

OP-ED: NC State's reopening mess was avoidable  
Dror Baron, Guest Columnist

We all know how NC State's reopening plans started. "Everything will be fine," they told us. They planned to test people with symptoms and others identified through contact tracing. "Trust us, we have your backs."

NC State could have tested the entire campus population frequently. My alma mater, the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (UIUC), [developed their own-saliva based test](#); you just spit into a cup. They're testing their campus population [twice a week](#), and it reportedly costs \$10 per test. UIUC decided to lead, and last week performed 1.3% of COVID-19 tests in the U.S. However, NC State chose to follow the minimalist guidelines suggested by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).

Over the last several months, multiple researchers have suggested performing frequent testing of asymptomatic populations. The idea is simple: Test people every few days, catch those who are spreading the disease early on and quarantine them, thus reducing new infections. Paul Romer, an economist who received the 2018 Nobel Memorial Prize, [has called for national testing of school kids](#). He explains that keeping kids safe lets parents work more effectively, thus helping the economy. [Michael Mina](#), an epidemiology professor at Harvard, and [Darius Lakdawalla](#) of the University of Southern California, have similar suggestions.

You might be astounded by this idea. Test most of the population multiple times a week? Isn't testing very expensive? Yes and no.

On the one hand, the U.S. federal government compensates labs handsomely for COVID-19 tests; [\\$100 per test is typical](#). However, labs' costs are lower. I've been working on high-capacity testing since February. Results have been presented to multiple audiences, and I've interviewed for [Nature](#), [IEEE Spectrum](#) and Technician in a piece [written by Kathryn Ellis](#). When testing symptomatic people, typically 10-20% are infected, and we can test 500 people using 200-300 tests. For asymptomatics being screened regularly, few are infected, our gains improve, and we can test 10,000 people using a few hundred tests.

We told NC State administrators about this in April. They could have tested the entire university population twice a week for under \$100,000. Our administrators and coaches are well paid; this was a question of prioritization and decisiveness.

Instead, NC State decided that there was no need to consider new ideas, and that following the CDC was sufficient. If anything happens, blame the students for partying. The UNC System knows best; NC State knows best.

In fairness, we don't know whether NC State's administrators were the real decision-makers, or merely implementing the UNC System's decisions. Let's think this through. If NC State's team

called the shots, then we can sympathize that they had to make tough calls. At the same time, we can criticize their lack of caution in choosing to reopen the university during the pandemic. Some students feel that they haphazardly chose to reopen just for money. The university claims that it has been taking the pandemic very seriously, yet ignored various constructive suggestions, including high-capacity testing.

What if NC State's reopening team was merely implementing the UNC System's decisions? If so, did NC State's reopening team feel that the plans were reckless, yet went along? Why didn't they speak up? Where is their personal accountability?

And did they pretend that students won't attend parties? Or maybe this truly was about money, and they planned to blame students all along. Let's face it, they should have known better than to give students the opportunity to let this happen. For these reasons, [Technician and other student papers have called for administrators to resign](#).

NC State could have led the pandemic response. They could have innovated. They could have made us proud. Instead, they followed the CDC's minimalist guidelines, and blamed students when things went wrong. Do we expect a major university to follow, or to lead?

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