THE CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

COMMUNITY RELATIONS

By Jack Stripling

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Gary Herzig was stunned.

It was March 2020, and the State University of New York's campus in Oneonta, where Herzig is mayor, had responded to the Covid-19 pandemic by abruptly shifting to remote learning while students were on spring break. Some students were expected to return to dorms or off-campus housing, and Herzig argued

that they needed to be told about bans on gatherings and other Covid-related protocols.

The Trends Report 2021

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But Herzig and like-minded city officials were getting nowhere. Hal Legg, the campus's top communications official, had told them he feared that sending a message to students would "add fuel to the fire," according to emails among city officials. Herzig elevated the issue to Barbara Jean Morris, who was then the campus's president.

"I have observed groups of students in backyards today playing beer pong seemingly unaware that life has changed," Herzig wrote to Morris on March 20.

"This is serious," Herzig wrote. "We are all sacrificing and isolating. Our students need to be told to do so as well."

"Please," he added, "— why resistance to sending a message?"

This would not be the last time Herzig and Oneonta's president disagreed on how to handle the volatile mix of 20-somethings partying in Oneonta and a deadly virus, setting the stage for a disastrous fall semester that revealed fractures in an essential relationship between the campus and the city.

Tucked in the foothills of the Catskill Mountains, Oneonta is a town of about 14,000 people, half of whom are students at either the SUNY campus or Hartwick College. As in so many college towns, peace in Oneonta rests on subtle truces between year-round residents and students. Covid-19 is putting those fragile compacts to a new and tougher test. This test comes at a critical moment, when the safety and long-term prosperity of both colleges and the towns they call home are acutely dependent on strong partnerships between local officials and campus leaders.

In the fall, Oneonta residents braced for the reality that a few partying college students could become viral superspreaders. Their trepidations proved to be warranted. The weekend before classes began, house parties popped up across town, spawning an outbreak that forced the campus days later to move instruction online for the duration of the semester. The fallout was significant, bringing SUNY-Oneonta national notoriety as an example of a failed reopening, straining relationships with local leaders and ending Morris's presidency.

Notable as SUNY-Oneonta's case may have been, the crisis can be traced in part to a very common problem in higher education: The campus's relationship with the community was not as strong as it needed to be, allowing tensions to fester over who was responsible for off-campus students at the intersection of town and gown.

Confronting the pandemic requires a level of coordination between civic officials and college leaders on multiple fronts. Enforcement, public messaging, transportation, and Covid testing are joint challenges for municipal and campus leaders who must set aside their differences to navigate an enduring crisis unlike any they have encountered before.

Nationally, the conversation around Covid is shifting from how colleges can make their campuses safe to how they can protect their surrounding communities, too. The University of California at Davis, for example, has taken a particularly expansive view, offering free coronavirus testing and other resources to tens of thousands of people who live in Davis or work in town, irrespective of whether they're affiliated with the university.

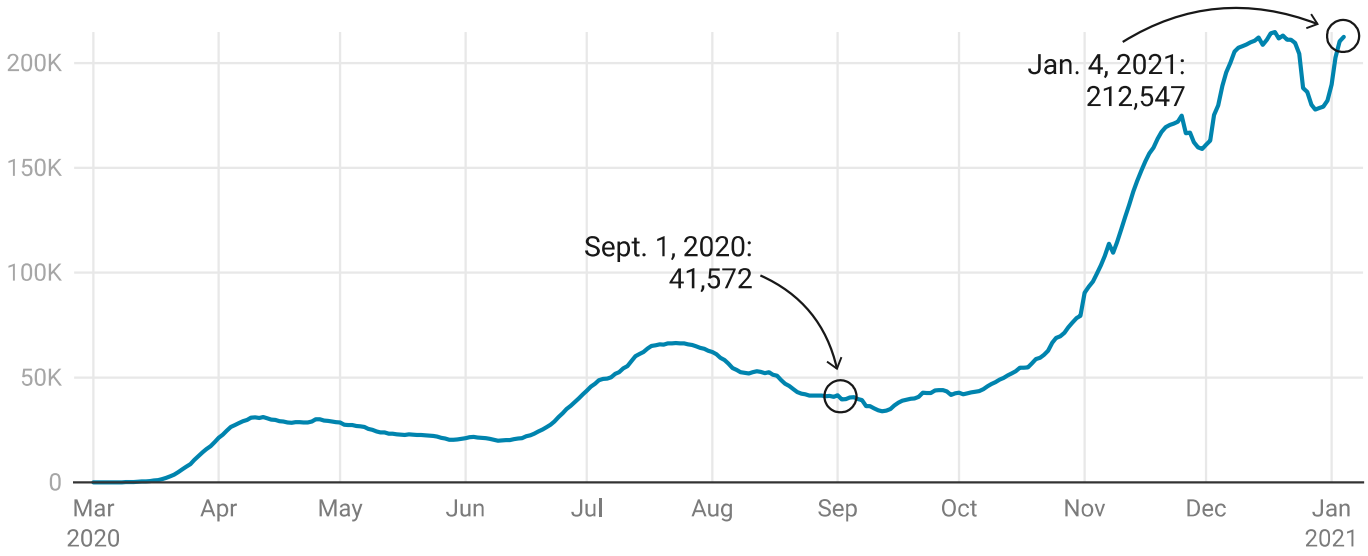
Davis's approach has a hefty price tag, but other colleges are making less costly changes. The University of Colorado at Boulder, for example, has updated its student conduct code to include public-health orders, requiring students to follow them whether they are on or off campus. Last semester, the SUNY-Oswego campus helped

