



CCSU JOURNALISM

COVID-19 Special Report

CCSU Freshmen and Sophomores: Isolated and Missing Out

By Sophia Muce

Jayden Klaus, a freshman studying journalism at Central Connecticut State University, was a junior at Middletown High School when the world shut down in March 2020.



Freshman Jayden Klaus Handout

Klaus wasn't very involved in school events; she'd created a "little bubble" for herself, and she planned to stay there. After some pestering from her mother, though, she begrudgingly joined the drama club her freshman year of high school as a stagehand.

She stuck with the club and worked her way up the ranks until her drama teacher hinted that she may see head of stage in her future. "I was like, 'wow, that's an incredible opportunity,'" she said.

The club had just finished their spring production when Klaus caught wind that the school could be closing down for "a couple of weeks" due to COVID-19. "I remember thinking to myself, 'gosh, I hope that doesn't happen because that'd be terrible.' And then everything just went down the drain."

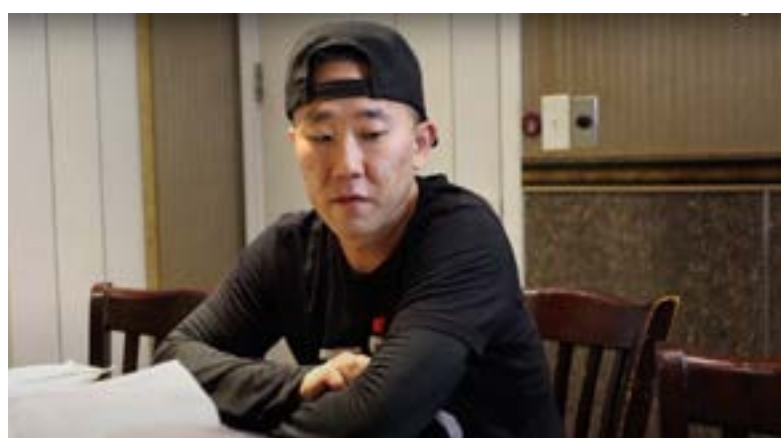
The drama club held their weekly meetings on Zoom and continued to do so, even when Klaus and her classmates returned back to school. "We talked about like, maybe if things get better, we'll be able to do the shows. But we never really got the opportunity to do so," she said. "It never came."

While her class had a prom and a proper graduation, Klaus said she was upset that she never got that chance to take over the head of stage position her senior year. She heard her classmates
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Costs Up, Employees Down: COVID-19 & New Britain Restaurants

By Melody Rivera

Restaurants across America have lost a lot of business due to COVID-19, but Scott Dolch, the president and CEO of the Connecticut Restaurant Association, said that restaurants in New Britain have had "a lot more challenges than most cities..." From food prices rising to the loss of several employees, restaurants in the city continue to deal with numerous struggles after the peak of the COVID pandemic.



Mark Moon, owner of Seoul BBQ in New Britain. (Melody Rivera)

This documentary was filmed and edited by Melody Rivera, a CCSU journalism student who created this for her capstone project. She has researched the project since September 2021 when the Connecticut Restaurant Association revealed that 88% of restaurant owners lost sales due to the Delta variant of COVID. In January, 96% of all restaurants in America had a decline of indoor dining because of the Omicron variant, the National Restaurant Association reported. Besides Dolch, Rivera interviewed the owners of two New Britain restaurants, Mark Moon, of Seoul BBQ, and Deivone Tanksley, of My Wife Didn't Cook.

See the full video here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rzWosJN1j6c>

Vaccine Exemptions

Almost 10% of Central Connecticut State University's student body was granted non-medical exemptions to the COVID-19 vaccine mandate since 2021, with no questions asked, according to data obtained through a Freedom of Information Act request. By Madeline Wilson. See page 4.

Enrollment

Madeline Wilson reports that after the pandemic, enrollment has dropped to 8,898 students at CCSU, which is an historic low, according to the university's own research. See page 4.

COVID-19 Testing

Chris Lill examined CCSU COVID testing data of commuter students and found that more than 850 commuter students were still not vaccinated as of March 21, but in a typical week, only 134 were tested. See page 6.

Federal Aid

Logan Zdun found that CCSU received \$22 million in federal funds to help students endure the pandemic. The university even handed out \$50 incentives to have residential students get vaccinated. See page 5.

Athletes

Exchange student Adam Proud from England looks at the mental health toll that the pandemic took on some CCSU student-athletes. See page 9.

Some freshmen athletes found that the pandemic created convoluted paths for them to get to play their sports at CCSU. By Jordan Smith. See page 9.

Social Life

Kristin Rose looks at the strict rules in the CCSU dorms that altered social life on campus during the pandemic. See page 7.

Callahan Marsh reports that many nights, Elmer's Place is packed by 200 to 400 people – many of them maskless. See page 8.

International

Azam Plummer reports that many international students had to overcome red tape and many obstacles to get to New Britain. See page 10.

CCSU Freshmen and Sophomores: Isolated and Missing Out

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describe feelings of hopelessness and depression, but she didn't relate. "I was just very irritated and disappointed," she said.

David Nduati, a freshman and business major at CCSU, said that missing out on an in-person experience his junior year put him in a "slump." He was slacking on his schoolwork and he missed socializing. "I didn't get to see my friends until that September because of lockdown, so I was just by myself a lot," Nduati said.

His class had planned to go on a trip to Washington D.C. just a few days after the school closed. He unpacked his bag and opened up his computer for months of online classes.



Freshman David Nduati Handout

"It was really just the same thing day in, day out," Nduati said.

A study measuring COVID-19-related stress among fourth graders to high school seniors by Northern Illinois University found that social isolation and missing events were two of the largest stressor categories reported by students.

According to Dr. Candice Wallace, a professor of social psychology at CCSU, it is normal for freshmen and sophomores to feel the effects of missing out. She said that as humans, our sense of belonging means feeling like we are part of a group.

"As soon as we start to feel we're excluded for any reason, it sends off alarm bells for us that affect all kinds of things," Wallace said. She said that social isolation and missing out can lead to loneliness, a lowered sense of belonging, and lowered self-esteem.

She has seen the effects of social isolation in her own students; they discussed suffering from anxiety, depression, and not feeling like themselves. While these factors have led to a loss of motivation in the classroom, she said she is more concerned by her students' newfound lack of social skills.

"It's that inability to like, see me and talk to me face-to-face, or see their classmates and sort of feed off of their classmates in class discussion and stuff like that," she said. "That, to me, was more of a loss I felt as a professor than even the stuff related to the schoolwork."

More specifically, she said her younger students have experienced difficulties making friends on campus. "They have not met other students here at CCSU as easily as I do," she said. "I have a good community of college friends that I met at college."

Alex Zupan, a sophomore studying sociology at CCSU, moved onto campus for her freshman year in the fall of 2020, when the majority of classes were virtual. She missed out on a proper orientation and struggled to meet her peers.

"My first semester was by far the worst," Zupan said. "I literally didn't know anybody."

Zupan said that she felt secluded. She expected to make friends in classes and dorms, but social isolation guidelines kept them separated. She was already

feeling disappointed after graduating from Haddam-Killingworth High School a few months prior; her class was unable to have a

prom, a proper graduation ceremony, and other long-standing senior traditions at the school.

"If someone had told me that a virus was going to ruin my senior year and my first semester of college, I would have been like, 'what are you talking about? Are you crazy?' I would have literally thought they were nuts," she said.

Zupan was not alone in feeling lonely. In a study by Harvard University, when asked which factors of the COVID-19 pandemic contributed to a decline in their mental health, 91% of freshmen said social isolation.

Dr. Michael Russo, the director of Counseling and Student Development at CCSU, said he has seen a "very significant increase" in students seeking out mental health services since returning back to campus.



Counseling & Student Development is a branch of the CCSU Student Wellness Center that helps student address mental health concerns. (Sophia Muce)

The number of students who saw counselors in the fall 2021 semester was 4 percent higher than the entire 2020-2021 academic year. "Our intake blocks are booked up and we anticipate that's going to continue through the end of the semester... we'll probably see more students over the summer than we've ever seen before," he said.

