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WKU won't require vaccine for returning students, will cease offering vaccine on campus

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Students returning to Western Kentucky University this fall are "strongly encouraged" to get the coronavirus vaccine, but they will not be required to get it to return for classes, WKU spokesman Bob Skipper told the Daily News on Monday.

The decision comes as the university gears up for fall 2021 classes, with registration already underway, WKU Provost Cheryl Stevens recently noted in a message to campus. Stevens also noted that, although most classes will be taught in-person, about 20% will be delivered via online or hybrid formats.

"In fall 2021, 79.3% of courses are being offered face-to-face, 2.5% are hybrid, and 18.2% are online. For comparison, in fall 2019, 82.4% were face-to-face, 1.4% were hybrid, and 16.2% were online," Stevens wrote.

Even as the university prepares to return to some semblance of normalcy in the fall, Stevens wrote: "We continue to monitor the COVID-19 infection rate and follow the guidance provided by public health officials.

"If you have not done so already, please schedule an appointment to get a vaccine and encourage your students to do so as well," she wrote to faculty.

Colleges across the country are grappling with how far they should push students to get vaccinated, including whether they should, or even can, legally require it, the Associated Press reported. Universities including Rutgers, Brown, Cornell and Northeastern recently told students they must get vaccinated before returning for classes in the fall, hoping to achieve herd immunity and loosen restrictions on their campuses, the AP reported.

Others, though, contend they can't legally require their students to get vaccinated, namely because the Food and Drug Administration has only approved the vaccines' emergency use and hasn't granted its full approval.

According to the Associated Press, Northeastern and other colleges requiring shots believe they're on solid legal ground. It's not unusual for colleges to require students to be vaccinated for different types of diseases. However, legal scholars say the COVID-19 vaccines' emergency use status moves the issue to a legal gray area that's likely to be challenged in court. Some colleges may take a more cautious approach to avoid litigation.

Asked why the university settled on not mandating vaccination, Skipper wrote in an email to the Daily News that "Since the vaccines are available through the FDA's

emergency use authorization, we feel it is prudent to strongly recommend the vaccinations, but not require them."

In other news, Skipper wrote that the university would cease offering vaccines on campus.

"Given the availability of appointments in the community, and that the waiting period for the second shot of the Pfizer vaccine falls past the end of the spring semester, we have elected to cease offering vaccinations on campus for now," Skipper wrote.

Between 900 and 1,000 students have been vaccinated on campus, Skipper wrote, though the university does not have data about how many students have received the vaccine off-campus.

WKU has not surveyed its students about whether they're hesitant to get the vaccine, Skipper wrote.

"WKU has fared well during the pandemic and much of that can be attributed to compliance with our Healthy on the Hill guidelines and our aggressive case management. We have not seen the spikes that have been reported elsewhere. We continue to revise that guidance to remain compliant with the CDC and health department," Skipper wrote.

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