its local mayor establish testing for the city's essential workers, including police officers and firefighters.

The alternative to stronger collaboration, as Oneonta found out, isn't pretty. What happened there, as related through public documents, as well as interviews with local officials, professors, students, and administrators, is a cautionary tale for college leaders who will have to navigate newly fraught dynamics in their communities.

New Cases of Covid-19, Fall 2020 vs. Spring 2021

The seven-day average of new Covid-19 cases reported nationwide has increased alarmingly since the fall, when students traveled back to many college campuses.

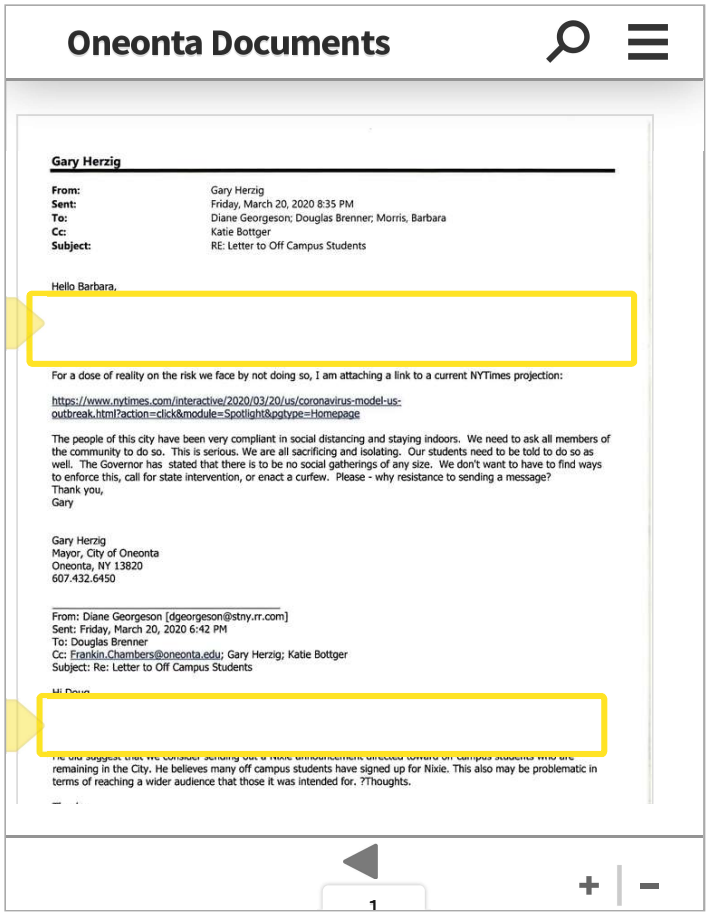


Source: The Covid Tracking Project • Get the data • Created with Datawrapper

Hints of friction between the mayor and campus president, which had been visible in the spring, came more clearly into focus by August, as SUNY-Oneonta prepared to resume in-person instruction. Herzig again approached Morris, the president, about sending a Covid-related message to students — this time, from him — and again she rejected him.

