

USING TIKTOK TO COMBAT COVID-19

A Call to Action for Higher Education

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) reports that just over half of all Americans aged 18 to 24 are fully vaccinated as of late October 2021.¹ As institutions of higher education continue to manage the pandemic, health and communications professionals must utilize effective outreach strategies to increase vaccination uptake and mitigation compliance among all campus community members. Social media is a critically important source of information on the COVID-19 pandemic; however, according to the World Health Organization (WHO), the technology we rely on to keep us connected and informed enables and amplifies an “infodemic” that continues to undermine the global response to the COVID-19 pandemic.



What Is TikTok?

TikTok is a mobile-focused, video-based social media platform where individuals create and share 15- to 60-second-long pieces of content using either their own audio, popular songs, or dialogue from the platform’s searchable sounds. It is the most downloaded app in the Apple store as of September 2021.² Videos (“TikToks”) may receive millions of views and are popular for their dance trends, sound trends, and “challenges.” TikToks also serve as quick information sources. Informational or “quick facts” TikToks often include dance trends and popular sounds. TikToks are published on the creator’s profile and on other users’ “For You Page” (FYP), an infinitely scrollable page of videos collated by an algorithm based on a user’s engagement and interests. The more videos relating to a particular trend or information topic a user views, the more related videos will appear on a user’s FYP. The FYP features videos with low view or follow counts as well as viral videos, making it the social media platform with the highest viewing potential.³

Who Is on TikTok?

TikTok has 1 billion active global users as of late September 2021.⁴ Worldwide, 80% of TikTok’s 1 billion million active monthly users are people ages 16–34.⁵ In the United States, as of March 2021 nearly half of TikTok’s total users were under 30, a demographic that includes most college students in the United States, as well as many campus staff.⁶

“TikTok is a way to ‘meet students where they are — on their phones.’”
– Sonya Johnson⁷

TikTok Has Reach

A study examining a WHO campaign promoting face mask usage found “videos [with the] hashtag #WearAMask garnered almost 500 million views, and videos that were posted by WHO garnered almost 57 million views.” Just over one quarter of the trending #WearAMask videos (27%) involved dance, and these videos garnered over 130 million cumulative views.⁸ This study, from the JMIR Public Health Surveillance concluded that, “Due to the platform’s incredible reach, TikTok has great potential in conveying important public health messages to various segments of the population.”⁹

TikTok Relies on Strong Emotional Content to Drive Engagement

Strong emotional appeals on social media may support or suppress public health strategies. Research showed higher user engagement with videos portraying COVID-19 testing as disgusting or unpleasant as opposed to videos with positive portrayals of testing.¹⁰ High engagement was also seen with videos conveying alarm or concern, susceptibility to and severity of COVID-19 disease, and efficacy of mitigation behaviors like masking and social distancing.¹¹



Misinformation Thrives on TikTok and Reaches Users Quickly

As of September 2021, fewer credible and verified source of COVID-19 information are active on TikTok than on other social media platforms, however, videos and “sounds” that share COVID-19 misinformation and disinformation are abundant and amassing millions of views.¹² While TikTok does have a policy prohibiting medical misinformation, research has shown the platform fails to act on 95% of COVID-19 and vaccine misinformation reported to them.¹³

“Proactive messaging that is both compelling and tailored to different audiences is needed. We need to stop relying on fact-checking efforts and platforms’ content moderation policies to address data deficits. Doing so is reactive, insufficient, and potentially counterproductive.”

– First Draft News¹⁴

The viral video responsible for the widespread myth that COVID-19 vaccination causes people to become magnetized first appeared on TikTok. The Virality Project reported that before being removed by TikTok, the video was viewed over 9.6 million times in just five days.¹⁵

“Misinformation costs lives. Without the appropriate trust and correct information, diagnostic tests go unused, immunization campaigns (or campaigns to promote effective vaccines) will not meet their targets, and the virus will continue to thrive.”

