

Speaker 1: I've been here for 35 years and it's so good to have the students back. I just love it. Just make my day.

Speaker 2: I'm very optimistic about the year and the sense of community return.

Speaker 3: I'm looking forward to seeing people's eyeballs again in class,

Speaker 4: I wanted to come back to work. I needed

Speaker 5: This job. You, I missed a lot of the social stuff that I would have had as a freshman in college. So it's, it's good to be back

Speaker 6: Welcome. I'm [00:00:30] Mary Marquetta Odell last week, some 70,000 students returned to Rutgers after nearly 18 months away due to COVID-19. So how's the big comeback going to find out. I'm talking with Antonio Calcutta, executive vice president for strategic planning and operations and chief operating officer at Rutgers repopulating campus at Rutgers university is a complicated task. Some members of Rutgers never left campus because they were in healthcare and other essential [00:01:00] services, jobs, other business and administration offices, which have been coming back slowly over time, such as our research labs. And most recently getting back to in-person classrooms and taking on how to teach in this new world. We have had a lot more activity on campus. Rutgers has been increasing its on-campus presence and population for a long time, but the big push was to bring students in classes back to predominantly in-person this September Tony, [00:01:30] what has been the hardest part.

Speaker 7: So I think, um, from, from my perspective, the hardest part has been, uh, really trying to reassure people that we are in a good place. It's not a perfect place. It that I would be disingenuous or trying to kid someone if I were to say that, but we have taken all of the necessary safety precautions that we believe at this point in time, all of the mitigation [00:02:00] strategies that put us in a good place for us to be able to move forward. You know, it was a yeoman's job to have 65,000 students almost vaccinated that mandate alone gave us a tool that we, um, that we were, that we used as a vehicle to get to where we are. So we did things that no one else did. We never stopped mandating masks indoors, even when the state said, okay, you don't need to do this now [00:02:30] over the summer, you know, we never stopped mandating, uh, social distancing in our non-academic areas, indoors.

Speaker 7: Those were all things that we did. We had to that vaccine of students and the 92% employee rate of compliance as well. That builds a pretty good bubble, not a perfect bubble. We expect cases. We know there'll be positive cases. There's no doubt about that. But I think what we will see is that we've protected [00:03:00] our community to the point that those positive cases should not have a terribly adverse effect on anyone who does become infected. And that's what, what we're looking at. And that's what we see. That's what we continue to see. We'll continue to test. We'll continue to educate. We'll continue to move people forward. But, um, you know, getting beyond that initial shock of, I need to return now has been a bit of a push, [00:03:30] but I'll go anywhere and speak to anyone about some of the things that we're doing in order to try and keep

people safe. We need to be empathetic to what the feelings are. Um, we need to understand those feelings and we need to address those feelings, but, um, we're not going to get away from coexisting with this virus. We have two,

Speaker 6: You know, you talk about the feelings and there are people who are concerned, but there are also a lot of people feeling, a lot of excitement and joy really. And I mean, [00:04:00] well just walking up to the building this morning, I saw the, are you back sticker on the ground? And I just was smiling about it. You know, it's, it's really, it feels good to be back. And, um, you know, I agree that the vaccination strategy is one of the most effective and have said, even that the population here at Rutgers is one of the most vaccinated in the state and country. So we should all feel really excited about that. Tell me a little bit about, what's been surprising to you during this journey.

Speaker 7: Oh, I think [00:04:30] the, um, the, the joy at which students are coming back, right? They they're so excited. They did their part. I want to be clear. They did their part. They went out, they got vaccinated. It, it, you know, there's just a handful that we're working with when we look at those kinds of numbers, but their joy, they're ecstatic to be back. And we owe them that, you know, for us, it's, it's about what is that college experience? Give it back to our students, [00:05:00] let them enjoy the things that we do. Collaboration. You know, we, we work with each other. We talk to each other on a regular basis, but seeing their faces and hearing their conversations, when I go down college avenue or whatever, wherever I might be, you know, fighting traffic now to get over here to the building to do this, I think that's great. After a year and a half, it's been a long haul. It's taken its toll. It's taken its toll mentally. It's taken its toll [00:05:30] physically. It's been tough, but that is just phenomenal to see that.