Singling out the students, rather than the whole community, Morris said in an email, risked "perpetuating an us vs. them mentality."

Morris declined an interview request.



The email exchange is among 55 pages of communications related to Covid-19 that the City of Oneonta provided to *The Chronicle* in response to a public-records request. *The Chronicle,* in early December, filed a similar request with SUNY-Oneonta, but the university has yet to provide any responsive documents.

What can be discerned from even this limited batch of emails are critical moments in which the city and the campus either outright disagreed on matters of tone and strategy or simply appeared to talk past each other. Ideally, according to one expert, mayors and college presidents would issue joint messages about the pandemic.

“That’s half the battle, right?” says Stephen M. Gavazzi, a professor of human development and family science at Ohio State University, who consults with colleges on community relations. “If you’re issuing joint messages, that means that you’re talking.”

Collaboration has always been desirable, Gavazzi says, but the pandemic has made it mandatory. “If they weren’t doing this kind of work before, they had better do this work now.”

For all of his concerns, Herzig needed the students back. The City of Oneonta, which has a $15-million annual budget, stood to lose about $2 million a semester if the campus were shut down in the fall and spring. Economically speaking, an Oneonta without SUNY doesn’t work.

At the same time, the campus’s testing plan for its 6,000 returning students struck many in Oneonta as flawed. Unlike Hartwick, SUNY-Oneonta did not require returning students to present evidence of a recent negative Covid-19 test or to be tested upon arrival. The campus, which had the capacity to test only 12 to 14 students a day, had planned to test wastewater to spot outbreaks in residence halls.

Gina L. Keel, a political-science professor at Oneonta, says the decision not to test students “seemed crazy and seemed to be driven by money.

“That was a fatal decision,” she says. “I thought it was negligent, frankly.”

SUNY-Oneonta has taken a lot of criticism for its testing plan, but it was hardly alone in its approach. All of SUNY’s 64 campuses resumed some form of in-person instruction in the fall, and only six required testing upon arrival or shortly before, says Holly Liapis, a SUNY spokeswoman.

SUNY’s central office approved Oneonta’s plan, and it didn’t initially mandate that any campuses test students.

“I’m also one to point the finger at the SUNY system and their approval of a plan that wasn’t much of a plan,” Keel says. “Why are 64 campuses figuring out how to track and control with not much ‘systemness’?”

In response to this critique, Liapis said in an email to *The Chronicle:* "Any plan is only as good as its implementation, and this is when you need leaders who can review the evidence in front of them, engage key stakeholders, and take swift action when problems arise. Some similar plans on other campuses did not have the same result as at SUNY-Oneonta."

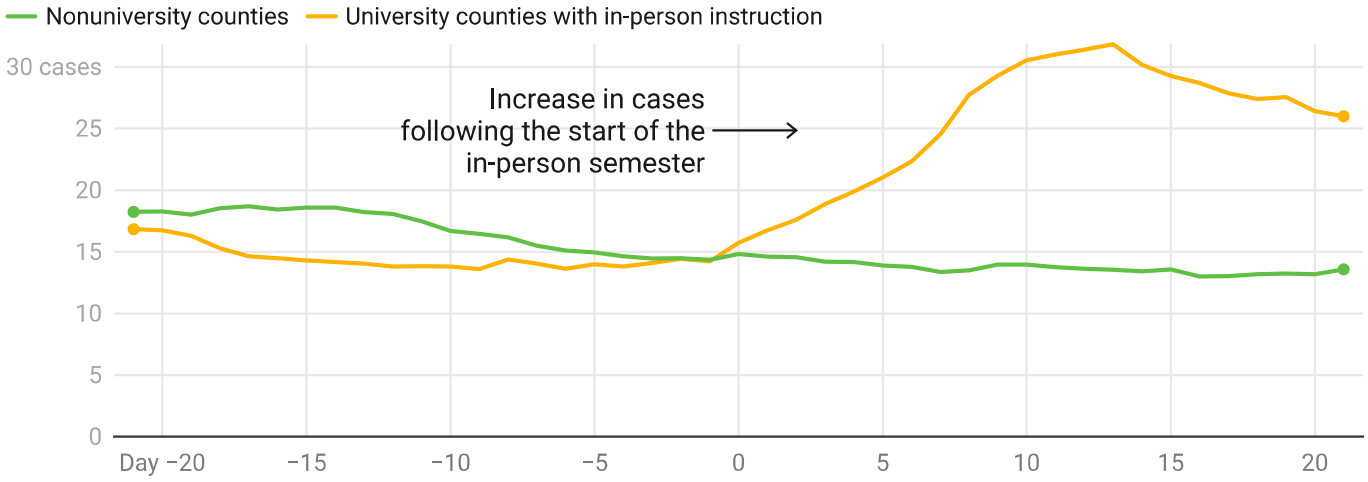
In total, five SUNY campuses paused in-person instruction for a period of time during the fall due to Covid, but only SUNY-Oneonta sent students home, Liapis confirmed.

