

Prepping for Fall

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Infectious disease specialist helps QU make decisions regarding pandemic

The part Dr. David Hill plays on Quinnipiac's COVID-19 task force can be compared in some ways to the role of Dr. Anthony Fauci, the well-known infectious disease expert serving on the White House coronavirus task force.

Hill, the director of the Institute for Global Public Health in the Frank H. Netter MD School of Medicine, learned long ago to balance optimism and pragmatism with clear, accurate messaging, reminiscent of Fauci's style. Hill has decades of front-line experience in America and Europe dealing with the spread of infectious diseases such as HIV/AIDS and H1N1 (swine flu).

In fact, during Hill's residency at the University of Rochester in the late 1970s, it was Fauci who provided the template for temperament. Fauci came to Rochester to conduct grand rounds on a rare autoimmune condition. Even then, Hill said, he was impressed by Fauci's deep knowledge, no-nonsense approach and plain-spoken style: "I thought he was just brilliant. He's been on the cutting edge of his field for 45 years now and has published hundreds of respected articles."

More than 40 years later, Hill, like Fauci, has been called upon to help navigate an institution through an unprecedented and ongoing public health crisis. Since February, he has been a vital member of Quinnipiac's COVID-19 task force, a group created by President Judy Olian to guide the university's response to the pandemic.

The task force meets daily to assess reopening scenarios and outcomes, working closely with local and state health officials. The team's 13 members represent nearly all of the university's major offices and functions, from public safety, facilities and student health services to marketing and communications, student affairs and information technology.

In late May, Hill said that if a fall reopening at Quinnipiac happens as planned, it will include on-campus instruction as well as classes with access for remote learning, a mixed model that accommodates all students.

Members of the QU community will be required to wear face masks as they go about their campus routines, with a variety of social distancing protocols and other modifications in place for academic buildings, residence halls, dining halls and other facilities.

"It's very likely we're not going to have a widely available vaccine through the end of the next academic year, so we need a phased approach to learning," Hill said. "It won't be something where we've been staying home, and suddenly, the next day we're all going out without wearing masks and doing what we did several months ago. Things aren't going to turn until we have a vaccine. That's just very clear."

Hill noted that four measures would have to be in place before the university could reopen: all students, faculty and staff would need to do a daily check for symptoms related to COVID-19; Student Health Services would need the capacity to conduct rapid diagnostic testing; the university would need the ability to trace contacts of those who may be infected; and the university also would need to dedicate safe spaces to isolate those who are infected.

"You need to make sure that you're testing enough to pick up a signal [of infection]," Hill said. "Some of the modeling that's been done on a national and global basis is not based on testing everybody. It's based on testing a representative sample and then making a prediction. I could see us doing that."

Hill is proud of how nimble Quinnipiac has been in response to the pandemic, but there is still work to do.

"We are going to need cooperation from all members of our community," Hill said. "In this time of pandemic, we all need to look inside and say, 'What can I do? What do I need to do to make sure my community is safe, and I can continue to learn throughout the semester?' We're really going to have to take that to heart."

The alternative, Hill said, is unacceptable.

"We can't go back to overwhelming our health care system. That's just not an option," he said. "We also need to walk this tightrope of allowing people, especially those who are vulnerable financially and socially, to pursue their livelihoods—but first, they have to be healthy."

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To ensure that the nation isn't caught off guard again, Hill would like to see increased funding and support for emergency pandemic preparedness. This includes preparing the next generation of epidemiologists and infectious disease specialists, in which he sees Quinnipiac playing a role.

Hill also would like to see a master's program in global public health established at the university. He envisions Quinnipiac students taking the lead in combating future crises.

In the meantime, Hill knows thousands of health care alumni are hard at work fighting the pandemic, while thousands more alumni are donating their time, money and supplies.

"As we often say," Hill noted, "it will require all of us to be Bobcat Strong."

Dr. David Hill, shown in collage, is director of the Institute for Global Public Health at Quinnipiac and a member of the university's COVID-19 task force.

