NARRATOR: RIT is a global university. And that includes in the United Arab Emirates, which is home to RIT Dubai. A newly-built campus, located in the Dubai Silicon Oasis, recently opened featuring high-tech learning, research, and spaces for collaborative innovation. In this episode of Intersections: The RIT Podcast, RIT Dubai President Yousef Al-Assaf speaks with Bob Finnerty, RIT’s associate vice president of communications, to discuss the new campus and the vision for RIT Dubai in this emerging part of the world.

BOB: If you could please set the scene of Dubai as an international destination in the context of the United Arab Emirates and the Gulf region. What makes this area of the world so special at this moment in time?

YOUSEF: Well, I think the location of Dubai being in the middle of the world is a big element where it attracts people from all over the place. The people who would like to look into the future. The people who would like to be creative, they would like to run business and cater for many areas of the world. And that's why we have many companies that take the UAE and Dubai as a place where they can reach to Africa, to Asia, and so on. In order to achieve this, you have to look into the future, you have to be a futuristic. And that's why if you compare Dubai to many cities in the world, they are really so advanced in many aspects in the technologies, the things they provide, the services and what have you. And that's why we have actually people coming to Dubai from 205 countries. It's global in the sense you have so many people living in the country, but all of them-- they have one vision, to live happy and to advance the future.

BOB: Just a little bit about your background, if you could briefly tell us your biography and where it fits into your leadership today.

YOUSEF: I'm trained as an engineer. I finished all my studies in engineering and I worked as an engineer. Then after that I joined universities whether in Jordan or American University of Sharjah as a faculty, teaching courses. Then when I became an administrator, I felt any university, any program, any college has to serve the community very well, and they cannot be isolated from the community. Otherwise, you are going to graduate students but they are not relevant to the needs of the community or the industry or the public entity or even the future. And I saw that happening at many places, that you graduate people with degrees but after that you leave them and maybe they don’t find jobs. Then I felt, no it has to be done differently. We have to create an ecosystem where students during their studies they actually are working in the industry, they are building themselves as individuals, and the curriculum should be built in the right way. And when I came to RIT Dubai, it was very fitting because RIT already they are doing that as part of their co-op program, as part of their interaction with industry, as part of having, within their DNA, innovation and creativity. So, it was easy because you have a vehicle now you can achieve this. Now, in Dubai you have so many opportunities but you have to tap into them. We have international companies that come from everywhere. So, the idea of how do we attract talent from everywhere to help the industry, help the economy in this region. And that's what RIT is doing and Dubai is doing and we are really tapping on the support of our colleagues from RIT in New York.
So, we are global and I think there are so many opportunities of being a global university for us in Dubai and even for our colleagues and the community at RIT in Rochester.

BOB: RIT Dubai was established in 2008 to provide a world-class university for students in the UAE, but really for students from the Middle east, Africa, Southeast Asia, America. You started with programs in fields such as electrical engineering, computer, mechanical engineering, finance, and service management. What has changed since those early days since 2008?

YOUSEF: I think the needs are different, the kind of people, the aspirations of the country, the region has changed. Dubai is becoming a smarter city, it’s relying more on technology. So the programs which we started with are still vital, they are important. We have so many students that are taking these programs and they are contributing to the industry. However, we discovered we need to align our programs and our delivery with the major needs and the futuristic needs of the country. And that’s why we are building a program for example, in “Smart City.” Dubai is a smart city, but how can we make it smarter? The same thing with data analytics. This is something for the future, using data and business. How do we see the future, not to only understand what will happen, but to design the future for our country, for the region? So, we are now aligning our deliveries into the future. Another program we are introducing is psychology. People are working with technologies whether working at home or maybe going to a factory and there are some machines. How will those people be interacting when you have so many technologies around them? The psychology will be different, and the people they have to keep reinventing themselves again and again and again.

BOB: In a program like that are you actually partnering with RIT’s College of Liberal Arts back in New York State?

YOUSEF: Yes, we do. Actually, before we created the program we do our feasibility study here, we submit it to our colleagues in Rochester. We reason out with them, why do we need it, how do we offer, what exactly do we offer? And they help us in the design, they help us in the acceptance, and then after that we apply to the ministry of the UAE for accreditation, and then we run the program. So, we are working hand in hand with our colleagues in Rochester not just only in creating the program but also in running the program and how does it add value to us, to Rochester colleagues, and to everyone in the community.

