

College students must reclaim direction of their lives

Keys for new campus reality: Vaccinations and assimilation “back to the world”

By Ora Hirsch Pescovitz

In the past year-and-a-half, college students have had their education, expectations, and, yes, their dreams upended because of the pandemic. Frankly, it's time to get back to making dreams come true, and the first step is a return to campus.

In the fall, we, at Oakland University, don't expect to return to normal. Rather, we consider the return to campus to be distinguished by a heightened awareness that we have the monitoring tools, expertise and resources to do whatever it takes to maintain the healthiest possible campus in response to a public health threat.

That's the new reality.

This fall at Oakland University, we expect our campus to resemble the pre-COVID-19 atmosphere, including a minimum of 80 percent face-to-face course instruction, the return of student activities, a bustling student common, and an inspiring learning environment.

Since the onset of the pandemic and subsequent mask-wearing, social distancing and other imposed restrictions, many of us have experienced a condition similar to post-traumatic stress disorder. The disruption in our personal, professional and public lives has shaken our worlds, rearranged our priorities, drawn us into “electronic social-media bubbles.”

A major step in preparing for fall is helping students, faculty and staff come to terms with reorienting themselves to being part of a community and assimilating back into the world. The key to our success is a common understanding of public health policy for the common good that translates into a shared responsibility among students, faculty and staff doing their part to maintain the broader health of our campus community.

The top responsibility comes down to getting vaccinated.

While the ideal is for everyone – students, faculty and staff – to be vaccinated, we do not mandate inoculations. Instead, the best we can do is highly recommend the measure.

Our policy is based on common sense: If you are vaccinated, then you can be part of the face-to-face interaction that is essential to a thriving education community. That way, your participation on campus does not negatively impact another person's health. If an employee, for instance, chooses not to be vaccinated, then they will be encouraged to work from home.

Of course, there are people who will choose not to be vaccinated. While there are medical and religious exemptions, students, faculty and staff who decide not to get vaccinated can choose to get tested weekly, and submit evidence of their health status.

Reluctance and resistance to vaccinations may reflect a uniformed view about the negative impact from inoculations or a noncritical acceptance of an anecdote that misrepresents the facts. Too often, myths have been perpetuated and the truth is compromised.

For instance, some myths include false claims that vaccinations can be delayed until the pandemic is over; vaccines make you ill (which is different than short-term side-effects); natural immunity is healthier and more effective than vaccine-induced immunity; vaccines can cause autism; and, the flu vaccine protects you against COVID-19. Of course, then there is the outrageous falsehood that vaccines are used to implant microchips so people can be tracked.

After receiving a vaccination shot, some women claim it has affected their reproductive systems and menstrual cycles. Neither has been proven by a scientific study or survey. In fact, early data suggests COVID-19 vaccines are safe during pregnancy.

As a nation since January, we've made great progress with vaccinations. More than 70 percent of Americans 65 or older are fully vaccinated, while 55 percent of the country's total population has been fully vaccinated. The rate has a way to go before herd immunity is reached, but we're moving in the right direction.

With widespread distribution of the vaccines and compliance to preventative measures, there are many reasons for hope.

It's time to look ahead.

At Oakland University, that's exactly what we're doing.

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