Diane M. Georgeson, Oneonta's city health officer, says she does not fault the campus for its lack of testing early on, which was about resources and availability.

"They tried as best they could," she says. "Trust me, they really tried."

Campuses' Impact on Their Communities

The seven-day average of Covid-19 cases per 100,000 residents initially spiked where large universities reopened but dropped in similar counties that did not contain large colleges.



Source: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention • Get the data • Created with Datawrapper

SUNY-Oneonta's approach to testing revealed a deeper philosophical disagreement between city and college leaders about who was responsible for students living off campus. Even as the college ramped up testing to manage the outbreak, Morris, the president, stuck to the position that she did not have the

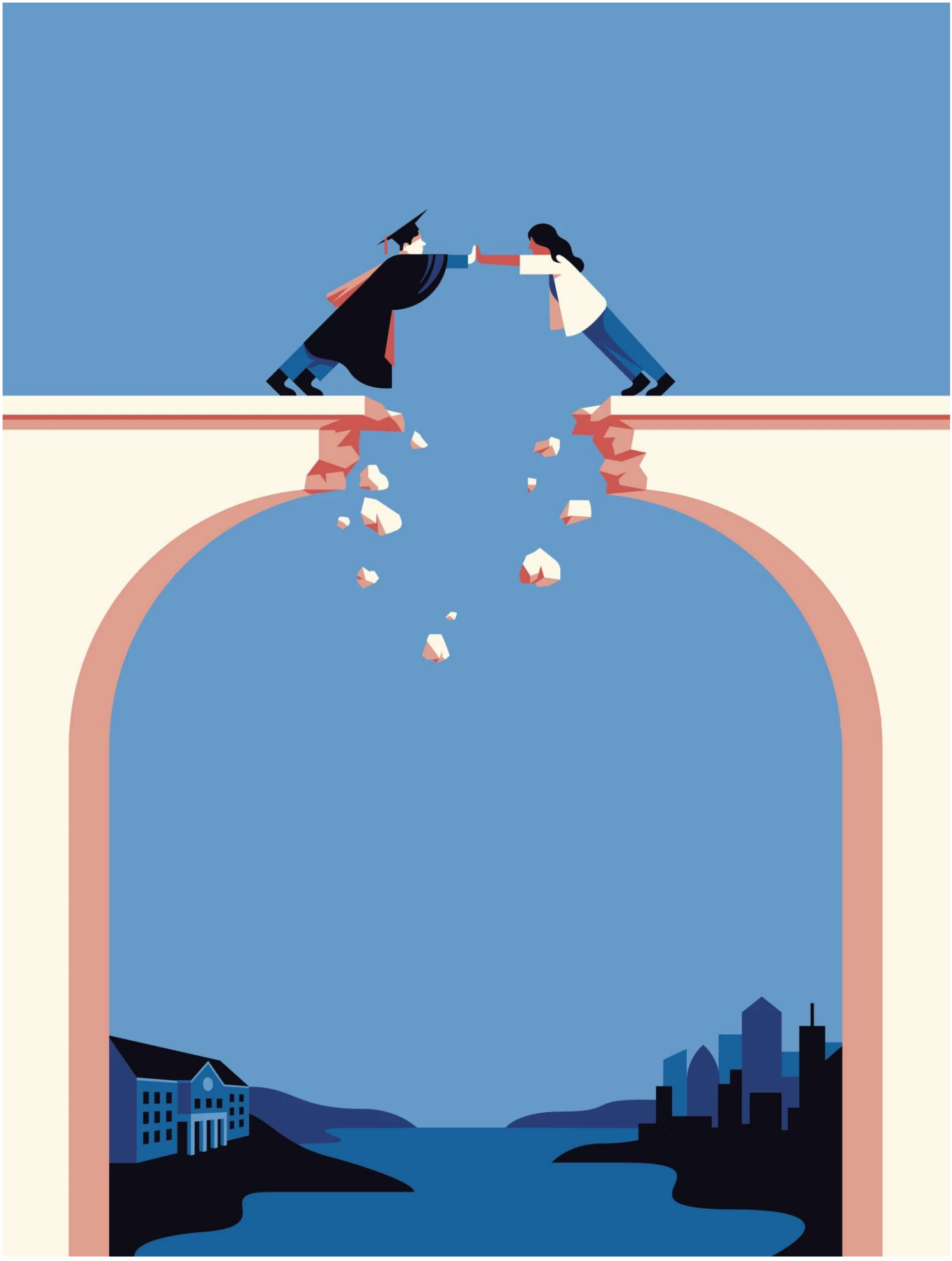
authority to mandate testing for off-campus students who did not use campus facilities. (SUNY's legal office does not share this view, Liapis said).