Students seek out counseling for a plethora of reasons, but Russo said that he has seen many freshmen and sophomores struggling to reintegrate back into larger populations after the social isolation they experienced. They missed out on their last year of high school, and then came to college where "things were just very different."

"All of that impacts their level of anxiety and their level of depression," Russo said. "That's what we've really seen in the Counseling Center - very high levels of anxiety. Just feeling very overwhelmed and stressed and that, over time, impacts their level of depression."

Sarah Horrax, the assistant director of Student Activities/Leadership Development at CCSU, said that she has also seen the impacts of social isolation on students now that they are running in-person events on campus.

"Students are talking to us about wanting to go to an event, but they're like, 'I don't have a ton of friends. What do I do?' And it's like, 'no, you just make friends.' And they're like, 'I don't remember how to make friends. Like, I literally don't know how to talk to people anymore,'" she said.

Horrax said that SA/LD partnered with the Student Wellness Center during the campus shutdown via virtual events, and will continue to do so with in-person events. According to some club leaders, though, getting younger students involved during a pandemic is no easy task.

Alexandra Tudisca, a senior at CCSU, is the artistic director of the AcaBellas and listed as the president of a nonexistent A Cappella

Society. The AcaBellas are the only members left of the "society" as two of the other groups were eliminated by COVID-19.

She said that it is "super hard" to recruit students to strengthen a community that was destroyed by the pandemic. "It definitely does not feel the same."

Without tables at club fairs or shows around campus for exposure, Tudisca said that social media became her strongest tool for engaging incoming students. The AcaBellas were lucky to have online content like music videos and competition sets for interested students, but with billions of social media users, they had trouble finding freshmen's accounts.

"They can't see us on social media because they haven't had the opportunity to find us," Tudisca said. Club members decided to promote auditions on their own social media in hopes that freshmen would find them. They saw success in their marketing methods, but still struggled with recruitment as they had no place to rehearse.

The AcaBellas met on the fifth floor of the Welte Garage, masked and surrounded by space heaters. "Can you imagine trying to promote a group and saying, 'yeah, we'll be holding practice in the garage. See you at 5 p.m.?'"

Christy Jackson, a member of the Art & Design Club, said that the club also had issues recruiting last year as their meetings were virtual. The club is made up of only five consistent members as many students failed to attend the meetings regularly.

"A large part of college clubs appears to be social in nature, so it makes sense that online would not hold the same attention," Jackson said. Recent high school graduates are not engaging in clubs like they used to.

According to CCSU's Fall Headcount Enrollment, students are seemingly uninterested in college altogether. In the fall of 2020, CCSU saw 1,759 first-year students come to campus. By the fall of 2021, that number dropped nearly 12 percent to 1,549.



College enrollment has dropped significantly since 2020, both nationally and at CCSU. The dramatic decrease in enrollment is not a CCSU-specific issue. According to Inside Higher Ed, total enrollment across the nation "dropped by 2.7 percent in fall 2021 compared with fall 2020."

Lawrence Hall, an undergraduate admissions counselor at CCSU, has felt the effects of both the national and institutional decline. "We're still attempting to recover from that because there were some other side effects of the pandemic."

Hall said the pandemic created new opportunities - educational or otherwise - in a simpler online format which pulled students away from CCSU. Additionally, Hall said that fear of COVID-19 itself and an objection to online learning kept enrollment numbers low.

Still, Admissions pushed on with recruitment. They attended online college fairs, virtual open houses, and implemented an outreach program in New York and New Jersey that they'd planned pre-pandemic. Hall said that more high schools began opening their door to admission recruiters and gave them access to students earlier on. Despite the reported decline, he said that CCSU is

seeing the number of students coming back thanks to alternative approaches.

Thomas Pincince, the director of Athletics at CCSU, said the department saw no considerable decrease in the number of student athletes or their playing abilities. High school and college athletes continued to practice unofficially, but the pause was upsetting nonetheless.



There are over 400 student athletes in CCSU's Athletics Department. (Sophia Muce) "I think what they did miss out on was why most people play high school sports: it's just to be around the team and your friends and the camaraderie that comes with it," Pincince said.

The Athletics Department was especially hands-on during the campus shutdown; they did daily check-ins, made sure counseling services were available to them, and tried to answer questions that they "didn't really have answers to."

"We were trying to operate in a world that nobody had ever operated in before and it was really difficult," Pincince said.

As COVID-19 restrictions have gradually lessened at CCSU, athletes are back with their teams and the school is coming back to life. Numerous campus officials said that they have plans to re-engage students and pull freshmen and sophomores out from their social isolation bubbles.

Russo and the Counseling Center are hiring a peer outreach worker to promote new services, particularly to freshmen during orientation. Dr. Tully, the interim vice president of Student Affairs, is working with other departments to create programs like the First-Year Experience course, which will support freshmen and connect them to the campus. Horrax and SA/LD are going to prioritize wellness and mental health programming on campus. Hall and Admissions are committed to a new four-year scholarship and financial aid modeling package.

As for freshmen and sophomores, they are finally getting a taste of typical campus life. Nduati lives on campus and joined the African Student Organization and the Black Student Union. He's enjoyed meeting new friends with similar interests. Now in her second year living at CCSU, Zupan attended the 2021 spring concert and homecoming. She said she's glad that CCSU is getting closer to normality each day. Klaus keeps in touch with friends from high school, and this year, the drama club put on proper shows. Klaus said she is happy for the now-seniors, but can't help but wish she was able to do the same.

She has also enjoyed her time living on campus, but it has come with similar disappointments; she was supposed to go on a trip to France with the Journalism Department at the end of the semester, but it was recently canceled due to the rising number of COVID-19 infections overseas. "I was very excited for the opportunity because for years, my mom and I had talked about how I should do a course abroad," she said.

Klaus was planning for her mom to meet her in Paris at a cafe for lunch. "It was legitimately crushing to learn we weren't going," she said. "I had hoped for quite a long time that we were still going to be able to go."

Almost 10% Of CCSU Students Were Granted Non-medical Exemptions to the COVID-19 Mandate

By Madeline Wilson

| CCSU Vaccine Exemptions | | |
|-------------------------|-------------|-----|
| Faculty | Medical | 6 |
| | Non-Medical | 49 |
| Student | Medical | 30 |
| | Non-Medical | 858 |

CCSU vaccine exemption according to a Freedom of Information Act request.

A total of 858 students, almost 10% of Central Connecticut State University's student body, were given non-medical exemptions to the COVID-19 vaccine mandate since it was imposed in 2021, according to a university response to a Freedom of Information Act request.

CCSU also gave 49 non-medical exemptions to faculty members, which accounts for about 6% of those currently employed.

Chief Operations Officer Sal Cintonino said that CCSU chose not to reject nearly any medical or non-medical exemption requests.

"Those exemptions we recognized because we didn't have a way to dispute that, right," he said. "And because we could never force somebody...to be vaccinated anyway."

Cintonino said that the university was sympathetic to students who wanted to make their own decisions, and wouldn't force anyone to get the vaccine, especially before it was fully FDA approved.

In January, the Faculty Advisory Committee brought a resolution to the Board of Regents asking to require students to provide a written explanation for non-religious exemption requests. Thomas Burkholder, president of the CCSU chapter of the American Association of University Professors, said the resolution was "ignored" by the regents.

The Faculty Senate discussed the same desire for students to provide written reasons for exemption requests at a meeting in December 2021.

Fred Latour, president of the senate, said that he hoped that if students had to provide a reason, it would allow CCSU to step and educate them based on their responses.

"The mission of Central is to provide an education to students," he said. "Part of providing an education is to help people discern what a trustworthy source of information is."

Latour said that the university may have been hesitant to require written reasoning because it would indicate that it endorsed the reason behind every exemption.

"They didn't want to be in the business of sorting out which would be a good reason and which would not," he said.

university's top goals is to bring students back to residence halls.

