-makers at her college — but she also wishes the guidelines were more clear, echoing concerns from faculty members across the country.

“We have lots of unknowns,” Moilanen says. “We haven’t heard what the contingency plans are, and on our ‘Return to Campus’ website, I can never find the answers I need. What if my kids have to quarantine cause they were exposed at school? I still don’t know what I’m supposed to do in that situation.”

Moilanen and her husband are both vaccinated and their children, ages 6 and 11 “can’t wait to get it.” But WVU is not requiring the shot, which surprised Moilanen.

In May, the university announced threshold requirements that, when hit, would allow the school to reduce its COVID protocols, including opening some facilities like the rec center if vaccinations hit 50%.

But in mid-June, when COVID-19 cases were down across the country, the university changed course and said it would fully reopen, period. “The percentage milestones ... previously announced that relate to on-campus activities are no longer relevant,” WVU said.

Moilanen is scheduled to teach one in-person class of about 40 students this fall. She’s not sure what the classroom layout is, or if there will be enough room to spread out. She empathizes with students who are anxious to get back to campus after a year of virtual-only experiences.

But she also worries. Last year, she says, “there were a lot of students who kept on going like nothing had changed.” How’s she supposed to know that everyone will take the virus and the Delta variant seriously?

With the recent surge in cases, last week WVU said if it didn't reach its 80% vaccination goal for students and staff by Sept. 1, it would implement additional enforcement and safety protocols for unvaccinated individuals, including increased testing.

But that didn't do enough to assuage staff fears. On Aug. 5, WVU faculty circulated a petition that demands the vaccine be required for anyone on campus, and masks be required regardless of vaccination status. It also asks that faculty “who live with someone who cannot currently be vaccinated” have the option to move their classes entirely online. It was signed by more than 70 faculty members who gave their name, title and the ages of their (unvaccinated) children.

Provost Maryanne Reed responded almost immediately after receiving the petition, according to the organizers. “Be advised that we are in a difficult situation politically,” she wrote. “Neither our governor nor legislative leaders are willing to support a vaccine or mask mandate at this time and there could be repercussions that would tie our hands in the future.” She said she'd shared the petition with the university's senior leadership and WVU was taking the faculty concerns “very seriously.”

Classes are scheduled to start next week.

“I don’t fault anybody above me,” Moilanen says. “I know everyone who is making these decisions, they’re trying to keep the doors open and the lights on, and that’s important. But at the same time, there’s just this constant feeling between keeping my career going or keeping my children safe — that’s a horrible choice.”

In Buffalo, New York, Margaret Sallee has similar concerns — and wonders how often people are thinking about staff and faculty who double as parents or caregivers.

“The last year has been bananas,” says Sallee, a professor of higher education at the University at Buffalo who has 3-year-old twins. “As a single parent with very young kids, I’m extra cautious. What if I get sick? What if my kids get sick?”

As an education worker, Sallee is used to relaxing and rejuvenating summer breaks. But as college start dates creep closer and infections tick up, it’s been nonstop stress. She’s grateful to live in a state that’s taken COVID-19 seriously, but knows it’s far from a perfectly safe situation.

Working remotely is not an option for Sallee when she has to teach, though she acknowledges her privilege in being able to work off campus when she’s not in class. She knows it’s not like that for thousands of staff and faculty members all over America, many of whom have already been stretched thin.

The argument in favor of in-person work goes like this: Many colleges are residential, with students on campus 24 hours a day, seven days a week. So shouldn't the faculty and staff be there too?

“There’s already plenty that wasn’t working in 2019 — why are we trying to go back to that?” Sallee said. “We’re missing a big opportunity to rethink how universities are run.”

'Great Resignation' coming?

That criticism — that universities are back to conventional ways of thinking and operating — has some worried about the future of higher education, especially as it pertains to staffing. Across the country, workers are quitting jobs in record numbers, many citing burnout. Others aren’t willing to return to in-person work.

'I quit': Workers change jobs at a record pace amid burnout, new openings with higher pay

Kevin Kruger, president of the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators, is particularly concerned about student affairs workers, the staff who do the most hands-on and face-to-face work with students.

“I don’t think higher education is immune from the Great Resignation that we’re seeing across other industries,” he says.

Sallee at Buffalo, whose book “Creating Sustainable Careers in Student Affairs” published in late 2020, points to data that shows 50% of that profession's workers leave within the first five years — and that was before the stress of COVID-19. And many student affairs jobs, such as working with LGBTQ students, benefit from mid-career staffers' experience.

Kruger says NASPA isn't advocating for any particular way of doing business. He understands some aspects of student life pivoted well to online, like teletherapy and Zoom workout classes. But other elements, like residential life, demand in-person responsibility.

In a recent NASPA survey of 1,005 student affairs staff, respondents were asked: "Which of the following operational changes from the pandemic do you think your institution will keep in place in the next five years?" Sixty-one percent said "more flexibility to work remotely." Kruger isn't sure what happens if that doesn't come to fruition.

Community colleges could face a unique set of challenges. Because they often cater to non-traditional and commuter students, there are concerns about how much potential exposure on-campus staff and students could receive, compared with a more insular, traditional four-year school community.

"Everybody is sick of being online, but at the same time, I'm excited to get back to the classroom. But at what cost?" says Courtney Buiniskis, an adjunct communications professor at Anne Arundel Community College, located about an hour outside of Washington, D.C.

Her school is mandating masks inside, regardless of vaccine status, which she's happy about. But she has other concerns: "What if you have a student who doesn't want to wear a mask? Can students come to class sick? You worry about those things," she says.

Chris Conzen, who works in student affairs at Hudson County Community College, thinks colleges have a not-so-secret reason to push for full campus reopenings.

"No one wants to say this out loud, but there's a lot of money invested in having students on campus," Conzen says. "It does not behoove universities to create an opportunity where students would be just as happy to stay home."

But Conzen and others, the only choice is to move forward, despite rising cases and rising anxiety.

"I just don't think we're ready" to go back to campus, says Sallee at Buffalo. "I'm not at least." She sighs.

"But I guess I'll be doing it."