"What I would be critical of," Georgeson says, "was the campus administration's attitude that the off-campus students weren't necessarily their problem or their responsibility."

City officials were concerned about what they saw as a very likely scenario: Throngs of unsupervised students living and partying in the city, who were effectively the city's problem. The local police force, just 25 strong, was no match for the thousands who might descend on downtown bars or house parties. And help wasn't coming.

Herzig had pleaded with Morris to deploy the campus police force, which has 11 officers, to assist local law enforcement. She wouldn't do it, saying she was hemmed in by jurisdiction.

"We are limited in how, when, and where we can assist other jurisdictions. We are not simply denying requests from the city," she wrote in an email to the mayor on August 6.



HARRY HAYSOM FOR THE CHRONICLE

The debate over policing revealed another crucial difference in how the city and the campus viewed the pandemic. From a legal standpoint, Herzig saw Covid-19 as an "emergency," which would allow the Oneonta Police Department and the campus police to work together as prescribed by a memorandum of understanding. SUNY-Oneonta's response suggested its leaders viewed the threat differently.

"I understand that they can certainly decline our OPD's request in this case as they do not see the current pandemic threat as an emergency," Herzig wrote to Morris. "In talking with both attorneys, mayors and other SUNY presidents, I find that this is more a cultural issue than a legal issue. There are UPDs that provide much off-campus assistance for policing their students while others refuse to do so."

Hoping to stem the tide of students pouring into downtown, the city decided to limit local bus service from the campus, cutting it off at 6 p.m. The mayor did not have the authority to close bars — that would have to come from the governor, he said — but he could make it harder for students to get to them.

This, too, caused friction with the university. The Student Association began exploring alternative nighttime transportation options, a move that Bill Harcleroad, director of campus activities and leadership, defended as necessary to facilitate shopping — not barhopping.

"This all could have been avoided," Harcleroad wrote in an email to the mayor and other city officials, on August 20, "if the City of Oneonta would just have asked instead of trying to play various campus folks off each other and stoking/reflecting fears of the students."

Students, he added, "know where they feel welcome and where they don't. This whole process just reinforces their perception that they are not considered to be Oneantans

but outsiders."

Harcleroad declined an interview request.

By this point, students were already moving into residence halls. The relationship between the city and the campus was on the cusp of a much bigger test.

On August 22, the Saturday before classes were set to resume, the mayor's fears came to fruition. Student revelers blanketed the city, overwhelming the local police and, as it turned out, spreading Covid-19.

Reports from sergeants on duty, which Herzig shared with Morris, painted a frightening picture: An "ABSOLUTE EXPLOSION of house parties" throughout the city with "hundreds or even thousands" of students, none of them wearing masks.

"A quick and easy solution to that would be to increase arrests for such parties," a sergeant reported, "however, we simply *cannot* keep up."

"The students are not heeding the warnings," another dispatch said, "and it seems that going away to college is more their 'escape from Covid.'"

On August 25, a day after classes began, SUNY-Oneonta reported its first two positive cases. Georgeson, the city health officer, pressed campus leaders for more information about testing off-campus students, expressing frustration that responses weren't coming.

"I feel this was not an unreasonable request," Georgeson wrote in an email on August 27 to Colleen Brannan, chief of staff at SUNY-Oneonta. "I am disappointed," she added, "that I have received no information from you."