According to CCSU's semi-annual report, since 2019, CCSU has housed 552 fewer students, a loss of over a quarter of the 2,179 residents that were on campus in the fall of 2019.

"We're trying to get back up to 2,000 in the [residence] halls," he said. "If we only bring in four or 500 students, we're gonna have financial problems."

Cintonino said that the university is working to provide programs to help students who need extra support due to the pandemic and make coming back to CCSU more accessible for them.

"We've recognized how important it is," he said. "Right now, we are working diligently with recruitment and retention."

Ariel Wolfe, a former CCSU student who left during the pandemic, said that there wasn't anything CCSU could've done differently to have made her stay.

"Being at home for so long made me think about what I really wanted to do with my future and career path," she said.

Wolfe left CCSU to pursue a full-time job as a bartender. She said she had fallen in love with the work while attending school online and knew she would be happier after making the decision to do it as a career.

"I've been making enough money to sustain myself and more," she said. "It was a hard choice to drop out, but I think it was the best decision for myself."

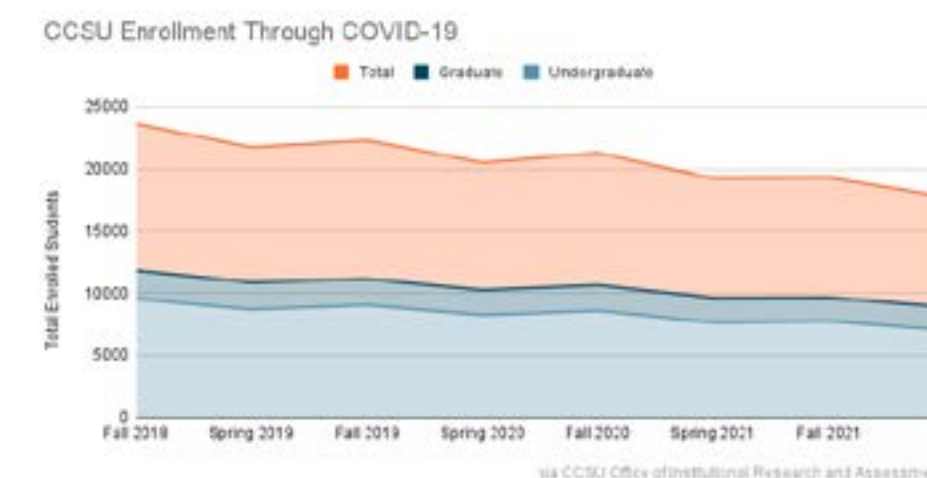
Public colleges and universities across the state have seen similar enrollment declines. In the last 5 years, enrollment has dropped by 22% in

the Connecticut State Colleges and Universities system, including all four regional state universities and the community colleges.

At CCSU, the enrollment decline varies at each of the university's schools and colleges. According to OIRA data, from Fall of 2018 to Spring of 2022, the School of Education and Professional Studies' enrollment dropped the least, only by 19%. The School of Liberal Arts and Social Sciences decreased by 26%, and the School of Business decreased by 33%. The School of Engineering, Science and Technology's enrollment fell by 21%. Enrollment of students committed to no school or inter-school programs plummeted by 43%, losing almost half of those students.

The number of faculty members at CCSU has also dropped after the pandemic, but not enough to match the drop in students. According to OIRA, in 2018, there were a total of 977 full and part-time faculty members employed, and in 2022, there are only 828. This makes for a 15% drop in faculty members compared to the 25% drop in students.

This has boosted the student-to-faculty ratio from 15:1 to 14:1.



CCSU enrollment through COVID-19. (Madeline Wilson)

CCSU Sees Lowest Enrollment Numbers in Recorded History

By Madeline Wilson

Historically, enrollment at Central Connecticut State University has hovered at around 12,000 students, but after the COVID-19 pandemic, that number has dramatically dropped by 25%, according to the university's own research.

Since 1975, CCSU's enrollment had never dropped below 11,400 until this semester, when there are only 8,898 students enrolled, according to its Semi-Annual Statistical Report.

Even before the pandemic, enrollment was declining, according to historic enrollment data from the university's Office of Institutional Research and Assessment. Between 2000 and 2018, fall enrollment averaged 12,186 students. In the fall of 2019, before the pandemic, that number was only 11,154 students. All of the figures include graduate students as well as undergraduates.

The 8,898 students enrolled at CCSU now are a fifth less than 2019's students, and over a third less than the 2000-2018 average.

President Zulma Toro addressed the steep drop in enrollment at her open forum in April and discussed what the university is doing to try to reverse the decline.

"We have established what we like to call the blanket of support," she said.

That "blanket" consists of establishing a new First Year Program to help restore the retention of first-time, first-year students, as well as bolstering existing programs like financial aid, advising, counseling services, and residence hall living and learning communities.

But Toro acknowledged that the enrollment drop hurts the university.

"The fact of the matter is that enrollment decline is costly for us... It's costly," she said. "For every 500 full-time students that we lose, we are losing close to \$7 million [in revenue]."

Already, CCSU has budgeted for higher expenses than revenues in 2022, according to its historical spending plan document. The university has



President Zulma Toro described CCSU's enrollment challenges in April. (Madeline Wilson)

predicted spending \$5,501,789 more than the \$233,317,904 it expects to bring in. In 2019, CCSU made over \$10 million more in revenue.

The decreased revenue comes entirely from the loss of 10% of the university's income from tuition and fees since 2019, according to past actual revenues.

Toro said that the university lost \$30 million in revenue from tuition and fees for the fiscal year 2022, but information obtained from CCSU officials through a Freedom of Information request shows that \$21 million in federal CARES Act funds helped offset losses in revenue from tuition, room, board, fees, events and other auxiliary services.

CCSU is predicting a \$16.6 million increase in expenditures this year, and Toro maintained that the university is financially stable.

"This year and next year, we seem to be in good financial footing," she said. "But what is important for me is to have long-term financial sustainability for the university."

The university has set goals for recruitment of students back to campus, and Chief Operations Officer Sal Cintonino said that one of the

\$23.2 Million in Federal CARES Money Assisted Students

By Logan Zdun

Harley Jobbagy, a criminology major at Central Connecticut State University, said the \$1,900 in federal CARES Act funds she received helped her when she was switching jobs.



Student Harley Jobbagy Handout

Otherwise, she said she might have dropped out of college.

"[The funds] helped to pay for my car," Jobbagy, of Terryville, said. "Not being able to have a car to get [to class], and with gas prices so high, it would've been hard."

As of April 1, 2022, \$22 million of CARES Act funds have been awarded to students, CCSU officials said.

CCSU spokeswoman Janice Palmer said that in the fall 2021 semester, 6,486 full-time students received an average of \$1,087.77 in the federal funds. Another 2,744 part-time students received an average of \$448.01.

During the spring 2022 semester, 5,821 full-time students received an average of \$778.31 in while 2,617 part-time students received an average of \$297.64, Palmer said.

In response to a Freedom of Information request, CCSU officials said a total of \$23.2 million of the CARES Act money was used to make up for lost profit at the university during the pandemic.

CCSU even used \$22,350 of the funds to offer financial incentives for residential students to get vaccinated, CCSU records show. Palmer said the incentive was a way to reach herd immunity from COVID-19.

"To ensure the health and safety of students and staff living in a communal setting, reaching herd immunity was a necessity," she said. "The university's CARES funding enabled the university to offer a \$50 housing credit to 447 COVID-immunized resident students."

CCSU allocated more than \$13.5 million to replace lost revenue from sources including room, board and events, records show. Additionally, \$4.5 million was used as reimbursement for lost tuition, housing, room and board and other fees, the CARES Act breakdown provided by CCSU said.

Sal Cintonino, CCSU's chief operations officer, said CCSU is no longer running at a deficit, thanks to the federal funds. He added that federal funding for COVID testing has run out.

"The testing we're doing right now, we're finding a way to pay for that testing," he said.

Kimberly Kostelis, CCSU's interim provost, said the federal funds were a huge help for CCSU.

"We were thankful for that CARES money because we incurred some expenses that we had to put in place," she said. "[Such as] simulated learning labs that weren't previously needed."

