

“Cut the secrecy,” says Lehigh editorial, criticizing handling of virus precaution

The Bethlehem Gadfly coronavirus, Lehigh University October 13, 2020

 Latest in a series of posts on the coronavirus 

*How does a school expect its students to act responsibly, honestly and openly if they do not model that same behavior themselves?
Lehigh University Brown and White, October 7*

Gadfly reported a few posts back that at City Council a week ago the Mayor reported on what sounded like a high number of confirmed virus cases at Lehigh, doing so without context.

He said that the Health Bureau director would forward more information to Council the next day.

Here is that email to City Council.

From: KVenrich@bethlehem-pa.gov
Sent: Wednesday, October 7, 2020 8:40 AM
To: [REDACTED].com; [REDACTED].com; [REDACTED].com; [REDACTED].com; MColon@bethlehem-pa.gov; [REDACTED].com; JReynolds@bethlehem-pa.gov; RVidoni@bethlehem-pa.gov
Cc: RDonchez@bethlehem-pa.gov; WKarras@bethlehem-pa.gov
Subject: COVID-19 Update

Good Morning-

I would like to provide an update on the COVID-19 situation at Moravian College and Lehigh University. As of yesterday, Moravian College does not have any active COVID-19 cases. Lehigh University currently has 96 positive cases. A large number of these cases started in the various sports programs. Lehigh is conducting large scale surveillance testing events over the next few weeks. Yesterday was the first testing event and they will hold 6 subsequent testing clinics. Lehigh will randomly select and test approximately 600 on-campus and off-campus students at each future clinic. In addition, Lehigh is continuing to test symptomatic students and contacts to positive cases on a daily basis.

We are working closely with Lehigh University and are handling all investigations and contact tracing for students. The University is focused on testing and appropriately isolating and quarantining students. We have secured contact tracers from the Department of Health if we need additional resources to assist with our efforts. I do anticipate that these numbers will continue to increase as more students are tested which will have an impact on our overall incidence rate in Bethlehem.

Please let me know if you have any questions. Thank you.

There were 96 positive cases counted at Lehigh as of the writing of the above memo, 155 counted by last Friday, two days later.

(Note that Moravian is “clean.”)

The Bethlehem Health Director provides pertinent factual information to City Council, but Gadfly was also interested in commentary on what the impact of this outbreak (the dashboard seems not to have been updated on Monday) on Southside residents and businesses. It looks like Lehigh is a “hot spot” — should there not be some publication of that fact? But there was no comment on that.

Should the Health Department be more than a passive reporter in a situation like this?

Gadfly might expect — because of the outbreak — some commentary on the quality of Lehigh’s policies and procedures. Have they been operating properly during this pandemic? Are proper safety precautions being taken? Are there recommendations for changes in their practices? The Health Director is silent on that too.

Which is interesting because of this October 7 critical editorial in the student newspaper. The *B and W* points to serious deficiency in Lehigh practice and attitude.

Shouldn’t the Health Director be on this ?

Selections from “Editorial: Cut the secrecy.” Brown and White, October 7, 2020.

When it comes to testing, Lehigh’s administration has been taking a page out of the playbook of the White House.

During the first two weeks of the fall semester, Lehigh University administered thousands of COVID-19 tests to gauge the health of the campus community. Within those first two weeks, there were fewer than 15 positive cases, as indicated by the Lehigh COVID-19 dashboard.

After the first two weeks of surveillance testing, no more tests were administered on a routine basis. Students who felt sick were

administered a test from the Health and Wellness Center, and were sent on their way.

Six weeks later, throughout the last week of September and first of October, case numbers rose exponentially to 100, as of Oct. 7. The number of students in quarantine between on and off-campus is at 269.

During the week of the initial spike in cases, more students learned of possible exposure to positive cases and attempted to receive testing from the Health and Wellness Center, further spotlighting the struggle for students to gain access to a test. This forced students to find off-campus facilities to administer tests, some of which have turnaround times as long as seven days.

Indeed, the numbers don't lie: 40 of the 100 positive cases were reported to the university after having been identified through tests administered by locations unaffiliated with Lehigh.

While it is on both the student's and the administration's hands to emphasize the importance and practice of COVID-19 safe behaviors, it is a team effort that stems from the top. When the school no longer preaches the importance of testing and staying on case numbers, the apathetic mentality trickles down throughout the student body.

It feels as though after having relatively low numbers during the initial testing phase, Lehigh administrators wiped their hands, said "that's good enough," and left the student body to handle the risks of the pandemic on their own.

But that isn't what played out throughout September.

First of all, any plan to include further surveillance testing after the first two weeks of the semester was never communicated to students. So the argument of "we were always going to do more" is made in bad faith.

This increasing spike could've been mitigated by transparent and consistent communication. We have said this time and time again when it came to discussing reopening plans, which while frustrating, did not cause any imminent threat.

But this time, it does.

How does a school expect its students to act responsibly, honestly and openly if they do not model that same behavior themselves?

While we are frustrated with how the administration has handled the pandemic since our return to campus — and before — we understand that the responsibility also lies on us. There is a social contract that all students returning to Bethlehem signed, agreeing to take part in socially responsible behaviors amidst a very difficult time.

But at the end of the day, it shouldn't be the university's newspaper to serve as the only bridge between the administration and the student body.

The inability for the administration to hold themselves accountable during a time when its community is the most reliant on them it has ever been is disheartening to say the least.

Be open with us. Keep us informed. Let us know where the administration's head is at. It can only go to assist student and staff decision-making to make our campus healthier as a whole.