All the while, partying continued. The local police relayed the names of offenders to university officials, who promised to adjudicate swiftly. Suspensions were rare: just five students after the first weekend and three campus organizations. Warnings, which were the most common sanction, were issued to 168 students, according to data provided to *The Chronicle* by the campus.

On August 30, Jim Malatras, who had been appointed chancellor of the SUNY system days earlier, directed Oneonta to shift for two weeks to online-only instruction, citing 105 confirmed Covid cases, or 3 percent of the campus population. Assisted by a team from SUNY Upstate Medical University, Oneonta escalated testing for students. Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo said he would deploy a "SWAT team" to test local residents.

Speaking from a podium on a campus lawn, Malatras said, "Today is a difficult day for SUNY-Oneonta, but hopefully it serves as a wake-up call that Covid-19 is not done yet, that it can rear its ugly head and it can rear its ugly head quickly."

The chancellor was flanked by a few officials, masked at a distance. The mayor stood on one side; the president on the other.

The situation was swiftly deteriorating by the next day, as members of the "Control Room" gathered, their faces appearing in rows of boxes on a Zoom screen.

Designed by the mayor as a space for college leaders, city officials, and students to share information, the group convened on August 31 for what turned out to be a gloomy proceeding. Oneonta's president acknowledged that Covid was "coming on fast and hard," citing more than 200 positive cases — double what had been identified the day before.

By the next day, as more test results came in, Morris said she expected to see "a very big number."

University officials had traced the outbreak to an off-campus party, thrown by three athletic teams the weekend before classes started.

The mayor, presiding over the meeting, gave the floor to Margaret L. Drugovich, who had been Hartwick's president for 12 years. Drugovich emphasized the college's strict conduct code and early testing as vital to its strategy. In Oneonta, Drugovich had come to be seen as something of a foil to Morris, a president of two years who some saw as reluctant to play the heavy.

On the advice of the Otsego County Health Department, Drugovich said, Hartwick College had directed its students "to refrain from contact with members of the SUNY-Oneonta community."

Hartwick was walling itself off from a population presumed to be riddled with infection. If Oneonta students came onto the Hartwick campus, as they sometimes had at the invitation of Hartwick students, they were issued trespassing citations, Drugovich later told *The Chronicle*.

Hartwick, though, had the luxury of retreating into its own borders in a way that SUNY-Oneonta could not. Not only is Hartwick's typical enrollment of about 1,200 much smaller, but about 87 percent of the college's students live on campus, Drugovich said. The only exceptions are students in Greek housing and local commuters.

Locking down SUNY-Oneonta would have been like playing Whac-A-Mole across the city. Not that the campus even knew where to look. When city officials, in several email exchanges, pressed Morris for information about the off-campus population, the president told them she did not know where students lived locally or how many there were in the area.

"I think the best way to gauge this information is to ask landlords regarding housing capacity and vacancy rates," Morris wrote in one email.

Over the course of the semester, Hartwick had 73 positive Covid-19 cases, and never had more than 31 at a given time, Drugovich said.

"The one conclusion that fits the evidence: Her draconian measures worked," says Ronald E. Bishop, vice president for academics with Oneonta's chapter of United University Professions, a union that represents faculty and professional staff members.

As members of the Control Room deliberated, students back on the Oneonta campus were recording on social media what resembled life in a science-fiction film. Video on Twitter showed students who had tested positive for Covid-19 being escorted from the dorms in the dark of night by someone in a hazmat suit.

On September 3, three days after the Control Room meeting, the chancellor announced that the campus would move online for the rest of the semester, citing nearly 400 cases.

"Do you see the issue here?" the officer asked.

It was September 4, the night after Oneonta had moved online for good, and the local police were responding to a noise complaint at an off-campus student rental property.

By college standards, this wasn't a rager. Even so, there was plenty of evidence by now of what this group of 15 or so unmasked students, packed into a garage, and yelling over music that was loud enough to hear from the street, could do. One of the hosts, though, said he still didn't get it.

"Can you explain the issue to me?" he asked the officer.

A body-camera recording of the incident, which the city provided to *The Chronicle* in response to a public-records request, illustrates the frustrations that both local law enforcement and students experienced during the crisis.

