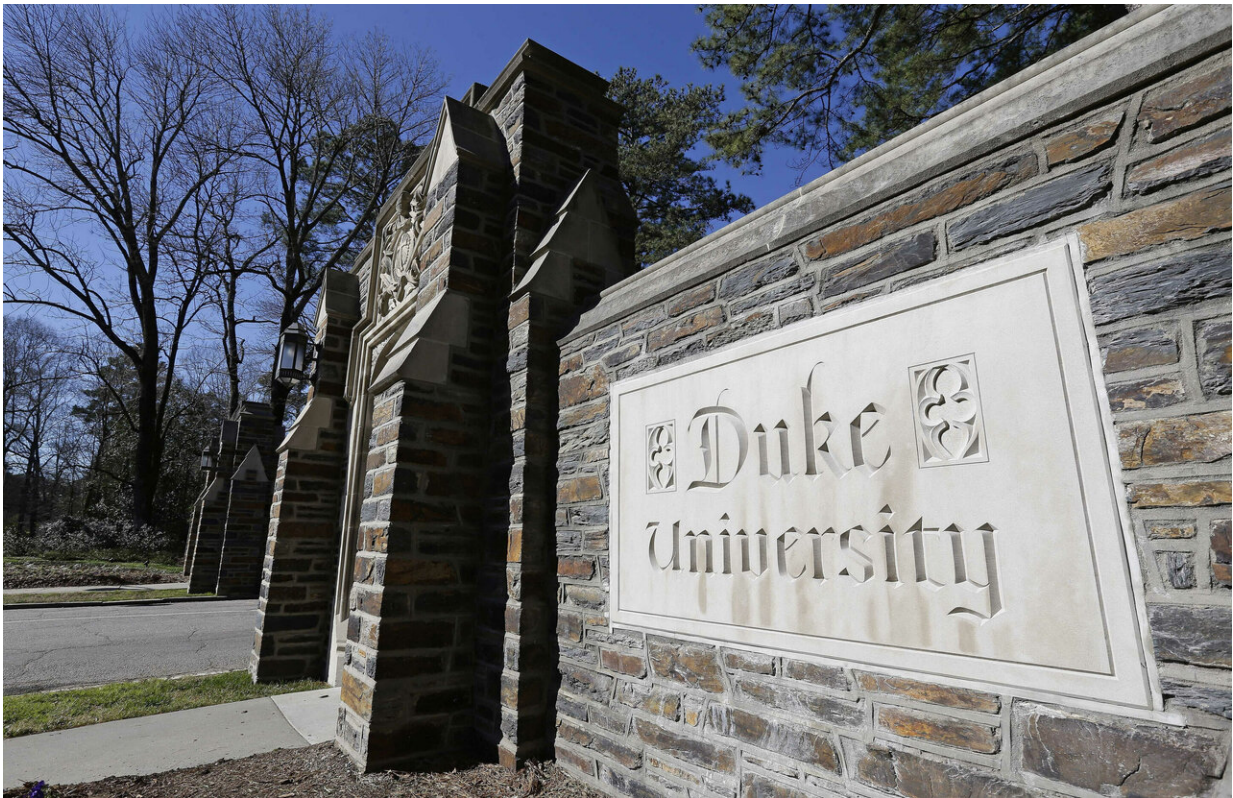


Duke COVID-19 cases surge; fraternities blamed for many

March 16 2021, by Bryan Anderson



This Jan. 28, 2019 file photo shows the entrance to the main Duke University campus in Durham, N.C. Duke University announced Wednesday, March 10, 2021, that it is considering ending in-person classes as an uptick in COVID-19 cases over the course of five days worsens and students continue to violate health guidelines. (AP Photo/Gerry Broome, File)

Duke University saw nearly as many cases of the coronavirus last week as it did during the entire fall semester, according to data released Tuesday, a spike that school administrators largely blamed on fraternity rush events.

The vast majority of the 231 new cases reported from March 8 through Sunday occurred within the university's undergraduate student population, which accounts for only about 0.06% of North Carolina's population of 10.5 million people, but whose cases account for nearly 1.9% of the total number reported statewide last week. A total of 241 cases were reported during the entire fall semester.

The spike at Duke comes as transmission is decreasing across the state and country, though health officials insist it is too early to fully reopen schools and businesses and lift mask mandates.

Michael Schoenfeld, vice president for public affairs and government relations at Duke, said most of last week's cases came from recruitment parties held off campus by "unsanctioned fraternities."

Amid changes to the rush process and other restrictions because of the coronavirus, nine fraternities decided to sever ties with the university and form a group called the Durham Interfraternity Council, which has more than 700 members. In a statement, the council said it supported Duke's shelter-in-place directive and has a hotline and email that it will utilize to receive complaints of infractions and relay those to the university.

"The Durham IFC is disappointed that some individuals within fraternities violated the expectations we established for virtual recruitment which may have contributed to an increase in cases of COVID-19 within the Duke student population," the group wrote on Facebook.

Cases have dramatically increased since the fraternities began recruitment. The 218 additional positive cases last week among students is more than quadruple the 53-student total that occurred during the first week of March. Over 550 students have contracted the virus since Jan. 3.

In response to the surge, Duke [announced over the weekend](#) that a campus-wide stay-in-place order will remain in effect until 9 a.m. this Sunday, with nearly all in-person classes transitioning to remote instruction.

The school said it will also refuse library entry to undergraduates and has told students not to leave their dormitories or apartments unless it is for essential activities such as picking up food and mail, exercising outdoors in groups of three or fewer people, seeking medical care or participating in COVID-19 surveillance testing. Off-campus students living in the Durham area are not allowed to return to campus, except for pick-up food orders, medical care or a coronavirus test.

If conditions do not improve, top Duke administrators said over the weekend that the university may not be able to go forward with classes and graduation.

"Our ability to complete the semester, commencement for our seniors, and the health and safety of our community, including your fellow undergraduate students, is hanging in the balance," the administrators wrote.

The university has been widely praised for its robust testing of students throughout the pandemic. School officials say the testing helped them spot a surge before cases got out of hand. Just 1.1% of total tests performed last week came back positive.

"This is not thousands of Duke students going wild," Schoenfeld said of

the recent surge in cases. "This is the inevitable and avoidable outcome of a relatively small group of people who can amplify what is still a global pandemic."

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