

U.S.

# More Colleges to Require Student Covid-19 Vaccinations

Debate over requirement ensues as school leaders say vaccinations will hasten return to in-person classes



Brown University, in Providence, R.I., said last week that students must be vaccinated to be allowed on campus in the fall.

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By [Yoree Koh](#)

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A small but growing number of colleges will require students to receive a Covid-19 vaccine, saying it is the most assured way of returning to some semblance of pre-pandemic campus life.

But by doing so, they are stepping into the increasingly politically charged debate over whether businesses and other institutions should be able to make inoculation a condition of participating in events in person.

Duke University in North Carolina, Brown University in Rhode Island and Syracuse University in New York said last week that students must be vaccinated to be allowed on campus in the fall. They join a handful of other colleges that include Rutgers University in New Jersey and Cornell University in Ithaca, N.Y., that have recently said students must be vaccinated to matriculate for in-person classes.

Others, such as the University of California system, said their vaccination policies for the fall are still in development.

Mandating the vaccine was a natural next step as accessibility opened up and supply increased, said school leaders at Rutgers, Cornell, and others.

“I think there’s a lot of common sense here. The science says that the vaccine is safe, it’s got a phenomenal efficacy rate,” said Antonio Calcado, Rutgers executive vice president and chief operating officer.

Students at Rutgers have consistently tested positive for Covid-19 at a rate 70% higher than its faculty and staff, said Mr. Calcado, underscoring that despite extensive safety measures it is difficult to keep the virus at bay among a student population that wants to hang out. “Students are built for congregation and collaboration. That’s what college is all about,” said Mr. Calcado.

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Just over 4,000 of the school’s 71,000 students are currently on campus.

At Cornell, nearly all students have been back on campus since the fall but only 40% of classes are in person. If the campus can reach herd immunity, it plans to conduct almost

all classes in person this fall, said university provost Michael Kotlikoff.

Many of the roughly dozen schools that have mandated the vaccine thus far have said they would allow for medical and religious exemptions.

Some schools, such as Texas A&M University, have balked partly out of concern that such requirements appear to conflict with federal law.

Glenn Cohen, a professor at Harvard Law School, said schools are likely getting tripped up by legal language requiring the federal government to inform people they have the right to refuse a vaccine approved under an emergency-use authorization.

The three vaccines that have been approved by the Food and Drug Administration—manufactured by Pfizer Inc., Moderna Inc. and Johnson & Johnson—were only approved for emergency use.

But that right to refuse the vaccine doesn't prohibit universities to make it a condition of attendance, Mr. Cohen said. He also said many colleges have been requiring on-campus students to submit to tests for Covid-19; many of which have been approved under the emergency-use authorization as well.

Texas A&M also said it was simply following Texas Gov. Greg Abbott's executive order, "which stipulates that vaccines are voluntary for all state agencies. A&M is encouraging all faculty, staff and students to get the vaccine," the school said in a statement.

Cornell and Rutgers said they are confident they have the legal authority to mandate the vaccines. "We've gone through the legal analysis. We don't think there's any doubt about our ability to require vaccinations of students and we think it's the right thing to do," said Mr. Kotlikoff.

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Cornell said that students who don't have a valid medical or religious reason for exemption, won't be allowed on campus. If the school reaches herd immunity it would provide "minimal remote accommodations" that would mainly be for international students unable to come to campus or those who have a valid medical reason not to attend.

Unvaccinated students who want to attend Rutgers won't have the option for remote-learning, unless they are enrolled in one of the school's degree-granting online programs. Mr. Calcado said the university made the announcement early so that students will have enough time to decide whether to get the vaccine, and if Rutgers is the right school for them.

Several states, like Texas, have moved to restrict such requirements. Florida Republican Gov. Ron DeSantis issued an executive order this month blocking businesses from requiring patrons to show so-called vaccine passports-documentation that they have received the vaccine.

The order was a surprise to Nova Southeastern University, a private college in Broward County, which a day earlier announced that all students must be vaccinated before the fall semester, said Dr. Harry Moon, the university's executive vice president and chief operating officer.

Dr. Moon said the university is studying whether it is considered a business and prohibited to require students to get vaccinated. "We're looking to make our university community as safe as possible. We have great respect for the governor and his attempts to help make Florida as safe as he can."

Many colleges have required certain vaccinations for years, but the standards aren't uniform, said Leila Barraza, an associate professor at the University of Arizona's Zuckerman College of Public Health. Still, outbreaks on college campuses are relatively common. There were 150 mumps outbreaks in the U.S. comprising 9,200 infections in the 18 months through June 2017, according to Ms. Barraza. Half of those occurred on a college campus.

When Fort Lewis College in Durango, Colo. told students this month they must get vaccinated against Covid-19 to enroll in the fall semester, a few emailed university President Thomas Stritikus questioning the legality of the mandate, he said. Mr. Stritikus reminded students that the college already requires students to receive the MMR vaccine, which fights against measles, mumps and rubella.

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Harvard's Mr. Cohen said potential ethical and policy questions that come up with forced vaccinations are likely to be messier than the legal ones. For instance, if a student is granted an exemption, the school will need to figure out what constitutes a "reasonable accommodation" and whether to offer remote learning as an option so that the unvaccinated student doesn't have to attend in-person class.

The requirements are unlikely to be affected by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration and the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's recommendation on Tuesday to temporarily halt use of Johnson & Johnson's Covid-19 vaccine. Schools said students have time to get safely vaccinated by the fall.

Syracuse University is requiring that students be vaccinated by June 1. The private college in New York, which had been using the Johnson & Johnson vaccine to inoculate students on campus, said it would switch to the two-dose Pfizer vaccine on Wednesday.