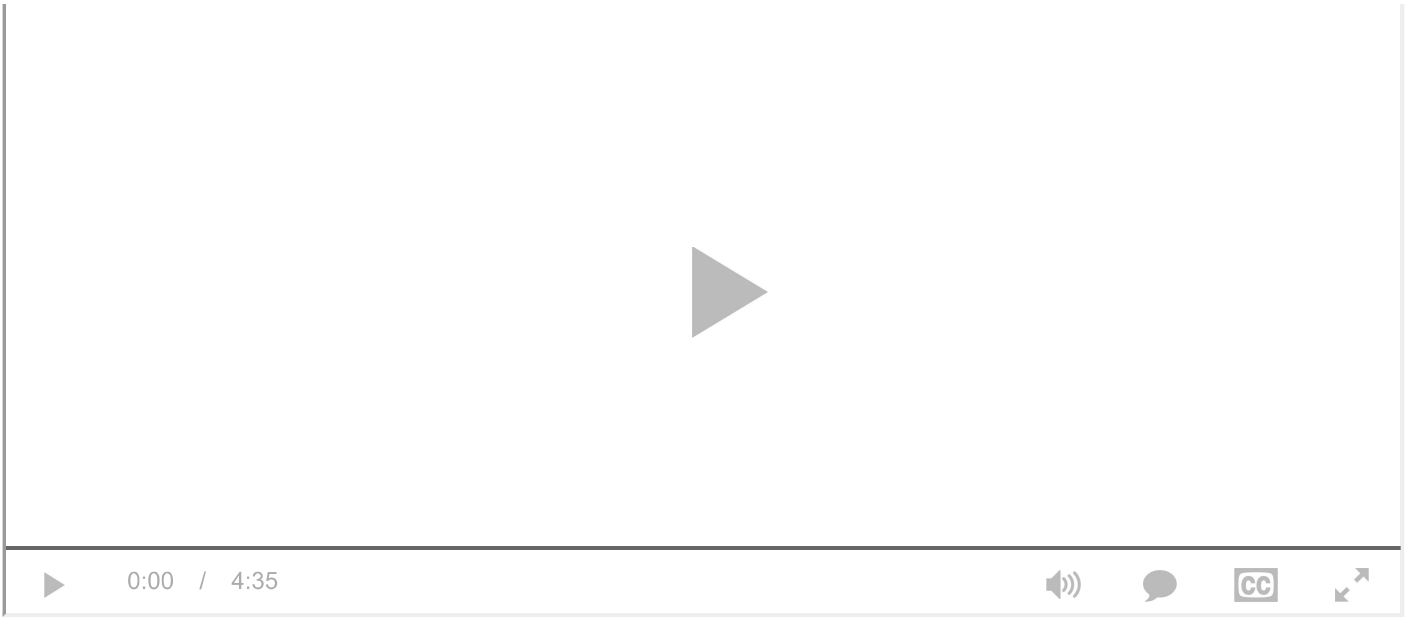
Some of the students who had tested negative for Covid told the police that they assumed they could now congregate. The police officers, in turn, were left to explain the finer points of Covid protocols, assuming the students had all signed conduct codes that they had chosen to ignore.

Here's how that played out.

Student: "No, I didn't sign any waiver."
Officer: "Well, you're lying then."
Student: "I'm not lying."
Officer: "You are."
Student: "I promise you, I did not sign a single thing, and I go to this school."
Second Officer: "I'm not going to debate it with you."

The student wasn't lying, and the officers weren't wrong. State guidelines would not have blessed the gathering, but the student had not "signed" anything. Students were provided, but not required to sign, an "Actions for Safety Plan," which contained 16 bullet points directing students to follow state and local guidance on masking and social distancing. It said nothing of what would happen if students didn't comply.

"It was not as clear and specific as I think it should have been," Herzig, the mayor, says.



CITY OF ONEONTA

Responding to a noise complaint on September 4, officers with the Oneonta Police Department try to enforce Covid-19 protocols at a gathering of SUNY students. *The Chronicle* is shielding the identity of the unmasked student because it is not relevant to our news coverage.

As the police cited the students for noise violations that night, interactions steadily devolved. One student mocked an officer for not having attended college. (The officer said he had served in the military.) Twice, a student joked that an officer's flashlight resembled a "dildo."