Madison Nelson, a media film and TV production major at CCSU from Stonington, said she used the CARES Act funds to help pay for living expenses.

"It was great to have extra money to pay my rent and use for gas," she said. "With inflation, everything is much more expensive, and money is very tight."

Nelson said she would have liked to receive more federal aid.

"As a college student, I am always working to pay my rent and expenses," she said. "[However,] I am grateful for what I was able to receive."

Brianna Norton, a political science major at CCSU from Bristol, said she has been making car payments with some of the money and saving some.

"I've just been saving it up, so when I do graduate, I don't have to pay as much out of my own pocket," she said.

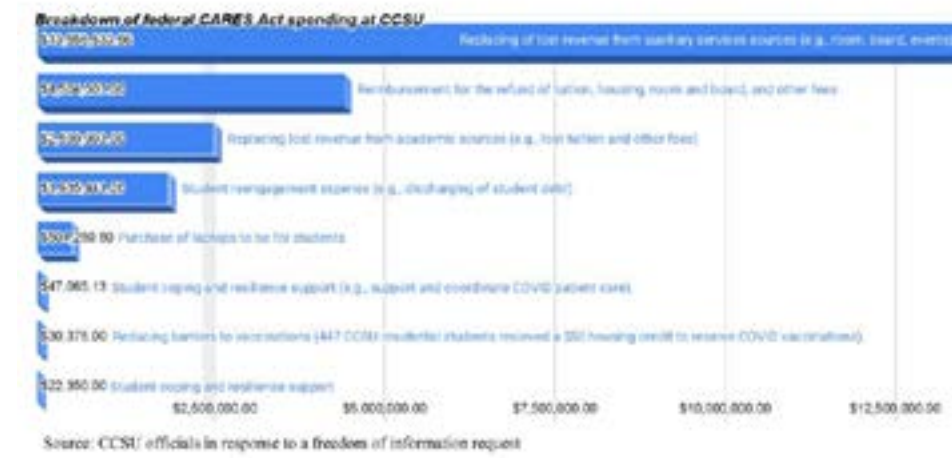
Norton said the point of the money was to help students pay for college.

"I know not everyone is saving it up towards their loans or putting it towards school," she said. "If they put it towards the school, I feel like everyone would have seen an improvement, and not just select people who did receive the CARES Act funds."

Jobbagy, the student from Terryville, said students need more financial help.

"I feel like we didn't get enough," she said. "Tuition is too high, and we could have gotten more."

Madeline Wilson, Alexis Dascher and Kristin Rose contributed to this story.



CARES Act funding to CCSU. (Logan Zdun)

Testing of Commuters Fell Short in Spring Semester, CCSU Data Shows

By Chris Lill

Central Connecticut State University's own COVID-19 statistics show that more than 850 commuter students are still not vaccinated as of March 21, but in a typical week, only 134 were tested.

In the first three months of the Spring 2022 semester, commuter students needed to be vaccinated or undergo weekly PCR tests, as outlined in the CCSU COVID-19 Blueprint. The data on the dashboard doesn't reflect CCSU's guidelines that say that testing is being enforced. Heather Ryan, an unvaccinated commuter student at CCSU, said that there were never any repercussions for not submitting test results.

"There were a few times I would get an email to get tested, so I did, but not by the school," Ryan said. "I never actually ended up submitting them, but I called a few times concerned I was going to get in trouble for it, so it's very possible they documented that. But no, there were never any repercussions."

CCSU spokeswoman Janice Palmer did not respond to requests for comment.

CCSU is a majority commuter school, with its website saying that commuters represent 77% of the student population. Commuter students have a lower rate of vaccinations than their on-campus peers. While about 95% of residential students are vaccinated as of March 31, just over 84% of commuter students are vaccinated.

With 5,427 commuter students, this means that 850 are not vaccinated, but the week with the most PCR tests reported for commuters at CCSU in the 2022 spring semester on the COVID Weekly Dashboard was 134. The weekly average for the semester was 113 tests per week for commuters, which means if all of the tests were from unvaccinated students, it would still only account for 13.29% of the testing that should have been reported.

Angelica Llanos-Bultron, a commuter student from Waterbury, said that she was worried about contracting COVID-19 and having to miss work.

"There were times people just did not care and weren't wearing their mask properly, so I started double masking, which I hated," Llanos-Bultron, who is vaccinated, said. "But I couldn't risk getting sick because of my job. There's a lot of older people so I did not want to be the one who gave them the virus."

As CCSU lifted its mask mandate on April 4, it is still unclear what effect this will have on the student body. CCSU made other changes on April 4, including no longer requiring unvaccinated commuter students to get COVID PCR tests on a weekly basis. All CCSU employees and students are still asked to complete the symptom tracker if they test positive.

Only 81 commuter students were tested during the week of March 21, the lowest number besides Spring Break the entire semester.

Commuter students have tested positive more frequently in the spring

semester than students who live on campus, the dashboard shows.

In the week of Jan. 21 to Jan. 28, 11 of 128 commuters tested positive while only 2 of 38 residential students tested positive. This is still a 3% higher rate of COVID among commuter students, but with such low testing rates for both groups, it's unclear if there was any difference in positivity rates among the two groups.

While Llanos-Bultron said she didn't think the symptom tracker was effective, Sal Cintorino, CCSU's chief operations officer, defended it.

"When we first started using the symptom tracker, you'd get a reminder every single morning to fill it out. So there's thousands of them in there because of that," Cintorino said. "You affirmed every morning that you did not have symptoms."

Llanos-Bultron said relying on self-reporting was a weak strategy.

"I most definitely believe students came on campus with COVID and they just did not care. In class I would literally hear people coughing out their lungs in the middle of lectures," Llanos-Bultron said. "Students were not honest from what I witnessed."

Cintorino said CCSU used 30 contact tracers, and as soon as a student reported a symptom, they were contacted and told not to come to campus.

Some commuter students said that COVID was not a concern for them at all. Ambrot Ginin, a commuter from Danbury who is vaccinated, said that he is indifferent about the rate of vaccinations in commuters, and that he has never been tested as a commuter.

"COVID testing shouldn't be mandatory because there's more commuter students and really no way to enforce that," Ginin said. "Also college students are lazy and will look for any reason to stay home. I think they'll get tested on their own if they have symptoms, or stay home."

Logan Zdun and Madeline Wilson contributed to this story.



A tent outside of R.C. Vance Academic Center was used for COVID-19 testing, classes and campus events. (Madeline Wilson)

CCSU Does Not Require COVID Booster Shots

By Dylan Braccia

Central Connecticut State University mandated the COVID-19 vaccine when classes resumed in the Fall 2021 semester, but it has since not required the booster shot.

Thomas Burkholder, president of the CCSU chapter of the American Association of University and a chemistry professor, said the university should have required it.

"I think it's an excellent idea," he said. "I think the vaccine itself provides a lot of protection, and the booster shot gives additional protection."

Burkholder, who said he has had the booster shot, said it would be safer with everyone having the booster.

"I think most people would be more comfortable with the booster shot required," he said. "I think we have even more faculty members that agree with that."

CCSU has tracked the number of students who are vaccinated at the school, and as of March 25, 95.38% of residential students and 84.23% of commuter students were vaccinated against COVID-19. The vaccinations typically only work for about six months.

Sal Cintorino, CCSU's chief operations officer, explained why there is not a mandate for booster shots.

"It's got to go back through the [state] legislature once it's FDA approved, and then be brought back to the campus," he said. "So we don't just have the ability to do that. We're not in a pandemic [anymore]."

CCSU Interim Provost Kimberly Kostelis said faculty and staff did not need to be vaccinated or boosted either. Kostelis said a common misconception is that all state employees had to have either.

"[Faculty and staff] had to follow the same protocol as students," she said. "They were getting tested as well [if they were not vaccinated]."

Cintorino said booster shots are still strongly recommended, and there



Dr. Thomas Burkholder

Handout

has been a vaccine van on campus every month.