– World Health Organization¹⁶

Disinformation and Misinformation Impact Vaccination and Mitigation Behavior

COVID-19 misinformation and disinformation on TikTok and other social media platforms have the potential to impact vaccination and other mitigation behaviors among users. In a study of online misinformation, researchers at Cornell University found “a negative relationship between misinformation and vaccination uptake rates. Online misinformation correlated with vaccine hesitancy rates taken from survey data.”¹⁷ Likewise, First Draft News reports that beyond COVID-19 vaccinations, routine immunization rates are already seeing a drop at a time when reliable vaccine information is not easily accessible and there is a high level of mistrust in actors and institutions.¹⁸

CALLS TO ACTION

College health and higher education communications professionals should:



- Incorporate TikTok into their social media strategy to reach students where they are. By using trusted messengers and credible sources in this virtual space, colleges and universities can build vaccine confidence, increase compliance with mitigation strategies such as masking and testing, and foster an ethos of community care. Doing so also helps to drown out the misinformation and disinformation that perpetuates the pandemic.
- Call for more effective strategies to prevent the spread of dangerous COVID-19 mis- and disinformation on TikTok and other social media platforms.
- Empower campus community members with health literacy skills needed to discern credible and non-credible information online.


“Demand on TikTok for more health care-related voices currently outpaces supply. TikTok has shown itself to be a viable means for practitioners to educate and dispel myths about COVID-19 to a broad and diverse adolescent demographic. In return, practitioners gain the ability to share their voices with those that they likely would not have reached otherwise while potentially expanding public policy adherence and reducing hospitalizations.”

— Ostrovsky and Chen¹⁹

Action Steps for Those New to TikTok

1. **Understand your campus social media policies:** Your campus may have a marketing or communications department, or policies and procedures related to social media accounts. Make sure that you are following their guidance for branding, content, and moderation.
2. **Create an account:** Make sure to upload an identifiable or branded profile picture along with links to your institution’s website in the bio. If your institution is active on other social media platforms, be sure to include those in the bio as well.



3. **Engage students early:** Student involvement in moderation, content creation, and idea generation will increase your chances of successfully reaching your target audience. Assign responsibilities to ensure that content is credible and timely.
4. **Create a team:** Consider creating a “TikTok team” comprised of campus health professionals, faculty, other staff, and students. Clarify each team members’ responsibilities and strengths. Someone may not be skilled at graphic design but excels at finding strong content to re-post.
5. **Create and post content:**
 - a. **Set a schedule.** You may start with a goal of 2-3 posts per week during the semester. Whatever your schedule, try to be consistent. Planning and creating posts in advance may save time but be prepared to change direction if the situation requires.
 - b. **Prioritize credibility.** It is better to wait and be sure that what you are posting is medically accurate, inclusive, and communicates effectively to your audience. When clinical or scientific content is included, ensure a campus health professional has reviewed and approved any posts.
 - c. **Be authentic.** Videos on TikTok do not have to be perfect. TikToks are often more casual and not professionally executed. It is more important for your authentic voice to come through than for posts to be overly polished.
 - d. **Make it interesting.** We have seconds or less to grab the attention of our audience. Use trending sounds and interesting visuals and feature people or places familiar to your audience.
 - e. **Make it discoverable.** Use hashtags like #vaxforward or #covid19 or hashtags with your institution’s name to make your content appear in popular searches.
6. **Set moderation expectations:** If possible, engage with your audience. If you do not have the bandwidth to engage, make clear that posts will not be monitored/responded to and inform viewers how they can get in touch with your department. At the very least, monitor posts and address harassment or conduct that violates campus norms. 
7. **Get verified:** Unlike other social media platforms, TikTok does not take requests to get verified. TikTok has dedicated team who seeks out official pages based on their content and post count. The more posts you accrue, the likelier it is that you will be verified by TikTok. Verified accounts feature a blue check next to the account username.
8. **Amplify and seek amplification:** Connect with your colleagues across the institution and across higher education. Use your platform to boost their relevant posts and ask them to reciprocate. Provide incentives for students to follow and share your content.

Action Steps for Existing TikTok Users

1. **Revisit your team.** Are there audiences you are not reaching? Are there perspectives that are missing? Ensure your team looks like the community it serves.
2. **Seek consultation.** Is a marketing or communications department, or faculty member with expertise available to provide feedback? Can you convene focus groups with students, staff, or faculty to provide you with guidance?
3. **Evaluate your content:** Are you posting on a schedule that meets your goals? Is your content up to date? Are your engagement statistics trending downward?

