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As a University Spokesman, Can I Promote a Reopening Plan I Question?

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I am a communications director at a large public university. The university, like most in the nation, intends to bring all students, faculty and staff together for the fall semester. Because bringing together 40,000-plus people from all around the country is the opposite of good public-health policy during a pandemic, I believe that the institution is placing financial concerns ahead of students' and employees' health and safety. My job involves communicating to our community that it will all be OK, but I have very serious doubts about that. Is it unethical to continue in my job? Name Withheld

How and whether universities can safely resume residential life and in-person education is a complicated matter, with no one-size-fits-all answer. At Vassar, where the college president is a public-health scholar, students were required to be cleared by a coronavirus test shortly before they arrived on campus and are to be tested at intervals thereafter. The college has invested in filtration systems for ventilation and an app to support contact tracing; it has established strict limits on room capacity and building density, along with the usual protocols about face masks, hand hygiene and social distancing. But it's also a small, somewhat isolated college on a thousand acres — a bubble of sorts.

At Yale, a much larger institution that's layered into a broader urban community, students are to be tested twice a week, with results available within 24 to 36 hours. Although a negative test result doesn't guarantee that you're not infected — false negatives aren't uncommon — they're a pretty reliable indicator that you're not infectious, or weren't when you took the test. (Speedy results are critical.) Students face being excluded from campus if they violate the behavioral rules. Even so, the bulk of classes will be conducted remotely. Similar protocols are being implemented at Colby College, Brandeis, the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign and many other places.

Will less stringent measures suffice? The experiences of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, the University of Notre Dame and the University of Iowa — to mention just some universities where

Covid-19 clusters have recently emerged — illustrate the dangers. U.N.C. has shifted from in-person instruction to remote learning and is further reducing residential density. Notre Dame at least temporarily suspended in-person classes. And it won’t do to simply put the blame on student misbehavior; institutions must anticipate the possibility of such lapses, taking measures to discourage them and, failing that, to contain their consequences.

Read the full article

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