"We still probably get 20 to 30 people there, faculty and staff included, each time it's here," Cintorino said.

An informal Instagram poll of 33 CCSU students on March 25 found that 58% of students have the booster shot while 42% said they did not.

CT Public reported that, as of March 20, 50.9% of Connecticut's population had received the booster shot.

While Connecticut's state universities and colleges have not required the booster, the University of Connecticut, the University of Hartford and Yale University have all required it, according to the universities' websites.

Samantha Moavero, 20, a CCSU student from Stamford, has not yet gotten the booster shot.

"I was going to get it," she said. "I just didn't see the need for it myself."

Moavero said she feels it should be up to each person to decide on the booster.

"I don't know if it should be required, but definitely, the vaccine should be required," she said. "I feel it should be your opinion."

Another CCSU student, Ethan Grabowski, 19, from New Britain, does not have the booster shot.

"I feel it's not required," he said. "At this point in time, COVID-19 is pretty much obsolete."

Grabowski also said he feels restricted on campus with the COVID-19 guidelines and is excited that a mask mandate and other restrictions were lifted on April 4.

"In the beginning, [CCSU] did a good job," he said. "But now, it's too much. I'm ready to move on."

Grabowski said that CCSU does not need to require the booster shots.

"Cases are down, and people are ready to move on from COVID-19," he said.

Madeline Wilson and Logan Zdun contributed to this story.

Life on CCSU Campus During COVID-19

By Kristin Rose

For Central Connecticut State University students like Jazmin Lasane, living on campus during the COVID-19 pandemic has been surreal and stressful at times.



Freshman Jazmin Lasane

Handout

Lasane, a freshman from Southington who lives in Sheridan Hall, is ready for a relaxed college experience now that a mask mandate and other regulations were lifted April 4.

"It was interesting to enter college with what seemed to be like even more rules and restrictions enforced in relation to COVID compared to what was enforced in high school," Lasane said.

When students returned to campus in the Fall of 2020, all the residence halls had strict rules that changed the social life on campus. The restrictions remained in place as enrollment dropped and the number of students

living in the dorms declined from 1,990 in the Spring of 2020 to 997 that fall, according to statistics obtained from CCSU officials through a Freedom of Information request. This spring, 1,627 students are living in the dorms, records show.

Paige Stringer, a sophomore who lives in the Mid-Campus residence hall, was an incoming freshman when COVID was still surging. She had to have a negative test before she could move in. Stringer, of Monroe, Washington, said the rules in Mid were difficult to adapt to, but for precautionary reasons, she understood the extent of them.

"As soon as we stepped out of our dorm room, we had to have a mask on," Stringer said. "The hardest rule to adjust to was only four people allowed in each room."

Stringer, who is on the softball team, said her teammates all lived in Mid at the time, so it was hard to have a team get-together while continuing to follow the rules.

"For our season in 2020-21, before every practice and lift, we would have to fill out the symptom tracker and show our green dot," Stringer said.

“The green dot meant we had no symptoms of COVID-19.”

Stringer said she is glad the restrictions have been lifted.

“As a university, we have come a long way,” she said. Sal Cintonino, the chief operations officer for CCSU, said a lot of thought went into the rules regarding dorm life.

“We call that a communal setting,” he said. “When people are going to live in a community, the sciences showed that we had to have different mitigation plans.”

Cintonino said it was necessary to create smaller communities and reduce the number of students in each dorm room to four or less throughout the campus.

“They will live amongst one another; they are not going home every night to a separate family,” Cintonino said. “We needed to create plans and strategies to protect all those people.”

He said it was mandatory to have testing on a weekly basis to prevent the spread of COVID and a ban on outside visitors.

“All these restrictions were a way for us to ensure that we would have the least possibility to have COVID show up on our campus,” Cintonino said. “If it ever showed up on our campus, then we would have the opportunity to identify it and mitigate it immediately.”

Cintonino said two resident halls were closed and were dedicated to the students who tested positive for COVID-19.

“After talking to President [Zulma] Toro, she committed to taking two residents halls offline for quarantine and isolation,” Cintonino said. “We made sure these students were fed and cared for.”

CCSU had gotten past the 80% herd immunity that needed to get vaccinated in the first month, he said.

“The plan after April 4 is to lift the blueprint and the mitigation that is in place,” Cintonino said. “Students that are living on campus will be able to get back to a normal 2019 environment as they had been before.”

Logan Zdun, Madeline Wilson and Alexis Dascher contributed to this story.

Elmer’s Hosts Maskless Crowds Despite COVID-19

By Callahan Marsh

It’s a Thursday night in March at Elmer’s Place during the coronavirus. The bar is packed shoulder to shoulder with young adults, and there’s not a mask in sight.

Over on the dance floor, students are rubbing up against one another, sharing kisses and sharing drinks. COVID seems far from their minds.

Central Connecticut State University has had heavy restrictions due to the pandemic, but social life thrives at Elmer’s.

Claire Viola, a resident advisor in Gallaudet Hall, said that despite Central’s COVID-19 restrictions, Elmer’s still managed to host a large crowd on most Thursday nights.

“Social life on campus has changed 100% since the beginning of the pandemic because people are afraid of getting sick or getting in trouble for being in too large a crowd,” she said. “They don’t really go to house parties anymore. They go to Elmer’s, and Elmer’s is flooded.”

Viola said sometimes she worries about how many people are in Elmer’s, but then she remembers that most are vaccinated.

“Sometimes I think about how gross Elmer’s is on a Thursday night, but then I remember that most everyone in the bar is vaccinated and I’m even boosted, so that definitely makes me feel safer,” she said.

Michael Cook, the co-owner of Elmer’s, said the bar is not to blame for the spread of COVID at CCSU.

“We were open from the middle of May to September with zero complaints, zero issues, and then the first week of school, they tried to pin everything on us,” he said. “When Central started back up, that’s when we started getting complaints. They tried to blame us when it was off campus parties, and other off-campus events.”

Although the bar closed for three months at the beginning of the pandemic, Elmer’s is popular now and serves 200 to 400 people on many nights, Cook said.

Sal Cintonino, CCSU’s chief operations officer, said the university had issues with Elmer’s when the campus attempted to prevent the spread of COVID in the fall of 2020.

“[The] state has talked to them [Elmer’s]. The local police have talked to them,” he said. “There was a point when we were concerned about people going there.”

Not only did CCSU monitor Elmer’s, but the university also watched for house parties around campus, reducing students’ social life.



(Sophia Muce)

“We were notified of every party,” Cintonino said. “Where there was a party with more than X amount of people, I worked with the city making sure to limit the spread of COVID.”

Anna Hallin, a sophomore at CCSU, is not only an Elmer’s regular on Thursday nights, but experienced COVID restraints as an on-campus resident.

Hallin said the social life at CCSU has changed since the pandemic and it’s noticeable in students’ behavior.

“Before COVID people were more open to going out and meeting friends, but since the pandemic, everybody’s been shut off for two years and no one’s used to talking to people face to face,” she said. “I think it made people insecure, and it was harder for people to reach out and make friends.”

Like most other students, Hallin said she she can make the right call at Elmer’s and protect herself from COVID.

“For the most part, I feel safe at Elmer’s, but I think that’s more because I’m capable of sticking up for myself and walking away from situations,” she said.

While some CCSU students spend their Thursday nights at Elmer’s, Camryn Jeffko, a resident advisor in F. Don James Hall, said there are many restrictions she enforces that receive pushback from some residents.

“We haven’t gotten complaints about the way we’ve handled the pandemic, but we have gotten complaints about people not wanting to wear their masks, or attend RA programs virtually,” she said.

Jeffko said social life is affected dramatically by the pandemic since some students are cautious in large crowds.

“A lot of residents just sit around and scroll on TikTok. There are a lot of people afraid to go to Elmer’s because there’s too many people there. It’s cramped and gross,” she said. “People don’t want to go to Elmer’s because a lot of people have gotten sick there.”

Logan Zdun and Madeline Wilson contributed to this story.