Quick Tips for Using TikTok

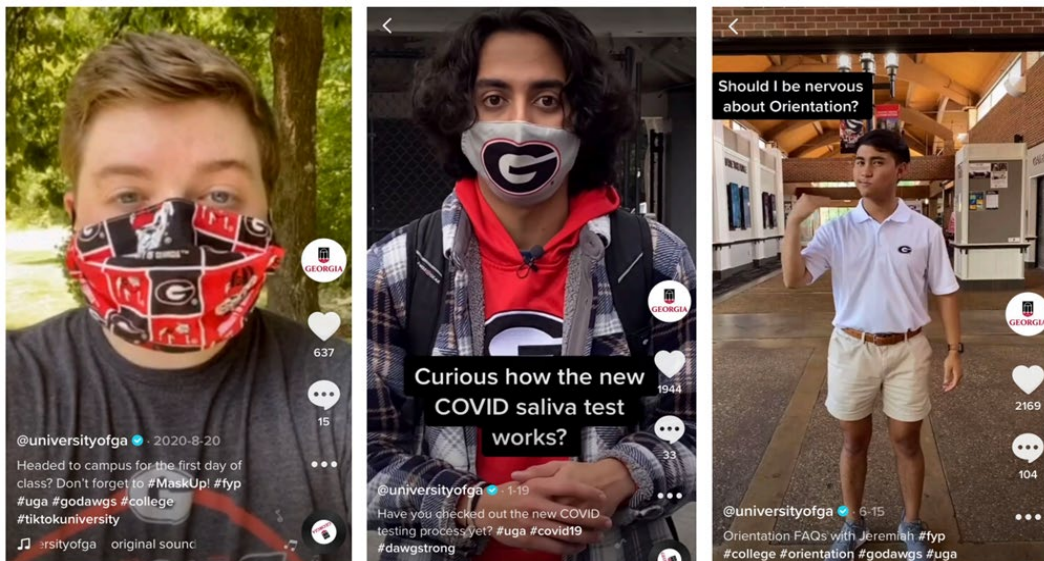
- Post consistently to develop a following.
- Convey your department's voice authentically.
- Utilize popular sounds and visuals to get the most views.
- Include hashtags and be easily discoverable.
- Review and address student feedback in comments.

HIGHER EDUCATION TIKTOK ACCOUNTS AND HASHTAG

The following TikTok accounts and hashtag are examples of how TikTok can be used to combat misinformation with content that is accurate, science-based, informative, and provides credible resources for viewers to learn more about COVID-19 vaccination and mitigation behaviors.

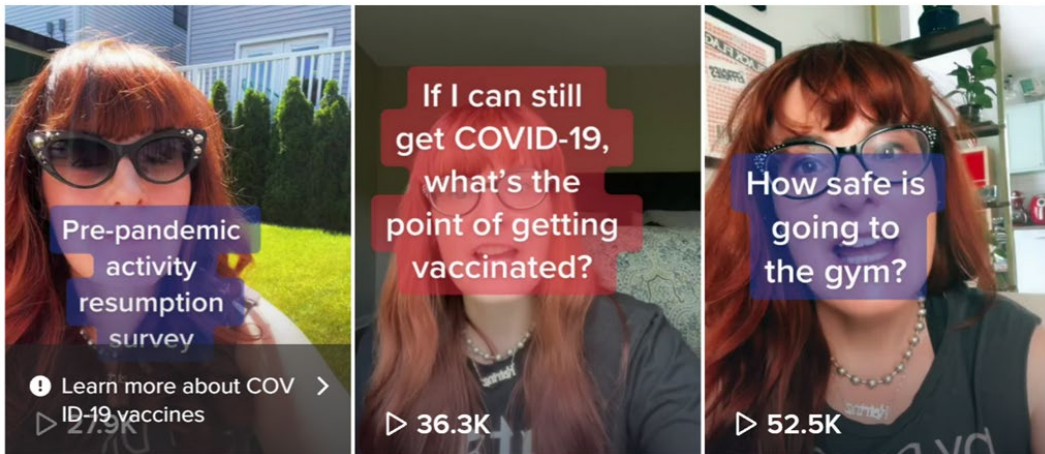
The University of Georgia: [@UGA](#)

The official TikTok account of the University of Georgia serves as a resource for students to learn more about campus efforts to combat COVID-19 and reminds students of behaviors they can observe to help protect their campus from COVID-19, such as masking.