At one point during their protracted dialogue, an officer stated, "You guys aren't the only people that live in this town."

That same night, a photo began circulating on social media that would become the defining image of SUNY-Oneonta's semester-gone-wrong: a group of students partying in a quarantine dorm, mugging for the camera and appearing to be having the time of their lives.

Malatras, the chancellor, told *The New York Times* that his "blood boiled" when he saw it. Three weeks later, he introduced a "uniform sanctions policy," standardizing punishments for violations related to Covid-19.

Then, on October 15, Malatras announced that Dennis Craig, who had been interim president of the Purchase campus, would take the reins as acting president of Oneonta. Buried deep in a news release about the appointment was an acknowledgment that Morris had "transitioned from her position as president to pursue other opportunities."

Morris has a "six-month engagement" with the SUNY system, Liapis, the SUNY spokeswoman, said in an email to *The Chronicle*. In this role, the former president will work on the "general education framework to empower students to meet the changing demands of a 21st century," Liapis said.

Morris's departure was a standard crisis response, signaling a new start. But it did not land that way for a lot of people on the campus. Had Oneonta really grappled with what went wrong? Had the SUNY system accepted any responsibility for its role? Emma M. Sarnacki has her doubts.

"SUNY-Oneonta was a convenient scapegoat as a campus, and she was a convenient scapegoat as a person," says Sarnacki, a graduate student in museum studies. "The vengeful part of human nature wants to see that person gone, and when there's new leadership people tend to assume everything has changed and we can move on."

Sarnacki, who advocated unsuccessfully in the fall for a better system to report Covid-related violations, says she has found the administration more collaborative in recent months.

"Even though I'm disappointed that the failures placed an enormous strain on the community," she says, "I'm looking forward to the opportunities of the improved relationship going forward."

he official narrative of what happened at SUNY-Oneonta is laid out in a 31-page "Retrospective on Fall 2020" that leads off each section with "What Worked Well."

There are also “Lessons Learned.”

The document is generally lacking in specificity about how the outbreak actually happened, what the tensions were between city and university officials, or who made which decisions. It is a master class in “strategic ambiguity,” says Kristen C. Blinne, an associate professor of communication studies.

“It reads like it went through a legal team and was sanitized for public consumption,” Blinne says.

Some professors believe that an unvarnished draft of the retrospective, composed by a committee that included faculty members, was more candid than the final product. *The Chronicle* filed a public-records request for the draft, but the campus withheld the document, citing an exemption in state law for records that are not “final agency policy or determinations.”

Still, changes have been made that speak directly to problems that came to the fore between the city and the campus. Craig, the new acting president, has created a cabinet-level position: The vice president for external affairs will serve as a liaison with the city and students who live off campus.

In another change, the campus police chief will report directly to Craig. Unlike in the fall, he says, the campus force will assist the local police as needed.

Craig says he does not want to “Monday morning quarterback” his predecessor’s approach. That said, Craig emphasizes the importance of “high-touch types of interactions” with city officials that, he hopes, “soften the environment overall.”

“All of these people have my direct contact information,” Craig says of the mayor and others. “They’ve got my mobile number — after hours. These are ways to build a

rapport and trust so that we're serving our institutions well in both good times and in bad times."

As Craig sees it, his job is "getting people to move forward beyond the hurt, beyond the fear."

Students are now required to sign a "Statement of Shared Responsibility" that includes a behavior pledge and states that noncompliance could result in sanctions. The spring plan requires that students living in the Oneonta area provide local addresses, and each week 10 percent of those students will be selected for randomized surveillance testing. (Students on campus will be tested weekly).

Sustained communication and collaboration with the local community is crucial, says Amanda L. Finch, associate vice president for student development.

"It's not something that we can just establish and then walk away from."

There is still a chasm, though, between the upbeat narrative coming out of the SUNY-Oneonta administration and faculty members who remain skeptical. More than 700 people have signed a petition opposing what some professors see as an implicit mandate to return to in-person instruction. The campus says it is offering 20 percent of courses in-person this spring, up from 3 percent in the fall.

There is a sense in Oneonta that the campus and the city have just one more chance to get it right. Thus far, the mayor likes the changes he sees. Finding a way to work together isn't an option, Herzig says. The stakes are too high.

"It takes us all down — the college, the broader community, our business community," he says. "We all succeed together or fail together on this."

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