Speaker 6: Tell me a little bit, um, about your impression. I've heard you talk about the safety. I've heard it as well. Many of our colleagues, um, in Rutgers health have talked about Rutgers being an island of health in a sea of disease. You've talked a lot about some of a long list of strategies. Um, do you think that there's any significant ones you think are managing COVID here on campus [00:06:00] better? I mean, we have the vaccine now. We didn't always have it. And we still have across this journey been relatively a safer environment than what we've seen around the state. What do you think are some of the real strategies that have made Rutgers safer during this time

Speaker 7: It's been this educational con this educational component, right? So there's the hard strategies wear your mask, wash your hands, socially distant, uh, vaccination. Of course, those are what I call the heart strategies. I think [00:06:30] there's this soft component that we don't give enough credit to. And that soft component is be aware of your surroundings, understand where you are, understand that if you're not comfortable extricate yourself from that situation, because some are more comfortable than others, right? Some, you know, I kid sometimes I talk about Broadway shows. I'm not sure if I'm comfortable yet at a Broadway show where you sit in the seats, right. But there are other things now that I'm perfectly comfortable with. I'm comfortable [00:07:00] going to a restaurant. I don't have any issues along those lines. So our educational process and our conversations as a community have stressed in many ways. And in many times just be aware, use common sense.

Speaker 7: You know, what you need to do. You know, when you go to the store, how you act or react, you know, when you go to a movie, how you act or react, you know how you, when you go to a restaurant, how to act or react, same thing here. If you're not comfortable extricate yourself from that situation, no, one's going [00:07:30] to look ill on you and judge you for that. You have to take a personal responsibility for your wellbeing and a shared responsibility for everyone else's wellbeing. That's where things like masks do come into play. Right? When we hear things about, well, you know, um, I can wear a mask. If I choose to wear a mask, it doesn't impact anyone else. And you and I both know that that's not true. You're wearing a mask, makes a difference to me. [00:08:00] My wearing a mask makes a difference to you. I protect you. You protect me. And that's why we ask for people to do this inside and make sure that they're compliant with that.

Speaker 6: You're touching upon a point that I think is so important that this is a team sport. We're all in this together. And we all come at it with a light, a slightly different perspective. So I have kids at home who are not vaccinated yet. So I'm a little less comfortable than I otherwise would be being vaccinated out in the community. And so, you know, everyone has these different [00:08:30] levels that they're trying to bounce for themselves and to be human and kind with each other is so important. It's really insightful to hear you talk about that beyond all the scientific and public health tools that we have going for us here. You know, you talked a little bit about where people are, the joy that they're feeling, um, and what our job is. And I see coming to campus as part of our mission, giving students an opportunity [00:09:00] to have that in-person, um, experience of learning and living on campus.

Speaker 6: And, um, another thing you mentioned was some of the mental and emotional toll that this has taken. And part of, I think why we have this mission to come back on campus is because of some of the other public health consequences that we've seen. And you both young kids and college, um, learners alike have suffered from increases in depression up to and including suicide attempts. I know this weighs [00:09:30] on your mind, um, and education and learning is such an important part of the lives of our young people. What are some of the driving factors that you've used to guide your vision in leading this effort here on Rutgers balancing all these different pieces that we're talking about to bring people and our operations back online here on campus safely.

Speaker 7: So one of the things that we've subscribed to and I believe firmly is that, um, we can never let the good be the enemy [00:10:00] of the perfect. We will never achieve the perfect. We do not need to achieve the perfect. We need to be able to put a process in place that brings people back at a comfort level where they can understand that it's okay to come back. Secondly, one of the, one of the guiding principles that we need to look at all the time is that this is not going away. So today we're dealing with the Delta variant tomorrow, we're already [00:10:30] in some areas of new variant, right? We don't know what the variant two variants from now, maybe where the impact that they may have. We know that we're still safe with vaccine. We see breakthrough cases. We understand how that works. Yes, that's all there, but it's not going away and COVID is not going away anytime soon.