Dr. Katrine Wallace, Epidemiologist and Science Communicator: [@epidemiologistkat](#)

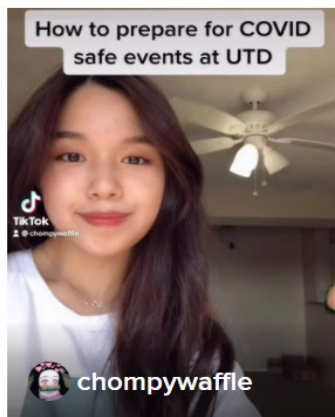
Dr. Katrine Wallace, an epidemiologist and adjunct assistant professor at the University of Illinois Chicago, uses TikTok to debunk COVID-19 vaccine myths and to provide simplified explanations on vaccine trial data.²⁰ Her TikTok videos have over 3.6 million likes on the platform.²¹ Dr. Wallace told CBS News, "Every single day I get messages from people saying, you know, 'My mom decided to get vaccinated because we watched your videos.'"²²



Hashtag: [#vaxforward](#)



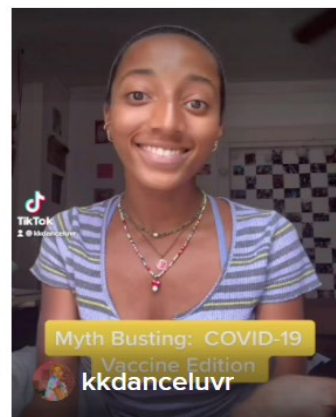
The hashtag [#vaxforward](#) was created by the American College Health Association's Campus [COVID-19 Vaccination and Mitigation \(CoVAC\) Initiative](#). The initiative, funded by a cooperative agreement with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, works to combat vaccine misinformation and build COVID-19 vaccine confidence and promote mitigation behaviors on college campuses. Students serving as virtual campus ambassadors created COVID-19 vaccine awareness TikTok videos tailored to their own campus populations. These videos have a combined 34,600 views on TikTok.²³



I'm so excited to be bac...



I got vaccinated to #Vax...



I've got some facts to h...

LEARN MORE

How TikTok's Algorithm Figures You Out

This [Wall Street Journal video investigation](#) into the world of TikTok explains “how the video-centric social media platform is so good at figuring out interests you never expressly tell it.”²⁴

Communicating COVID-19 information on TikTok: a content analysis of TikTok videos from official accounts featured in the COVID-19 information hub

“This [study](#) investigates the video format, type, and content of COVID-19 TikTok videos and how those video attributes are related to quantitative indicators of user engagement, including numbers of views, likes, comments, and shares.”²⁵

TikTok and Its Role in COVID-19 Information Propagation

In this [letter to the editor](#) of the *Journal of Adolescent Health*, researchers Adam Otrovsky and Joshua Chen discuss adolescents’ use of TikTok for non-educational screen time as an opportunity to educate them there and express a need for health care-related voices on the platform.

Handwashing videos on TikTok during the COVID-19 Pandemic: Potential for disease prevention and health promotion

A cross-sectional descriptive [study of two hashtags](#) on TikTok: #WashYourHands and #SafeguardSplash.

Toxic TikTok: Popular social-media video app feeds vaccine misinformation to kids within minutes after they sign up

“He gets the va**ine and he dies after three days! What do you think?” [This report by NewsGuard](#) explores the type of covid-19 mis- and disinformation children are exposed to within minutes of registering for a TikTok account.

COVID-19 Vaccines for Adolescents: Leveraging the ABCs of Communication

This commentary published in the *Journal of Adolescent Health* relays the [ABCs of vaccine communication](#) as a way for clinicians to promote adolescent vaccination. The authors mention TikTok and the need for clinicians to be trained in social media.



AMERICAN COLLEGE HEALTH ASSOCIATION
Campus COVID-19 Vaccination and Mitigation Initiative

The [Campus COVID-19 Vaccination and Mitigation \(CoVAC\) Initiative](#) is a project of the American College Health Association, funded by a cooperative agreement with the U.S Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

American College Health Association

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<https://www.viralityproject.org/rapid-response/made-to-stick-origins-and-spread-of-the-magnetic-vaccine-narrative>.

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