



Students and faculty members at Marymount University arrive at one of the athletic buildings on the Catholic college's Arlington, Va., campus, to receive the Pfizer COVID-19 vaccine during a coronavirus vaccine clinic April 21, 2021. (CNS photo/Chaz Muth)

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For next year's spring semester, some Catholic colleges are joining other colleges across the country in requiring students to receive COVID-19 vaccine booster shots.

As of Dec. 15, at least five Catholic colleges and universities — University of Notre Dame in South Bend, Indiana; Boston College; St. Joseph's College of Maine; St. Michael's College in Colchester, Vermont; and Georgetown University in Washington — had joined about 20 schools of higher education in implementing a booster requirement for students when they return to campuses in January.

A list frequently updated by The Chronicle of Higher Education shows that 1,123 campuses, as of Dec. 15, have a COVID-19 vaccine requirement and a few dozen of those listed have added the booster requirement.

Georgetown University announced Dec. 14 that it would be requiring the booster shot, a day after a school official announced that someone in the campus community was one of the first four confirmed cases of omicron variant of the coronavirus in Washington.

Also on Dec. 14, the United States surpassed 800,000 deaths from the coronavirus and top federal health officials warned in a briefing that the rapidly spreading omicron variant could cause a surge of infections in January.

The letter to Georgetown University's community was written by Dr. Ranit Mishori, the university's chief public health officer. She noted the individual with the omicron variant is fully vaccinated, asymptomatic and had recently returned from domestic travel. The individual also had not been on campus since before Thanksgiving other than to complete a COVID-19 test.

Georgetown's COVID-19 vaccine and booster requirement, which allows for medical and religious exemptions, applies to students, faculty, staff and visitors including teleworking employees and students enrolled in one or more in-person courses.

The University of Notre Dame is similarly requiring all students to obtain the COVID-19 booster shot for the spring semester and will provide a vaccination clinic on campus in mid-January.

The campus newspaper, The Observer, said the university notified students of the requirement in a Dec. 6 email. The message said Notre Dame has benefited from being uniformly and highly vaccinated.

The university has had 364 positive cases of COVID-19 since Aug. 22. In the last week of November, just after Thanksgiving travel, more than 50 cases had been reported.

Boston College reported its highest number of undergraduate cases of COVID-19 Dec. 13, with 94 undergraduates testing positive out of 10,505 tests performed Dec. 12 and 13.

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The Heights campus newspaper said university officials told students in a Dec. 14 email the school was requiring students to have the COVID-19 booster shots for the spring semester. The newspaper pointed out that The Boston Globe had reported the requirement six days before the official notice was sent.

The booster shot requirement is for all students, faculty and staff and the school is "working on the logistics now, given the six-month waiting period for the Pfizer and Moderna vaccines," Jack Dunn, associate vice president for university communications told the Globe.

The only exceptions to the new mandate are for those who previously received a religious or medical exception for COVID-19 vaccines at the start of the fall semester.

One of the smaller colleges to implement the booster requirement is St. Joseph's College of Maine in Standish.

An announcement on its website in October said that when the school first established its COVID-19 vaccine requirement for all nonexempt students, faculty and staff, "the possibility of booster shots was on the distant horizon."

"Now booster shots are much closer to widespread availability," it said, adding that following federal and state guidelines, the school will include boosters in its "definition of fully vaccinated."

The school's booster requirement is on "on a rolling basis — as boosters become available, and as the list of recommended recipients expands."

In a note to students in mid-November, the school said it would lift its public indoor mask requirement once the school community reached an 85% COVID-19 vaccine booster rate.

Another small college, St. Michael's in Vermont, which has under 2,000 students, also recently announced it is requiring the COVID-19 booster. The school's president, Lorraine Sterritt, told students in a message Dec. 1 the college was recommending the booster vaccine but then in a Dec. 10 message said boosters will now be required for those eligible.

She thanked the students for "carefully monitoring symptoms and getting tested" when they didn't feel well, which she said was key to the school's low numbers of COVID-19 positive cases in the past few weeks.

"I know it is a busy time," she added, encouraging them on other concerns: preparing for exams and completing final projects.