CCSU Athletes Faced Uncertainty, Stress During Pandemic

By Adam Proud



Dexter Lawson Jr. was unable to play football during the campus closure. (Adam Proud)

Sitting in the Student Center at Central Connecticut State University, football player Dexter Lawson Jr. recalled the impact the COVID-19 shutdown had on his mental health when he couldn’t play the sport he loved for almost a year.

“It definitely had an effect on my mental health because I use football as my scapegoat to get away from whatever I’m going through mentally,” Lawson said. “So not being able to get away just go play football was frustrating and forced me to kind of figure out other outlets and things like that.”

When the pandemic began in March 2020, the NCAA cancelled all sports games indefinitely. Some sports returned at the end of Fall 2020, but all CCSU sports did not fully return until the Fall 2021 semester.

At Central, the football team and the indoor track team did not compete during the fall of the 2020 season.

A survey of 25,000 athletes conducted by the NCAA at the end of Fall 2020 showed that 94% of Division I athletes in the survey reported being tested for COVID. Of those, 14% tested positive for the virus.

Aaron Dawson, a running back who was on the Blue Devils football team when the pandemic began, said it was tough to adapt to the health and safety protocols in place when he returned.

“It was very difficult to get used to,” Dawson said. “When we had to test, it was during the free time before practices where I’d like to eat or just relax and sometimes, I couldn’t do that.”

Tom Pincince, the director of athletics at CCSU, said the lack of vaccines when college sports returned meant teams were facing continuous problems with having to quarantine.

COVID-19 Threatened the College Playing Careers for Some CCSU Recruits

By Jordan Smith

The college selection process is already difficult for students, but for some Division I athletes during the pandemic, it almost meant the end of their playing careers.

CCSU track and field athlete Chris Estefani said that he thought COVID put an end to his chances.

“I went through a time when schools weren’t really responding because there was so much going on,” he said. “So I applied to the track team online myself.”

Estefani said the lockdown had thrown his whole selection process off.

“It really changed a lot for me. I wasn’t sure what this school and the others I was considering were really like,” he said. “I’m happy where I ended up, but it was a mess of a process.”

“I remember when we first came back to campus, and if I got sick, I was going into isolation for 10 days and I was staying there for 10 days,” Pincince said. “Well if you were considered a contact with me, you were going to quarantine for 14 days. There were no questions asked. There was no vaccine. There was no boosters.”

Sal Cintonino, the chief operations officer at CCSU, said the university worked with a number of groups to allow sports to return to the campus safely.

“It was a combination of working with our athletic director, working with the NCAA and the Northeast Conference, who we’re a member of,” Cintonino said. “And then we crossed over the recommendations that we got nationally from them with what we were doing with the Department of Public Health in Connecticut. So had a mitigation plan for them.”

Pincince said the strict testing protocols the athletics department and the university had in place allowed them to identify close contacts of athletes testing positive. This led to some sports teams on campus going into quarantine at least twice.

“When we first started playing, if a team had travelled on the bus somewhere and then somebody got sick and they tested positive, that whole team was going into quarantine,” Pincince said. “We had a couple teams that went into quarantine at least twice during the season. And we were asking the athletes to stay here just so that they didn’t go home and then have contact with somebody who could potentially be infected.”

The national NCAA survey conducted in Fall 2020 found that athletes whose classes were only online had higher mental health concerns. Of them, 43% said academic worries were a large contribution to this, 33% also said the lack of access to sports was a factor in a decline in mental health.

Lawson was one of these athletes who had no escape from schoolwork or classes because he couldn’t play football. The CCSU cornerback said he couldn’t even play by himself during the shutdown.

“I wasn’t even able to really leave home. I couldn’t just go to the field because a lot of the fields around where I’m from were closed off and nobody could go on there,” Lawson said. “So I couldn’t even just go by myself and zone out and things like that. It’s that thing that kind of keeps you going and all of a sudden, it just gets snatched away from you abruptly.”

Logan Zdun and Madeline Wilson contributed to this story.

Pincince said that an extra year of eligibility granted by the NCAA to athletes in college during 2021 may have limited some prospects opportunities.

“You have these college kids that may be staying in college an extra year,” he said. “So you get a senior or junior that may have had the ability to go somewhere but now there’s not an open roster spot.”

But Pincince said that the incoming number of athletes remained relatively stable at CCSU.

“I don’t think that it dramatically changed the size of the incoming class here. If you look at our baseball team, the roster size is 35,” he said. “After COVID began, they allowed that number to be bigger. So even with a couple sticking around, the incoming class was about the same.”

According to the CCSU athletics website, the baseball roster did increase from the 11-freshman rostered in 2020. Following the return from COVID in 2021, it brought in 22 total freshmen.

Second-year CCSU football player Alec Ambrosia said that roster retention makes it harder to play but may favor him in the long run.

“It has given all of the seniors extra years of eligibility and it has made getting on the field more of a challenge,” he said. “But I have been here for two years now, and I still have four years of eligibility left, so that’s nice.”

Coventry High School senior Ellis Thompson, who has committed to the

CCSU track and field team, said that communication lines were open with the program.

“I didn’t really feel like COVID impacted my personal process,” he said.

Thompson said that his recruiting process went smoothly over the last few months.

“They showed me everything that I was looking for in a school and made it kind of an easy choice,” he said.

Ambrosia said that he benefited from having a previously established connection with the program.

“I was getting recruited because they always recruit at my high school,” he said. “I met the o-line coach at camp, and we stayed in touch all throughout my junior and senior seasons of high school.”

But these camps that allowed Ambrosia to find an athletic opportunity have been canceled since COVID-19 began.

But Pincince said that with the upcoming relaxation of COVID-19 restrictions, these evaluations and camps can return.

“We’ll have the opportunity after April 4th to begin to open campus more. We haven’t done that stuff in two years,” he said. “Getting those kids on campus and seeing those athletes is a big part of the process for football, volleyball and soccer.”

Hardships, Confusion Made the Pandemic a Tough Journey for CCSU’s International Students

By Azam Plummer



Student Olanrewaju J. Olamuyiwa Handout

Olanrewaju J. Olamuyiwa, a basketball player at Central Connecticut State University from Lagos, Nigeria, said he lost his income when CCSU closed in March 2020 and classes went online due to COVID-19 pandemic.

“Being an international student, you cannot work outside of your university so that makes it harder for us,” Olamuyiwa said.

With support from CCSU, its food pantry and the relationships he built around campus, he said he was able to overcome these challenges.

“I have my coaches; I have some of my friends. As well as that, we have the Maria’s Place Pantry, which is available for students,” Olamuyiwa said. “Stuff like that helped me stay afloat during this pandemic. COVID-19 was hard for all of us, but it was even harder being an international student.”

Sal Cintonino, CCSU’s chief operating officer, said the school contracted with local hotels to accommodate international students when classes moved online suddenly in March of 2020.

“It was a journey for them. It was a journey for us. Back in the beginning when this first hit, in March 2020, one thing we had set in place for students who had nowhere to stay was we put them in hotels, where there were meals, and we stayed with them and worked with them,” Cintonino

said. “At the same time, students who were planning to come for the new semester could not be due to the travel restrictions.”

He said the enrollment of international students declined during COVID-19, as many chose not to come back when CCSU reopened. The campus continues to reach out to those students and encourages them to come back, Cintonino said.

According to CCSU Center for International Education, the number of international students, including graduate students, declined by 56% from 57 in 2019-2020 to 38 in year 2020-2021 but saw a 23% increase in year 2021-2022.

Olamuyiwa said with the arrival of Omicron variant, he was concerned about classes starting in January again.

“I was quite concerned that classes would move online and that would in turn invalidate my visa so I would have to go home,” he said.

Sara Alexandersson, an international student from Sweden, said she had a problem getting her visa in Sweden as there was a six-month backlog due to the pandemic.

“The U.S. embassy had a waiting time of half a year, so I had to go to Romania to get my visa,” Alexandersson said.

Adam Proud, an international student from England, said he applied to spend one year at CCSU and started his application process early.

Proud said there was a lot of uncertainty around travel and whether he would get a visa to come to CCSU.