Speaker 7: So we cannot revert to, we just want to stay at home and not go anywhere and not [00:11:00] do anything. And now live a life because we've been doing that for 18 months. And we know that we need to start taking these steps to get back to whatever the new normal is. And I haven't defined what a normal is yet. And I'm interested to see it myself, but it is somewhat of a normal things will not be exactly the same for years, for years, they won't be the same, but we need to understand that that it's okay, that they're not the same. And [00:11:30] we can not shut down because shutting down is taking that toll on our mental health. That's been devastating across the United States, not just in New Jersey, but across the United States. We see the difference that it's made to so many. So my guiding principle is always, we need to do this.

Speaker 7: Co-exist with this virus, we need to balance safety with comfort. We need to make sure that [00:12:00] we can keep people as informed our employees, our colleagues, our friends, as informed as we possibly can so that not only can they make good decisions, but they understand they're not doing this by themselves. They're doing this as a community and together we're all in it together. And whatever we do here, you take home some marijuana touch on you. You have children that are not old enough yet, right. To have a vaccine. One of the reasons that we want to keep [00:12:30] you safe here. And it's so critically important to keep you safe here is because if something happens to you here, yes, there is a potential of you taking that home. There's a potential indicate quality, K six math, right under 12, for them to take something back home, back home means, you know, children.

Speaker 7: It means, uh, grandparents. It means, you know, aunts and uncles and all of that extended community one may have. So the more we can keep ourselves [00:13:00] safe, the more we can do things like vaccinate, that's proven to be effective and it's proven to be safe. We should do that. You know, I, I come from a spot that, that, um, I've had the, well, either the good fortune of the misfortunate. It depends how you want to look at it of experiencing COVID both is heading up the response for the university for the last, uh, actually 20 months in January of 2020. [00:13:30] I remember meeting you at the emergency guests center that time. So we had that started all with our global and study abroad programs, right from China, right? So we had students and won. And you know, what people tend to forget is we had thousands of students here from China.

Speaker 7: So, um, by March the end of March at the height of this, I contracted COVID myself. And I wound up in, uh, in, in the hospital for over a week. And, and it was, um, [00:14:00] a horrific experience. I had a fever where I had to be, uh, over 104 and I had to be ice down on a number of occasions and you're delirious and you're oxygen deprived, a double pneumonia and all these great things that I never expected to have while I'm still coming home on oxygen. I survived. And, um, and I tell that story because I want to impress on people, how it is important that you do vaccinate. I saw [00:14:30] this from the inside out and, um, it's not about sympathy for me. I'm fine. It was never about sympathy, but I want people to understand that I understand what they feel. I understand what it is to actually have COVID to bring and come back. So I get it. And I want them to know that we're doing everything we can to make sure you're okay at work and that when you go home, you're going to be okay [00:15:00] as you make that

journey as well. And I am, I am just ecstatic by the fact that we're able to get back to where we are now at this point.

Speaker 6: Tony, thank you for sharing your personal story, because I think, you know, I know a number of people who've had COVID I know I've had friends that have died from COVID. I think it's important to remember that as we're in the midst of the operations and thinking about how to get back in our anxiety of the moment right now, remembering that this is very human for all of us is so important. And so [00:15:30] thank you for sharing that with us. Um, I want to ask you as a leader now, how would you give advice to other leaders of either schools that are in the same journey as you, but also, you know, other, um, organizations or businesses that are in the process of trying to sort of weed through this and figure it out? What would you say to them is something to keep in mind?

Speaker 7: So for me, it's all about the people you're with every day and that you are charged with leading and setting [00:16:00] an example. Empathy is probably number one. Number two is going to be empathy. And number three is going to be empathy. We need to understand people are scared. There's been a portion of life that's been taken away. I don't know when that's going to ever look exactly like it looked in for, for the holidays of 2019. So [00:16:30] understand that people aren't resistant that our colleagues aren't pushing back because they're, they like being home all of a sudden, or that our students are pushing back because you know, they rather be working from their basement remotely there's pushback because, because we're scared, we're scared of what the future brings. And I think leaders need to understand [00:17:00] that they need to be able to feel what our colleagues feel and work with them as we move our way forward and the best way to work with them.

