Jordan Tralins works to address young adults' vaccine hesitancy

Watch the AMA's COVID-19 Update, with insights from AMA leaders and experts about the pandemic.

Featured topic and speakers

In today’s COVID-19 Update, a discussion with Jordan Tralins (@JTralins), a rising junior at Cornell University and founder of the COVID Campus Coalition, about her work to address vaccine hesitancy among young adults.

Follow COVID Campus Coalition on Instagram and TikTok (@covid_campus_coalition) or visit the website for more information.

Learn more at the AMA COVID-19 resource center.

Speaker

■ Jordan Tralins, founder, COVID Campus Coalition

Transcript

Unger: Hello, this is the American Medical Association's COVID-19 Update. Today we're talking with Jordan Tralins, who will be a junior this fall at Cornell University and is also the founder of the COVID Campus Coalition, about her work to address vaccine hesitancy among young adults. She's calling in from St. Petersburg, Florida. I'm Todd Unger, AMA's chief experience officer in Chicago. Well, Jordan, thanks so much for joining us. I don't think anybody could have predicted the level of vaccine hesitancy that we're seeing now among young adults once the vaccines were widely available. Tell me about the first time you realized this was a problem among your peers.

Tralins: Early in the COVID vaccine rollout, around December and early January, I really first noticed on my social media pages—especially on my TikTok and Instagram pages—that I was seeing a lot of
misinformation and conspiracy theories circulating across those platforms. I was hearing information, or misinformation, about infertility from vaccines, claims that the vaccines alter DNA, microchips and it really got me thinking that because this is the information circulating across my platforms other young people must be seeing this as well, and in fact, they were,

**Unger:** Was that a surprise to you, the amount that you were seeing out there?

**Tralins:** I really was surprised because I, as a college student, was very excited about the COVID vaccines when they were first released and I wanted to learn more about them. And so when I was seeing these claims circulating through my social media pages, it was confusing and concerning to me, and really prompted me to do some research with reliable source like the New England Journal of Medicine, CDC, World Health Organization and by getting the true factual information and seeing that that is not the information that was being circulated through social media pages, it really prompted me to create the COVID Campus Coalition.

**Unger:** So you've got misinformation which is affecting broad scale our efforts to get people vaccinated but when you think back to the early part of when vaccines became available, about the messaging itself and the messages that were reaching you and I guess your fellow Gen Z-ers out there, what do you think about it? Where'd it fall short?

**Tralins:** So I really think that especially early in the code vaccine rollout there was not enough factual information circulating across social media pages on a national level to target people my age. And because there was so much misinformation and not enough of a public health national effort to actually target people from my generation on platforms where we are present, like TikTok and Instagram, I think that that has led to a lot of the vaccine hesitancy that we were seeing in young people now. Now, luckily, that has changed and there have been so many increased efforts to properly target young individuals, especially now. But I do think that because that didn't happen soon enough, it caused some of the hesitancy that we're seeing now.

**Unger:** So you’re saying, number one, there’s an issue around the medium and maybe there's not the critical mass of messaging on platforms like TikTok and Instagram?

**Tralins:** Absolutely.

**Unger:** Number two, timing, not soon enough. And you’re preceded by these waves of misinformation. How about the messaging itself? Is there messaging that's falling short in terms of reaching people your age?

**Tralins:** Yes, I think so. So, for starters, a lot of young individuals have shorter attention spans. We're used to watching 15 second videos and so lots of young people don't really go straight to scientific literature to get their information about COVID vaccines or scientific matters in general. And so, because that information wasn't being presented in a crisp, entertaining, short manner, I do think that
failed to reach people might age appropriately. And another way that I do think the messaging fell short is really emphasizing the community implications of COVID vaccines for young people. Because I think a lot of young people feel invincible and healthy and don't fully understand just how important it is to get vaccinated in order to protect others, not just young individuals themselves.

**Unger:** That's interesting. Your points around messaging, I think they apply pretty broadly at this point. I always tell folks on my team, "You treat every communication like a landing page. You get one sentence and three bullet points and if you can't explain it in under 10 seconds..." That's really hard these days. People's attention spans are so short. Rather than being frustrated, which I think many of us are with the situation with unvaccinated, you did something a lot bigger and you took matters into your own hands. Can you tell us where did the idea for COVID Campus Coalition come from?

**Tralins:** So, because I was seeing just so much misinformation circulating through my social media pages, it really got me thinking that young people my age don't get their information from scientific literature. They get it from social media. And so, from that understanding, I created the COVID Campus Coalition at first as a Cornell University-specific Instagram page, where I would take the most recent and relevant COVID vaccine findings from the CDC, World Health Organization, New England Journal of Medicine and compile it into bright, colorful infographics meant to attract students from my university. I also created a TikTok account where I would create video formats of that same information using trending sounds and trending video formats. And when I saw just how interested and engaged students from my university were with this account, I decided to reach out into other universities. And we now have COVID Campus Coalition ambassadors at over 30 other universities, all running their own Instagram pages and circulating graphics that we provide with factual information.

**Unger:** Well, I'd urge you to add to your list the great content we're producing here at the AMA and through the Journal of the American Medical Association. And I hope our video makes your feed.

