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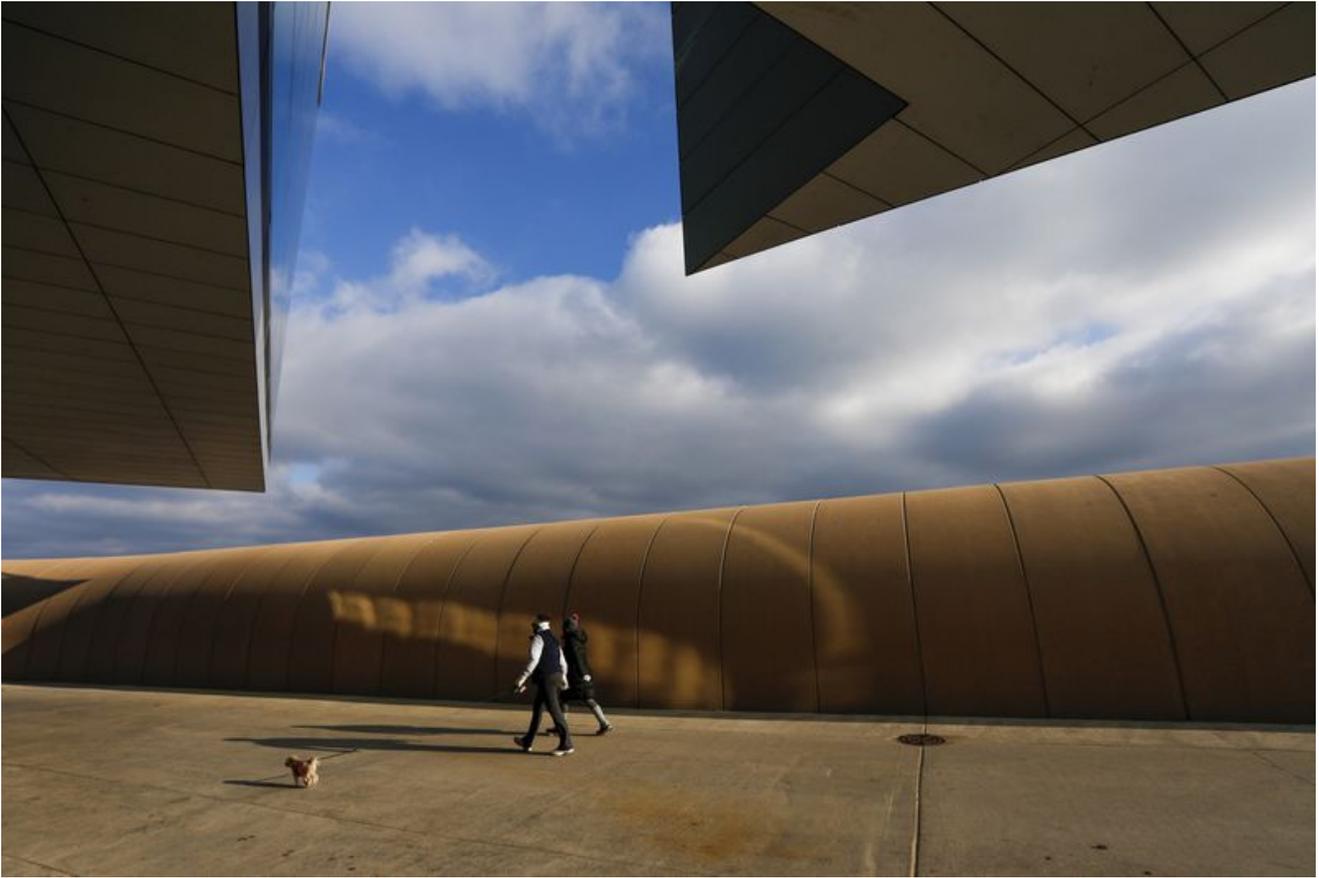
COMMENTARY OPINION

Op-ed: Require COVID vaccine for all Illinois public college students

By SHELDON JACOBSON AND JANET JOKELA
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FEEDBACK



People walk along a lakefront wall near Northwestern University's Ryan Fieldhouse and Walter Athletics Center, Nov. 13, 2020. Northwestern University announced this week that students will be required to have the COVID-19 vaccine next academic year. (Jose M. Osorio / Chicago Tribune)

Gov. J.B. Pritzker **has toyed with the idea** of mandating that all college students at state schools be vaccinated prior to their return to campus in the fall. Although elected officials often veer into areas that are outside their purview, in this case, a statewide requirement makes good public health sense.

FEEDBACK

There is ample precedent for mandating college student vaccination. Colleges routinely ask their students to provide proof of immunization against mumps, measles and many other infectious diseases. The purpose of such widespread immunization is to reduce the risk of outbreaks on campuses, where students congregate in close quarters, creating fertile environments for disease outbreaks. Adding the coronavirus vaccine to this list would take little effort, given the ample vaccine supply currently available.



Over 300 colleges have now mandated student vaccination, with many also including staff and faculty in this requirement. The split between public and private school is even, with private institutions such as **Northwestern University**, MIT and several Ivy League schools included, and many large public schools on board, including the University of Maryland and University of California at Berkeley.

No college would subject their students to unnecessary and inappropriate personal risks, nor accept the liability that comes with such mandates, without carefully weighing all the issues. Given that college COVID-19 vaccine mandates now cover several hundreds of thousands of students, and are expanding each day, Illinois state colleges would be joining a growing list of institutions whose decision provides sage evidence that there are benefits in such a mandate that far outweigh risks.

Personal coronavirus health risk to students is exceedingly small. However, college students on campuses represent an active vector of virus transmission, with the **18-29 age group having the highest fraction of their group infected in the population**. The goal for the nation is herd immunity, though the likelihood of this occurring in the near future is remote. Without college students vaccinated, herd immunity becomes even less likely.

Many college towns in Illinois, such as Urbana-Champaign, Charleston, Carbondale and Macomb, have a sufficiently large student population relative to their community's population that an outbreak on campus could impact local residents. Moreover, an outbreak among local residents would effortlessly seep onto campus. Achieving **clique immunity** within such a community depends on all residents, locals and students, to step up and bring the immunization rate to the highest possible level, ideally 80% or above. Without widespread student immunization, such a target is not possible.

FEEDBACK

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has addressed **vaccine safety** concerns head-on, by creating transparency in communicating their findings. Anxiety that the vaccines have only been approved under emergency use authorization are being allayed by the **more than 250 million** doses already administered in the U.S., with high effectiveness achieved and few adverse side effects. Moreover, both Pfizer and Moderna are in the process of **seeking full FDA approval** for their vaccines. Given that such approval may occur prior to the

beginning of the fall semester, proactively requiring students to be vaccinated today would smooth out the surge in demand in August.

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Ideally, college leadership will step up and mandate that all students be vaccinated prior to their return to campus in August. Without such actions, the governor can fill this void by either imposing a vaccine mandate as a direct requirement, or indirectly, making some portion of state appropriations be dependent on college leadership taking such steps or provide additional appropriations for those colleges that do.

Whether the governor imposes such a mandate, or college leadership takes such actions, asking college students at Illinois state schools to be vaccinated would be reasonable and justified as the state and our nation emerge from the grip of the COVID-19 pandemic.

FEEDBACK

Who will make the first move?

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