

POWER IMBALANCE IN COVID-19 ENFORCEMENT

Students threatened with expulsion.
Employees? A slap on the wrist.

BY CATHERINE ALLEN
AND HARRISON KIRK

Biological sciences professor Pat Fidopiastis says he never wears a mask “unless required to do so.” Consequently, he’s sometimes been unmasked while moving between multiple labs on campus or while talking to students.

“I’m like a four-year-old in a Sunday suit,” Fidopiastis said. “I just don’t like masks, I don’t like confining—I feel claustrophobic.”

Fidopiastis leads the university’s COVID-19 wastewater testing lab and teaches courses on microbiology and infectious diseases. He said he occasionally discusses his views with President Jeffrey Armstrong — views that include deeming masks ineffective and characterizing Dr. Anthony Fauci’s pandemic response as a politically-motivated “fear campaign.” When discussing the university’s COVID-19 response plans with Armstrong, Fidopiastis said he sometimes acts as the “counter perspective.”

For “too many students” in his classes this year, Fidopiastis’ rhetoric seemed “offensive,” and his discomfort with masks meant they “didn’t feel safe” for weeks, according to interviews with students and others with close knowledge of the class. All asked to remain anonymous in this story for fear of retaliation.

When university staff don’t abide by — or even believe in — the COVID-19 safety protocols they’re tasked with enforcing, it’s left students feeling powerless.

Students failing to comply with protocols for physical distancing, face coverings, and local ordinances related to gatherings can face disciplinary measures of varying intensity — from losing access to online educational resources to expulsion. Student’s are “strongly encouraged”

to report other students for potential violations of COVID-19 guidelines, according to Cal Poly’s COVID-related Compliance Reporting website.

The process for reporting violations from university staff, however, is less clear.

University Spokesperson Matt Lazier said people should report an employee to their college’s dean or the Academic Personnel Office if they break COVID-19 safety measures.

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PAT FIDOPIASTIS
Biological Sciences Professor

According to Lazier, when faculty are reported for violating mask protocols, the department discusses the situation with the faculty member, and “if the faculty member agrees that they were not wearing a mask,” and they don’t have a medical reason to be unmasked, they are verbally reprimanded to comply.

If breaking protocols is a recurring behavior, the college’s dean may issue a letter of reprimand to again communicate expectations and potential consequences. Lazier said employees “may be subject to additional steps with [Human Resources]

or Academic Personnel.” He added that Human Resources staff has told him they’ve documented about five reports of employee noncompliance, though the exact number is unknown.

To Columbia University Public Health professor Morgan Philbin, a San Luis Obispo local, Cal Poly’s enforcement standards sound selective and problematic.

“It serves to embolden people to not follow the rules,” Philbin said. “The administration needs to be very clear about its rules and the uniformity of enforcement.”

Philbin said Cal Poly lacks both enforcement and transparency surrounding COVID-19 response efforts, leaving it up to individuals on campus to report behavior. Students remain hesitant to do so.

“I think [being uncomfortable speaking out about a professor] has to do with the power imbalance between a professor and a student,” public health senior Sydney Johnson said. “Whenever one is going to challenge a professor, it’s going to be pretty intimidating.”

When Fidopiastis was reported to College of Science and Mathematics Dean Dean Wendt for not following mask protocols, Fidopiastis responded with a “lengthy email describing his views of the science behind mask wearing.”

According to Fidopiastis, routine self-testing means he’s “no threat” to anyone around him. Fidopiastis has also conducted his own tests on mask contamination, which he says provide evidence that masks are mostly ineffective. According to Philbin, however, many masks are designed with multiple layers to account for contamination, and wearers should wash their hands after touching contaminated masks.

In a lecture titled “SARS CoV2” Fidopiastis delivered in his fall Gener-

al Microbiology 1 (MCRO 224) and winter Emerging Infectious Diseases (MCRO 320) classes, he argues against mask and lockdown mandates and defends hydroxychloroquine for COVID-19 treatment, all of which counter messaging from top public health experts, including the CDC.

One study Fidopiastis defends in his lecture concluded cloth and surgical masks were ineffective against SARS CoV2. But the study has since been retracted from publication due to “uninterpretable” and “unreliable” results, according to the study’s authors.

Philbin said the professor’s statements are factually incorrect, which she says is exemplified when states enact mask mandates and in turn see lower rates of COVID-19.