“I started the application process in January 2021, which was the time when the U.K was back in another lockdown until March,” Proud said. “So, from January until pretty much a few weeks before I flew over in August, there were still concerns that I might not have been able to come to Central.”

During winter break, COVID-19 played a key role in his deciding to not travel back home, Proud said. He said he had considered going home to see his family but with the rise of Omicron variant, he decided to stay in the U.S.

“I was able to see my girlfriend for a week because she flew over from the U.K and we went to New York,” Proud said. “So that was nice, and it allowed me to see a familiar face again.”

Mohamed Mursal, a first-year international student from England, came to campus in January of 2022, and said his application to CCSU went smoothly.

“The college application process was seamless because of the tremendous support from the admission office at CCSU,” Mursal said. “Everything was online.”

Online Learning Worked For Some Students, But Not Others

By Daijah Ogletree



(Derek McLeod)

Prof. Frederic Latour has been teaching number theory at Central Connecticut State University for years, but nothing could prepare him for having to abruptly teach math virtually.

He said while teaching online during the COVID-19 pandemic, he missed the in-person interactions that made the classroom more beneficial for him and his students.

“I did enjoy my online classes because I do enjoy teaching that material to interested students,” Latour, the president of the Faculty Senate and the assistant chair of the mathematical science department, said. “The thing is that in comparison with regular classes, I mean online classes were definitely missing something, which is the actual in-class interaction.”

CCSU switched suddenly to remote learning in the Spring 2020 semester due to COVID. Students and faculty members were forced to engage with one another via Microsoft Teams, Zoom and Webex.

According to the U.S. Census, since 2020, 98% of universities have offered online classes, and 75% have purchased or are preparing to purchase additional student technology.

CCSU’s COVID-19 Blueprint says that 60% of the students were learning remotely in the Fall 2021 semester while 40% were online. Some professors used the HyFlex system, with only 12 students allowed in the classroom and others learning online. For Spring 2022, 85% of CCSU students were in person, the blueprint shows.

“Most of us didn’t really know much of what was going to happen when we moved temporarily in the Spring of 2020,” Latour said. “The initial message that we got was that we were going to move online for two weeks, and then we’ll see. Of course, we’re kind of laughing at that looking back, because obviously it was much more than two weeks, and the whole idea that COVID can last two weeks sounds kind of silly today.”

Even with the support of CCSU, the visa form could only be submitted through the specific courier of the U.S. Embassy.

“Because of this lengthy process, I arrived late to start classes,” Mursal said. “But the university was flexible to allow me to start one week later.”

Lawrence Hall, the director of undergraduate admissions at CCSU, said the campus continues to accommodate international students.

“We have extended the deadlines as long as we can to help students get through these processes and procedures,” Hall said.

Logan Zdun and Madeline Wilson contributed to the story.

Technology was a challenge for many people when the switch was made.

“Overall, I think that people, especially the IT department, got a lot of praise for working really hard to make sure that we had computer resources to be able to do things online that we were originally doing on ground,” Latour said. “They tried to provide faculty and students with some tools. Could we get webcams for our students? They might need a webcam to attend an online class. It turns out that that was hard, because webcam prices went way up during the pandemic because everyone wanted one.”

Prof. Thomas Burkholder, president of the CCSU chapter of the American Association of University of Professors, said the university handled the transition to teaching online in the Fall of 2020 much better.

“There were some miscues there, but by and large, it worked, because faculty had time to plan and structure their classes for the online environment,” Burkholder, a chemistry and biochemistry professor, said. “I think they thought that the HyFlex model would be successful. I don’t think they anticipated that students didn’t really want it, so that was a lot less successful than what they thought they were going to be.”

He added that CCSU should offer more online courses, which were effective for many students.

“The positive is, I think we learned that we can do some of these classes online,” Burkholder said. “There are some classes that are perfectly well suited for an online course. If you have a senior seminar, and it’s got 15 students in it, you could break students into groups, and you can have group discussions easily. You can have students work on projects within the online environment. I think we learned a lot about how online works and what’s possible. Also, what students are comfortable with.”

Meeting the demand of some students, CCSU ensures that more online classes will be offered as an option for all students, Interim Provost Kimberly Kostelis said.

“So I mean that’s a great discussion and one that we’ve been continuing to have almost daily,” she said. “You know we talk about you know we want to make sure that we know how we define ourselves coming out of the pandemic.”

Kostelis said she doesn’t think CCSU will return to the way things were before COVID.

“Going more digital in a lot of cases has helped streamline many different things,” she said. “I think it will also help us to be smarter, and more effective with our use of our funding as well.”

Madeline Wilson and Logan Zdun contributed to this story.

Substance Abuse Was a Problem During COVID, Experts Say

By Samantha Jones

As a clinical young adult outreach manager at Aware Recovery Care, Kayla Reiter knows that college students have struggled with substance abuse in the wake of COVID-19.

“Substance abuse use has become a massive problem,” Reiter said. “It’s gotten more out of control than it was before.”

The increase caused her Connecticut-based, at-home treatment program to expand into five other states as waitlisted outpatient services quickly became overwhelmed.

“College students, they’re more vulnerable,” Reiter said.

According to the state Department of Public Health, the number of confirmed drug overdose deaths increased by 14.3% between 2019 and 2020 alone. As the pandemic extended into 2021, the uptrend in substance abuse persisted as well. DPH reported a total of 2,739 drug overdose deaths between the year 2020 and 2021.

“The number of accidental drug intoxications has more than tripled since 2012,” Chief Medical Examiner Dr. James R. Gill said.

Before the pandemic, the KFF State Health Facts report found 0.5% of young adults and adolescents reported opioid dependence or abuse in the past year in Connecticut. By 2020, 1.8% of adolescents and 6.6% of adults in Connecticut reported having alcohol use disorder, the report stated. An additional 2.6% of young adults and adolescence reported having an illicit drug disorder in 2020.

Central Connecticut State University student Joey Gormley said that during the pandemic, a recovering family member relapsed after six years of sobriety.

“He struggled with drugs his whole life, and he was finally doing so good,” Gormley said. “But the second COVID hit, he went immediately back to [them].”

Unemployment and other isolation factors inherent to the pandemic, are what Gormley attributes to his loved one’s relapse.

According to summary findings from a CCSU health survey, 57.5% of participating students reported having family members with drug and alcohol dependency.

“I think that the pandemic had a lot of us face our own realities,” Reiter said. “And so not only are individuals seeing real problems, but their families are as well.”

During the pandemic, CCSU did spend some of its federal CARES Act money to assist students. According to information obtained through a Freedom of Information request, it spent \$47,065.13 for “student coping and resilience support.”

Jonathan Pohl, the coordinator of wellness education at the CCSU Student Wellness Center, said that following the pandemic, there has been a demand in students asking for services. He attributes the spike

to isolation, unpredictability, and loss which he said is amplified by the unstructured nature of college students’ schedules.

The increased funding in addiction services was due, in part, to remote pivots in treatment, Pohl said.

A New Britain resident who is in recovery from substance abuse said he did fairly well during the pandemic but others did not.

“A lot of people felt lost, a lot of people felt disconnected, and that disconnection cost a lot of people their lives,” the substance abuse survivor, who asked that his name not be used, said. “The pandemic was bad.”

Students seeking campus services for addictions may have felt further distanced from help, as treatment transformed. Alcoholics and Narcotic Anonymous meetings, therapy appointments, and other services were moved to Zoom, and disparities in supporting technologies further withdrew some.

Isolation and crowded rooms in CCSU’s dorms can jeopardize the important confidentiality associated with treatment and counseling services, Pohl said.

“With the [remote] services, one of the concerns was confidentiality,” he said. “It was common, for a few of the students I was working with, for people to access the room they were in, shifting our conversations as a result.”

On the other hand, some students struggling with addiction found the online approach advantageous because of increased accessibility, Pohl said.

Aram Ayalon, a CCSU professor and the Democratic minority leader of the New Britain Common Council, reminds students that anyone is subject to experiencing substance abuse addictions. Ayalon said he does not believe the issue is specific to campus or New Britain.