**Tralins:** It absolutely will.

**Unger:** I look forward to that. Yeah. Well, tell me a little bit more about how it works.

**Tralins:** Sure. So every week we go to reliable scientific sources and create infographics for Instagram but also for TikTok, so our infographics for each university all contain uniform information. So bullet points, bright graphics and pictures and they all contain the same facts, but we customize each graphic for each university to fit the school name and school color, just because I feel that students engage best with information when they can connect with it. So even if a student isn't specifically trying to get information about COVID vaccines while they're scrolling, if they see something that has their school name on it, and it has to do with COVID vaccines, they're more likely to take the time to read it. So student ambassadors post these graphics. They also have the freedom to put things on the Instagram stories and post anything relevant to their universities regarding COVID vaccine clinics, research coming out of their university's medical schools and really working with university leaders to help their student bodies get information about COVID vaccines and vaccine
clinics to hopefully combat misinformation and combat a lot of the hesitancy that we’re seeing.

**Unger:** I’m just curious, did you recruit a band of your friends, so to speak, to do all this graphic design? And who’s doing editorial oversight and picking out and curating all that content?

**Tralins:** Yes. So I have a few partners at Cornell University. Olivia Polowski helps me with graphic design. She is also a student interested in biology in society but she has an interest in graphic design too. So she helps me every week with compiling that information into graphics. And then I have another student, a researcher student, Lily Goldberger, who helps me with the research. But aside from that, in terms of the ambassadors, we really have reached other students using LinkedIn applications and Google forms, just doing what we can to get the word out. And, at first, I was very pleasantly surprised to see just how many students across the country were interested in opening chapters and spreading this factual information to their student bodies.

**Unger:** How many universities are involved now and how do you see this growing?

**Tralins:** So we have surpassed 30 universities but we’re quickly approaching 35 and I hope soon 40 as well. Every day I have more meetings with potential ambassadors and I do feel that we’re rapidly expanding as our word is getting out and more people are hearing about the COVID Campus Coalition. And what’s very exciting is we’re now having the opportunity to also work with other organizations and work with public health and medical leaders to help find out what information on a national level we need to be sharing with students at our universities. And it’s just been super incredible to see how many people are really interested in just getting the facts out there, helping to educate people and really get the correct messaging relayed to students.

**Unger:** Excellent. Well, I’m going to volunteer my incoming senior at Colgate University to lend a hand and start ...

**Tralins:** Awesome.

**Unger:** ... new chapters there.

**Tralins:** We would love that.

**Unger:** We’re seeing approaching September, late August, schools going back into session. Many colleges now issuing vaccine mandates. How do you think those are being received by students?

**Tralins:** I really think that the vaccine mandates are being received differently on different campuses, basically, depending on the campus culture. So at my own school at Cornell University, the vaccine mandate was received very positively because students throughout the vaccine rollout at my university were very excited to get the vaccine because they had access to the factual information, they understood the mechanisms of the vaccines and, I do think, they understood the implications on
a community level. But I think for some universities where maybe the administration wasn't as involved in the COVID vaccine rollout or in the COVID-19 response in general, some students might be feeling a bit more frustrated or confused not understanding the importance of getting vaccinated.

So I do really think that it differs based off of geography, based off of campus culture and it's been very interesting to work with my ambassadors across the country to see just how it differs from campus to campus and brainstorm on what we can do to really try to help students understand why it is important to get vaccinated and just how exciting it could be to return back to a normal college experience with a fully vaccinated campus.

**Unger:** Well, I'll tell you, one data point you can use, we just had a conversation about some research from an organization called Fair Health. They did a very, very large scale research study and it showed almost one in five people, even those are asymptomatic, were experiencing symptoms of long-haul COVID.

**Tralins:** Oh, yes.

**Unger:** So important to get that vaccine to prevent getting it and from the aftereffects of a potentially very, very unpleasant situation after that.

**Tralins:** Absolutely.

**Unger:** You've got a big audience of physicians and medical students out there. What do you have to say to them?

**Tralins:** I think I just have to say that I would really appreciate any efforts from medical students and physicians to really put COVID vaccines at the forefront of all of your discussions with patients. So whenever a patient's coming into clinic, just having the conversation and getting their questions answered about the COVID vaccines. Because as a physician, as a medical student, you really do hold weight in your advice and in the resources that you can provide. And I think people really do trust physicians and trust people they have relationships with. So I would really appreciate that. And I also just think that if any physicians or medical students are interested in expanding their practice into platforms like TikTok and platforms like Instagram, there really is an audience for it. And using TikTok, you can reach a very broad group of people who might not have access to the information you can provide. So I do think that it is the future, communicating using these platforms and finding ways to just get the information out there is very important at this point in time.

**Unger:** I couldn't agree with you more. We need more physician voices on the platforms where the people are. Jordan, thanks so much for being here today and talking with us.

**Tralins:** Thank you.
Unger: For folks out there that would like more information on COVID Campus Coalition, visit covidcampuscoalition.weebly, that's W-E-B-L-Y.com. We'll be back soon with another COVID-19 Update. In the meantime, for resources on COVID-19, visit ama-assn.org/COVID-19. Thanks for joining us. Please take care.

Disclaimer: The viewpoints expressed in this video are those of the participants and/or do not necessarily reflect the views and policies of the AMA.