“If someone were to follow his advice, [they] would actually put themselves at risk — it’s incredibly callous and it’s unethical,” Philbin said.

Concerns about Fidopiastis’ stance against common COVID-19 precautions were echoed in a “Shades of Cal Poly” Instagram post, where an anonymous student said his lectures about the virus “made light of the pandemic.”

In the lectures, Fidopiastis accepts the use of the label “Wuhan Virus.” He said “throwing the term ‘racism’ around” was done to intentionally divide the country amid the presidential election.

“Why is it ‘racist’ to call [COVID-19] the ‘Wuhan virus,’ yet we have no problem with all those other names? The politicization is a dangerous game,” Fidopiastis said in an interview email. “I could care less what we call the virus.”

Several other viruses use regional names — such as the Spanish Flu, Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS), and Lyme disease, among others — but many public health experts, including Philbin, have warned that labels like “China Virus” and “Wuhan Virus” play into xenophobia and rising acts of violence against Asians during the pandemic.

Philbin says that this terminology gives “license to other students in the class to behave in a way that is racist and disrespectful.”

“It’s really hard for students to call him out because he is a tenured professor — he’s in a position of power, he’s giving them a grade,” Philbin said. “It is not fair to have a tenured, white-presenting, male faculty say things like this, and then pretend that they don’t have an impact.”

Despite pushback from some students and colleagues, Fidopiastis maintains, “I am definitely not alone in my views on the pandemic among my colleagues at Cal Poly.”

While COVID-19 protocols extend beyond the classroom, they often go overlooked by other staff — from Cal

Poly Athletics to University Police.

A Cal Poly Football student manager said besides the eight or so student employees, Athletics staff and coaches haven’t been conscientious about COVID-19 precautions in the office — where typically six to 10 people gather in the small space simultaneously.

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CANDACE WINSTEAD
Biological Sciences Professor

“The athletic staff didn’t really enforce it upon each other — I also didn’t really want to complain too much because it was our job,” the student manager said.

The student asked to remain anonymous due to a potential risk of losing their job.

The football team experienced an outbreak about three weeks into the season, infecting both players and coaching staff.

During a Saturday scrimmage at Spanos Stadium winter quarter, two student employees saw President Armstrong walking around and talking without a mask despite the university and statewide mandates. A student manager said there were likely 50 to 60 people present on the football field.

50–60 PEOPLE PRESENT

During a Saturday scrimmage at Spanos Stadium. Two student employees saw President Armstrong walking around and talking without a mask despite the university and statewide mandates.

“It’s seems kind of dumb that the president wants people to follow people’s orders if he can’t go ahead and do it himself,” the student manager said.

University Spokesperson Lazier said Armstrong “believes whole-

heartedly” in following COVID-19 guidelines and he may have “had a lapse on a rare occasion.”

Art and design freshman Addie Moffatt recalled a day during fall quarter when the University Police were going door-to-door at the residence halls. Moffatt said she was “taken aback” when she opened the door to an officer who didn’t have a mask in sight. When she realized she forgot her own mask before opening the door and went to grab it, the officer laughed.

“They don’t seem to care super strongly about it, which doesn’t shock me; it just is frustrating,” Moffatt said.

Moffatt later reported the instance to Student Affairs Vice President Keith Humphrey, who said he’d talk with the police.

Lazier said University Police, Athletics and Student Affairs regularly remind employees to follow guidelines and respond quickly and appropriately if employees are reported for failing to do so.

While some staff have strayed from guidelines, biological sciences professor Candace Winstead, who specializes in immunology and medical microbiology, said these guidelines are what allow us to have in-person experiences, and students she’s talked to are hoping faculty help maintain a safe environment on campus.

“Any faculty that are dismissive of these safety measures create an uncomfortable and potentially unsafe environment for our students, which is not conducive to learning and does not build community solidarity during uncertain times,” Winstead said.

Whether it be dorm capacity, frequency of testing or even allowing tests on campus, Philbin says Cal Poly has not taken the proactive route on almost any COVID-19 measures. Most of the university’s pandemic response is the result of outside pressure from others, and one of the most powerful groups to apply pressure according to Philbin, are

the students — and parents — who fund it.

“If students band together,” Philbin said, “they are ultimately the ones that have a lot more power than I think they realize.”

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