

Opinion

Allegheny takes preventive measures against COVID-19 as colleges, universities turn to 'remote instruction'

First cases appear in Pennsylvania as students prepare for spring break

Bree Gray and Ethan Woodfill | March 11, 2020

Advertisement

As COVID-19 reaches Pennsylvania, store shelves have begun to clear out for emergency necessities such as hand sanitizer, surgical masks and everyday commodities from water bottles to toilet paper, according to an article published by businessinsider.com.

Thirty-six states, including Pennsylvania, have reported COVID-19 cases to the Center for Disease Control and Prevention, with a total of 647 cases and 25 fatalities, according to the CDC. As of March 10, 12 cases were reported in Pennsylvania, all in the eastern side of the state.

"We want to make sure we're as open and transparent as we can be," said Pennsylvania Governor Tom Wolf in a press release on March 6.

Following the press release, on March 9, President of Allegheny College Hilary Link, Provost and Dean of the College Ron Cole and Dean of Students April Thompson released a statement via email to the community that addressed COVID-19 and the preparations that the institution is implementing to ensure students are safe.

The college also set up a page on its website outlining contingency plans in the event that in-person classes must be canceled. A COVID-19 Town Hall was held in Quigley Hall Auditorium on March 10. Panel members included Assistant Professor of Psychology Ryan Pickering, Director of International Education Lucinda Morgan, Assistant Professor of Biology and Global Health Studies Becky Dawson and Administrator for the Meadville Medical Center Donald Rhoten.

"Should you be nervous and what should you know?" Dawson said in her opening remarks at the town hall. "I will boldly say, it is a pandemic. The World Health Organization doesn't want

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the town hall. I will boldly say, it is a pandemic. The World Health Organization doesn't want
to say it, but we have community spread (of the virus) on six continents. It's something new,
and it's something we haven't seen before."

In a daily risk assessment for COVID-19, the CDC acknowledges that this novel coronavirus may cause a pandemic due to travel, however, for the majority of individuals, the risk of exposure is relatively low due to a lack of "widespread circulation in most communities in the United States."

With spring break less than a week away, a large majority of the campus community will travel to areas where COVID-19 cases have been reported. While the institution drafts a response team, one must ask: will these preparations be sufficient enough to address COVID-19, if it were to arrive on campus, following mass spring break travel?

"Is there reason to be concerned?" Dawson said. "Not panic concerned, but definitely aware and understanding that this is causing major disruptions. The college is absolutely preparing for this and has been preparing for this."

Dawson also reiterated the need to follow reliable sources for the latest information, not whatever is trending on Twitter.

Currently, there are no identified cases in Crawford County or within the Allegheny College community. Nonetheless, the attention that COVID-19 has received in national media coverage has raised levels of concern within the student population.

The unfortunate reality exists that we may feel safe on this campus now, but once we leave, there is no way to ensure that we do not bring COVID-19 back on campus with us. Murmurs of this possibility can be heard all throughout campus from meetings with administrators to the bustle of lunch hour in the dining halls. The community is concerned but there appears to be a strange aura of complacency among the population, despite how close some of the cases are to campus.

I believe that while the general populous is concerned, there are more pressing issues at hand, such as midterms or planning for spring break that take priority to the possibility of COVID-19 cases on campus. This lack of regard for the growing issue may pose a threat to efforts made by the institution to prevent the spread of COVID-19 on campus following spring break.

Institutions like Kent State University and The University of California, Los Angeles, have cancelled in-person classes for the next month or so. Students at Kent received an email on Tuesday that states all in-person classes will be cancelled until April 13, and "remote instruction" will begin on Monday, March 16.

On March 10, Thompson released a statement about emergency preparation efforts ahead of spring break travel to Allegheny Student Government.

"My best advice to you: Unless you hear from the college, it is business as usual," Thompson said. "If we modify operations, in any way, I assure you that you will hear right away — as soon as any decision is made to modify operations, I will get it out to you immediately."

Thompson acknowledges the possibility that spring break travel may bring COVID-19 to campus when classes reconvene on Monday, March 23. Any emergency arrangements will remain in effect until the end of the spring semester.

"If your roommate or significant other gets sick and you want to take extra precautions, we are offering students the ability to do social isolation," Thompson said. "We have rooms set up in Ravine (Hall) with adequate security, linens and kits so you do not have to take anything from your room. If you are sick and do not want to expose other people, we have a different area that is for people who may be sick or may have been exposed to something and want to do self-isolation."

Personally, I live near a large metropolitan area, and I, like many other students, will be traveling home for the break. Regardless of the disparities in location of our students' travel plans, one common thread will remain: we will no longer be in a closed community.

"I think people should be nervous about COVID-19 due to how quickly it can spread, but I do not believe that fear should govern their entire life," said Pierre Jaeggi, '23. "Do not stay home and let life pass by due to fear. However, with that being said, if a person is sick, perhaps, do not give them a hug — take the necessary precautions."

Jaeggi lives in Fountain Valley, California, which is 45 minutes away from Los Angeles with traffic. Los Angeles County has 14 cases of COVID-19, according to the CDC. Jaeggi plans on traveling home during spring break but has prepared himself for the virus.

Should we be concerned for our safety? Should we panic? These are questions that saturate media coverage and have led many Americans to engage in xenophobic behavior and hoard commodities. I disagree with the methods that are being taken to "prevent" the contraction of COVID-19. Rushing to stores, fighting with employees and stigmatizing populations are not appropriate manners to prevent disease; if anything, it only escalates the situation and makes matters worse.

David Roach, '21, is a global health major and biology and political science double minor, who argues that there is one way to truly prevent COVID-19 and it does not include hoarding commodities or avoiding metropolitan areas.

"(COVID-19) could be here already, we can not know because it has a 14-day latency period," Roach said. "Take precautions, the most important ways to protect oneself from COVID-19 is to wash your hands for 20 seconds and avoid touching your face — standard flu precautions."

Outside of the United States, countries such as Italy and China have begun to cancel school and close borders to prevent further spread of the virus, however, minimal national precautions have been seen. Aside from quarantines in areas where cases of COVID-19 were reported, a general advisory was posted by the CDC that outlines standard flu precautions as well as a travel advisory.

"I remember speaking with Professor Dawson in late January and looking at the numbers and seeing that there were already the same amount of cases of COVID-19 confirmed in three

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seeing that there were already the same amount of cases of COVID-19 committed in three weeks that we had seen with SARS (novel coronavirus) in six months,” Roach said. “However, the ‘R naught’(R0), how infectable a disease is to a population, is actually lower than SARS, meaning that there are more person-to-person cases from travel. Despite how hyped up the virus (COVID-19) is in the news media, what they are not disclosing is the fact that over 50% of infected people have recovered.”

While I believe that panic is counter-productive to ensuring the safety of our community, the burden of preventing an outbreak on this campus rests on the shoulders of every student. Take the necessary precautions while traveling, for your own safety as well as the safety of our community.

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