Speaker 7: Be transparent, never tell them anything, but the truth I told you, I know where it will have outbreaks on campus. I'm absolutely convinced of that. We know that we know that, but we're prepared. We'll deal with those as well. And we'll work our way through that, but we need to be transparent. We can't [00:17:30] sit here and say, oh, you know, there's like a bubble. Everything's going to be fine. That's not true. We know that. And we want, I want my colleagues to know that I know it and what I know Bellville. And I think that's the best way to lead in a pandemic.

Speaker 6: That's I think really helpful and really simple. And hopefully everyone can, uh, you know, abide by that. Cause I think the transparency, the communication empathy, it's just so important. And that's actually a very [00:18:00] good transition to my last question, which is, I have been observing you for some time now during this pandemic. And, um, you know, you're an excellent communicator. I think you're very good at just how you're welcome talking to people. Right. Um, and it's so important in particular during a crisis. And one of the things that has been a hard for a lot of people that I've talked to them about, you know, it's friends and family, um, colleagues are talking about issues, you know, strategies like vaccination or [00:18:30] masking, whether it's someone on the bus next to you, or, you know, in the store where you have a different opinion and you feel strongly about it. And we've seen this play out on a number of different, um, levels across the country. But what is your advice? What's your strategy on talking to someone

who just disagrees with you so that, you know, if it's somebody on a Rutgers bus that sees someone who's not masking and thinks that they should, how should they approach?

Speaker 7: So I, I have found interestingly so well, let's talk about the, [00:19:00] the one piece is, um, something you encounter a Rutgers boss or, or in a store or something like that. What I have found for the most part is that people just forget, and they're not trying to make a political statement, but I'll pulling up the mask or putting it on when they get on the bus, they just didn't put it on when they got on the bus. So my first suggestion is always just ask the person, do you mind putting your mask on, [00:19:30] please? You can do that in a way that's non-confrontational. If the person then decides that this is a place to make a stand, to be confrontational back off, just back off, you don't need to put yourself in that, in that situation. And certainly you can report that to the authorities here.

Speaker 7: We have the COVID observation form and we'll follow up. We follow up on every single one that comes in. So that's the one way to do this when you're in a setting where it [00:20:00] becomes the debate about masking and social distancing, I think stories like mine go a long way. We are in a place in the United States that suffered greatly. I don't know anyone who doesn't know someone who, who was lost or was at least, uh, severely deal. I find, um, as, as I go through and, [00:20:30] you know, I work with a lot of data and work with a lot of numbers and I see, I see a lot of things that kind of come my way in one good thing is I, is I kid, uh, Dr. Strom all the time is I have no medical background. So it's easy for me. I don't, you know, there's no preconceived notions here.

Speaker 7: Um, I look at some of these and I, and I see that for the most part, three quarters of the people will get vaccinated for the most part, I think has 70%, at least one shot in New Jersey. Last time [00:21:00] I looked, um, I think there's another 15% of people who just don't can't seem to have the time to go around, but they're not anti vaccination. They just didn't get around to it. And then there's, you know, the last few, and I would say that's less than 10% that are truly believed that, that this is not where they, they can do this. And that's okay. I respect all of those. We need to work of course, on the 15% to make sure they [00:21:30] get to where they need to be. So again, I think it comes down to communication. It comes down to, uh, having conversations that are honest. I think sometimes people expect sense of, because of my role that I'm going to have all the answers. I do not have all the answers, but I'll be the first one to tell you, I don't have all the answers and we'll try and figure out if there is an answer, but sometimes there's no answer and the no answers are the difficult ones, but we recognize [00:22:00] that the world is imperfect. And again, we just don't want to let the good, become the enemy of the perfect.

Speaker 7: All right, Tony, thank you so much for joining us. Any final words you want to share to all of my colleagues here at Rutgers, don't shut down, take this at the pace and by this, I mean, COVID in general, not just coming, [00:22:30] not just working at Rutgers or studying at Rutgers, but COVID in general, take it at the pace that you are most comfortable with understanding that we do have to live with COVID and it will be here.

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And we need to learn how to co-exist and live side by side while keeping ourselves healthy, to get to happy because the mental toll that this disease can take on you, um, could be just [00:23:00] as debilitating as the disease itself in many ways. Thank you, Tony.

Speaker 6: Thank you for joining us for this episode of on the pandemic. For more information on how Rutgers is meeting the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic, please visit coronavirus.rutgers.edu.