Within weeks of campuses reopening, many prominent colleges and universities experienced severe coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) outbreaks, endangering students, faculty, staff, and local communities. More than 130,000 college-related cases have been reported as of October 1, 2020, across more than 1,300 schools. Despite universities' best efforts to mitigate the spread of infection, these surges highlight the need for updated data to understand the consequences of each school's approach to testing, tracing, teaching, and housing their students. For example, the University of North Carolina (UNC) at Chapel Hill quickly became the exemplar of a failed campus return. After reporting 130 positive tests among students within the first week, university administrators reverted to remote learning for the remainder of the semester. It was too little, too late: more than 1,000 UNC students and 65 employees have tested positive for COVID-19 to date. Even when universities implement extensive testing and contact tracing strategies, they cannot thwart student noncompliance with safety protocols. The University of Illinois identified more than 1,600 students with positive tests in the first month while conducting 1 of the largest mass testing programs of any US university, with more than 300,000 tests to date.

COVID-19 transmission on college campuses has broader implications. A recent analysis revealed that in the 203 US counties where college students account for at least 10% of the population, half experienced their worst outbreaks of the pandemic after August 1. Universities are making difficult decisions while facing substantial financial shortfalls. However, colleges and universities must uphold their responsibility to maintain community safety and transparency on COVID-19 transmission among students, faculty, and staff.

No state or local mandates currently require colleges and universities to report COVID-19 information publicly, and local leaders have voiced concerns that students' return threatens to increase cases well beyond campus borders. To our knowledge, no national guidance has been issued by the American Association of Universities or other similar organizations. University employees, students, and families should have clear and accessible information about how their institutions monitor COVID-19 spread, the results of testing programs, and the pandemic's impact on all stakeholders, including the surrounding communities.

To address the lack of guidance regarding college and university public reporting of COVID-19 data, we created "We Rate Covid Dashboards." Our system evolved iteratively based on feedback from internal and external stakeholders; it rates institutions' dashboards according to readability, timeliness, and comprehensiveness of their data. Specifically, dashboards are rated on whether they include daily data on positive cases and the number of tests conducted; a description of testing frequency and test result lag time; stratified student and employee data; the number of students in quarantine or isolation; trending local data; and a summary of overall institution status. Using these criteria, we generate grades ranging from F (no dashboard) to A++ (perfect score).

In the initial rating of more than 100 US colleges and universities, only 5 received a grade of A, and 11 received a grade of A−, demonstrating the lack of comprehensive public data among many universities. However, no criterion was so stringent that it was not present on at least 1 institutional dashboard. Among the institutions with dashboards, 62% updated their data daily, 74% provided testing positivity rates, and 34% reported the number of isolated or quarantined students.

Our objective is to engage the academic community and encourage meticulous reporting of COVID-19 data. Initially displayed only on Twitter, the account served as a platform to identify...
institutions that failed to report consequential COVID-19 data and applaud those who set a positive example for their peers. Most social media engagement has been from students, faculty, and parents; however, institutions have also expressed excitement when highlighted for comprehensive dashboards. Throughout this period, some schools adjusted their dashboards, and their grades improved on reevaluation. For example, Stanford initially did not have a publicly accessible dashboard in early September and within 2 weeks released a dashboard that earned an A rating.

While “We Rate Covid Dashboards” provides rigorous benchmarks for universities and colleges, the rating system can be improved in future iterations. It will be important to evaluate digital accessibility measures. In our initial evaluations, most dashboards lacked accessibility options. Furthermore, no dashboards provide demographic data, such as age, gender, or race and ethnicity, on employees or students tested or infected. The disproportionate impact of COVID-19 on Black, Indigenous, Latinx, and low-income people requires consistent reporting on who is affected to understand how to best mitigate risk and keep at-risk faculty, staff, students and their families safe.

Reliable reporting of COVID-19 data by colleges and universities can also help to generate knowledge. In our health systems, many patients were treated outside of rigorous trials, rendering it difficult for physicians to learn which treatments were best. Similarly, as schools vary in their COVID-19 testing and mitigation approaches, accurate and timely data are needed to assess their impact and inform institutional and government policies. With access to complete and updated data about the university context, local leaders and public health departments can be proactive about preventing outbreaks in surrounding communities.

As the pandemic evolves, universities will continue to have a responsibility to keep their community members safe. We hope our framework will guide universities on what COVID-19 data are needed for community members to make informed decisions and feel safe as well as offer data for public health understanding of disease transmission in these communal settings. In our initial assessment of more than 100 top-ranked institutions in early September, a quarter of schools did not publish a dashboard; since then, half of this subgroup have released dashboards. While 9 schools were fully remote, even without in-person instruction and student residence on campus, staff members and community stakeholders deserve to know their risks. Schools are increasingly sharing extensive information on the impact of COVID-19 on campus, and we hope that our ratings’ transparency can contribute to that process. “We Rate Covid Dashboards” offers a first step for public health experts and community members to hold higher education institutions accountable to high safety standards in their policy decisions.

ARTICLE INFORMATION

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