

Two-year colleges to not require vaccines

Argue it would put a burden on students hit hard by COVID

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Arguing that a vaccine mandate would create an unnecessary burden, the state's 15 community colleges on Wednesday announced they would not require their students to get COVID shots this fall to access the campus, bucking the trend in higher education.

An increasing number of colleges, particularly four-year institutions with dormitories, have said in recent weeks that students must be immunized against COVID-19 to take classes and live on campus during the next academic year.

Emerson College Wednesday was the latest Boston-area institution to require students to get the vaccine before coming to school this fall. Earlier this week, Bowdoin College announced that all students, faculty, and staff must provide proof of vaccination by mid-August. Colleges are making exceptions for medical or religious reasons.

But at community colleges, vaccination rates even for more common illnesses such as measles and chicken pox have traditionally been low. Now, community college presidents worry that requiring the COVID vaccine would deter students from enrolling in classes.

"Considerations for the fall semester continue to develop and are subject to change, but the community colleges are not contemplating COVID-19 vaccine mandates at this time," according to a statement from the Massachusetts Association of Community Colleges. "It is essential that we meet the needs of *all* of our students, who are often from the communities hit hardest by this pandemic and facing disproportionate access to the COVID-19 vaccine."

The association added that it's "more important than ever to prioritize equity, and creating additional barriers for our students would go against our critically important mission of open access for all."

Northern Essex Community College has been holding vaccine clinics and is encouraging students and employees to get immunized. But Lane Glenn, the college's president, said there are still many people in the Lawrence area who aren't vaccinated and that shouldn't stop them from earning a college de-

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gree.

Only 28 percent of residents in Lawrence have gotten the first dose of the vaccine and the share of Latinos, who make up a large part of the city, who have been vaccinated is slightly over 8 percent, according to state public health data.

Northern Essex will require masks and social distancing and has updated the ventilation systems to ensure the campus is safe, Glenn said.

The college has not decided yet whether it will require more COVID testing in the fall to contain the spread.

"It felt like a better move for our students, especially those who are sitting on the sidelines," Glenn said. "We anticipate a reasonably safe environment, and one where more students will be back to learn."

Community college enrollment has dropped dramatically during the pandemic, particularly among first-year Black and Latino students.

Four-year colleges are also trying to bring more of their students back to campus, and many have concluded that requiring vaccinations may be the best route. Colleges, including Boston, Brown, and Northeastern universities, have said that a vaccine mandate is needed to keep everybody safe and ensure a more traditional academic year with classes in-person and more campus events.

"Our plans to loosen current limitations on in-person activi-

ties for Fall 2021 are based on achieving a high level of immunity among students and employees," Christina Paxson, Brown's president, wrote in a recent letter to the campus community.

Paxson said the university's COVID-19 working group would provide a recommendation on June 1 on whether em-

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LANE GLENN *President of Northern Essex Community College*

ployees would have to be vaccinated. The Ivy League school said it's looking forward to a "greater return to normal," with a traditional two-semester model instead of the current "de-densified" three-semester program.

Still many colleges may avoid vaccine mandates this fall. Some governors in conservative states have already objected to requiring vaccines for access to business and colleges. Legal experts have also raised concerns about whether institu-

tions can require COVID vaccines when they haven't yet been fully approved by the US Food and Drug Administration. That approval could come this summer.

Massachusetts community colleges encouraged students and employees to get vaccinated. But they also acknowledged that they are in a slightly different situation than four-year institutions. Many community colleges have already said they intend to offer more online education, along with in-person classes, in the fall to better accommodate their students who are working adults and parents with busy schedules. So there may be fewer students on their campuses, potentially reducing the risk of spreading the virus.

Holyoke Community College President Christina Royal said the college will follow public health requirements.

"Since the beginning of the pandemic, we have followed health and safety guidelines established by the Centers for Disease Control and the state Dept. of Public Health, in consultation with our legal counsel, and we will continue to do so going forward," Royal said in a statement.

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