“The war on drugs was focused on cities, not suburbs [despite] that most of the drugs were [abused] in the suburbs,” Ayalon said. “Low-level drug [consumption] in urban areas are criminalized [and so] the media criminalizes places like New Britain.”

As the pandemic persists, Pohl said CCSU needs more counselors.

“We are understaffed,” he said. “We only have one staff member covering all substance abuse issues.”

Reiter echoed the importance of students seeking help on campus.

“It’s important for college counseling centers to be educated on the resources in the community because when a college student wants help, the window is really small,” Reiter said.

Madeline Wilson, Logan Zdun, Alexis Dascher and Kristin Rose contributed to this story.

Some CCSU Students Say \$1.2 Million to Safeguard Classrooms Wasn’t Enough

By Alexis Dascher

Two years into the coronavirus pandemic, Maeve Maltese, a senior at Central Connecticut State University, said little effort had been made to disinfect the classrooms.

“This is extremely passive and should have been done when we were in the middle of a spike in numbers,” she said. “I had no choice but to attend class on campus.”

Some CCSU students said the school’s COVID-19 guidelines have

protected them while others said they are not safe on campus.

CCSU spent \$1.2 million to implement safety measures such as adding plexiglass and air purifications in classrooms, according to the university counsel’s office. The funds were reimbursed by the state using federal funds.

Maltese said the classrooms she is in are not socially distanced.

“There is about a two-foot distance between desks in library classrooms, which was the same spacing the school had before COVID,” she said.

On March 13, an informal Instagram poll of 24 students found that 71% of CCSU students who responded said they felt safe on campus and in classrooms while 29% did not.

Sal Cintorino, CCSU’s chief operations officer, said the university’s COVID response was backed up by science from the state Department of Public Health and the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Preventions.

Everyone’s safety was paramount, he said.

“We had an in-depth amount of information from our campus community and took the science that was going on at the time to put together our mitigation plan,” he said.

Cintorino said classrooms that did not have air circulation towards the front had plexiglass.



Many rooms at CCSU used plexiglass as a safety precaution. (Madeline Wilson)

“If teachers wanted to clear their throat or get a sip of water, they would go behind the plexiglass,” he said.

James Grupp, the director of engineering services, said CCSU listened to students’ and faculty members’ requests to ensure safety in classrooms.

“CCSU has been conservative in its response to COVID protocols, erring on the side of safety and health,” he said.

Grupp said CCSU had a three-foot social distance plan for the 2021-2022 academic year and tables had plexiglass when students could not be separated due to classroom size.

Mask Mandate Lift Receives Mixed Feelings From CCSU Students and Staff

By Sydney Johnston and Darius Martin

When Central Connecticut State University lifted its mask mandate on April 4, some students and faculty members said that they were happy to see one another for the first time after two long years of requiring masks indoors.

“Unfortunately, the masks took a lot away from the whole college experience and that’s time I won’t ever have back,” sophomore Julia Pahl said.

Heid Hartwig, an English professor, said she thought it was “unnatural” to keep wearing a mask now.

“I think we have reached a point where the [coronavirus] variants that are circulating still are relatively innocuous,” she said. “I’m glad that we have done this, and I’m happy to see people’s faces again.”

But Frederic Latour, the president of the Faculty Senate, said some of his colleagues have said they were worried about the relaxed mandate. Some professors were concerned enough that they want to ask students to wear masks during office hours to protect themselves from COVID-19.

Senior Emily Kozon said the classrooms are socially distanced in different ways.

“The ones that may not have as much spacing have dividers between seats,” she said.

She said her class in Maria Sanford Hall has a plastic divider for the professor, but students are not distanced.

Interim Provost Kimberly Kostelis said she has received positive feedback on the safety in the classrooms.

“All the classrooms were redone and focused on safety,” she said.

Julia Conant, a senior, said she would still wear her mask even though the mandate was lifted on April 4.

“Even though I am vaccinated and have received the booster, I don’t trust every student at Central to be as cautious as they should be,” she said.

Conant said the classrooms are not spaced out enough. She said she constantly shifts her body to let students walk through the aisle.

Henry D. Altman, the university architect, said he followed guidelines from the CDC and the state when distancing classrooms.

“We looked at how students move in and out of a classroom,” he said. “We also looked at how the faculty and professors use classroom space.”

Altman said some classrooms on the lower level of the Vance Academic Center have fixed furniture designed for two students per desk, so it could not be moved. In those cases, he said, “We put up plexiglass between students, so they had a physical barrier, giving them the opportunity to distance.”

Altman said classrooms in Willard-DiLoreto all initially had spaced-out chairs, but the rooms went back to their typical set-up when CCSU reverted to the three-foot plan.

Despite all that was done, some students and faculty are not comfortable in classrooms, Kostelis said.

“Regardless of what we could have done, they still would not have felt safe,” she said.

Madeline Wilson, Logan Zdun and Kristin Rose contributed to the story.



CCSU students leave masks behind as mandate is lifted on campus. (Omar Gonzalez-Solano)

“If it were me making the rules, I think it might make more sense to relax the mandate at the end of the semester,” Latour, the assistant chair of the mathematical sciences department, said. “There are some professors who have expressed anxiety about the new rules.”

Junior Chris Zemaitis said he is comfortable with the university’s decision to go mask optional.

“I think I’m so comfortable with it now than I would have been a few months ago is because our state and school vaccine rates are so high,” he said.

As of April 5, Central’s average vaccination rate for both residential and non-residential students was 87.49%, according to the university’s COVID-19 dashboard.

“Some of the things to keep in mind though is that that we recognize that there are still going to be cases where there could be a positive result,” Chief Operations Officer Sal Cintorino said.

Neither residential nor non-residential students have tested positive for COVID since the week of Feb. 14 to Feb. 18, according to the dashboard.

Some students said they are playing it safe and keeping on the masks. A Google survey of 42 students and employees done the week of March 28 found that 22.2% of students said they did not feel safe around people not wearing masks.

Another 29.6% of the respondents said they will continue to wear a mask.

Junior Anthony Verde said he knows of several students who did not follow the mask protocol or practice social distancing.

“There’s certain classes where I know some students haven’t taken the proper precautions prior,” he said. “So, I’m a little hesitant not wearing a mask.”

As of April 4, CCSU has also ended testing for those not vaccinated. Some students said that they are uncomfortable with this.

“However, I am worried about Central getting rid of testing for non-

vaccinated students.” Verde said. “How do we find out if anyone is sick?”

CCSU is now running on the honor system, leaving it up to the students and faculty to decide whether to stay home if they are feeling sick.

“It’s a level of comfort for everyone,” Cintorino said. “We think that eventually we’ll get back to where we need to go and where we need to be. But it’s a process.”

From the same Google survey, 85.2% of students said they thought Central is doing a good job keeping students and faculty safe from COVID.

Sophomore Ryan Cunningham said he appreciated that the university for waiting until after spring break to assess the situation before lifting the mandate.

“I recognize CCSU’s assessment of our health and thank them for making our health a top priority by not rushing the lifting of the mandate,” he said.

On the other hand, some students said they wish masks had been optional sooner.

Senior Shannon Prevost said she was hoping for the mask mandate to be lifted months ago.

“I work with kindergarteners at an elementary school,” she said. “We’ve been maskless for three weeks so I’m honestly surprised Central took this long.”

Logan Zdun and Madeline Wilson contributed to this story.

Credits

This special project examining two years of the COVID-19 pandemic at Central Connecticut State University was produced by students in the CCSU Journalism Department. It was laid out by student Sophia Muce and edited by students Egypt Bell-Clayton, Jessica Bravo, Alexis Dascher, Ryan Davis, Sofia DiPiro, Elisabette Labonte, Dexter Lawson Jr., Christian Maldonado, Daijah Ogletree, Lucas Pauluk, Fallon Repeta, Jolise Reyes, Xavier Wellington, Madeline Wilson and Grace Woznicki.



Amanda Kenny anchoring CCSU News.

CCSU News