BOB: Well, let’s talk about one thing I know you’re super excited about. Let’s talk about the new campus. The new campus was built with an overarching theme of interactive learning and spans 129,000 square meters with collaborative teaching and research spaces designed to eventually accommodate 4,000 students. You recently dedicated phase one of the project this fall, just tell us about phase one and what that looks like now, and your excitement to be on this campus that’s in the middle of the Dubai Silicon Oasis.
YOUSEF: Now maybe you have seen in your visit that Dubai is filled with nice buildings. So having nice buildings is good, but the question is what is the story you are going to relate and tell inside these buildings. And that’s why we came with four themes, which we think they are very important for the current status and even for the future. The first one is a smart campus, a smart campus and the idea that we generate smart solutions to the challenges we are facing in the region whether it’s in health, in environment, in education, and what have you. Try to test them in the campus, if possible, then after that deploy it in the city with our strategic partners. And we are actually creating solutions, smart solutions and they are used. The other theme is sustainability, sustainability in the three domains, which are technology, the social domain, as well as the environmental domain. And we are looking at alternative kind of energies and how do we make them smart? And how really we help the environment. For example, here in this region, desalination is a major challenge. Now do we have alternatives for desalination. Cooling is another area which we need in order to be sustainable in the future. The third theme is innovative campus. And maybe you have seen actually the signature building of the new campus is the innovation center. The idea of the innovation center is we get everyone together in order to create solutions, companies and startups. So, if you have a company and you created a smart solution, why don’t you come and show it to everyone at our innovation center? If you are a company and you have a challenge, why don’t you bring it here and people will help you in order to solve that challenge? If you are a student and you are looking for an opportunity or you have an idea and you want to make it a startup, you go there and mingle with these companies who are there. So, innovation and creativity and entrepreneurship are a big thing as a pillar as we move into the future. The last one is Connected Campus. We are creating not a classic university where students, they come and take courses, they go to the labs and they go home. We are creating an ecosystem where we have companies inside the campus, we have innovation inside the campus, we have faculty teaching courses, we have everything. So, you come to a place where it resembles the future which you are going to be. And we ask you why don’t you be innovative and maybe you create your future as a student before you graduate. But the question is, from now we have to think, what is going to be phase two? So we are going to have more academic programs, that’s for sure as we move on, but at the same time we are focusing on research and business developments. Research that will add value to the business, it will happen in phase two. And phase two will be built gradually based on the needs.

BOB: If you can describe the unique relationship that you have with the Dubai Silicon Oasis, which is basically a large business park, but it’s many things, it’s a residential area too. And there are thousands of companies here, many startup companies. So what partnerships have you developed and where do you see this all going?

YOUSEF: Well actually, usually we say to people we are the university of Dubai Silicon Oasis, we are not a university in the Dubai Silicon Oasis. And part of our mission is really to integrate with those companies inside Dubai Silicon Oasis and beyond when it comes to helping students to find internship opportunities or finding jobs when they finish. Maybe part of the research will be done with these companies, whenever they have a challenge we are next to them and we do business with them. So, the idea is we
complete the ecosystem of Dubai Silicon Oasis, so we are serving this group and beyond. We have many companies, actually, they choose to be in Dubai Silicon Oasis because RIT Dubai is in Dubai Silicon Oasis because they feel they need the talents and RIT Dubai will give them the talent, they need labs and we give them the labs, and we have this energy with them when it comes to the future. So, it's a complete ecosystem and Dubai Silicon Oasis is really leading that ecosystem and we are part of the fabric of that ecosystem.

BOB: You know, we've been walking around the campus and we've seen and met some tremendous students from all over the globe. If you could just talk a little bit about what is your typical RIT Dubai student.

YOUSEF: Our students they come, at the moment, from 70 nationalities. We are so diverse and we would like to increase this diversity even more. And you know, the best thing is when people have the same goal and they come from diverse backgrounds, different countries, it is so good because you can achieve a lot, so you have the brains of every individual. I think diversity and being global is critical and I hope with time RIT in Rochester and RIT Dubai and other international campuses of RIT, we will focus more into this global element. And how do we take advantage of this globalization of RIT Dubai and we feel global every day?

BOB: What opportunities do you see for RIT students and faculty members back in the United States here at RIT Dubai?

YOUSEF: Well, I think if we do it right, which we started, I think faculty they will have so many opportunities when it comes to learning from their colleagues in Rochester, do research with their colleagues in Rochester, trying to solve challenges here and in Rochester and faculty from both sides they take advantage of the research and the supporting resources we have for research. For our students, you know, when they come here, already it's a global environment but definitely if they go back to Rochester, they will have rich experiences within the campus and beyond the campus, learning new things, meeting new people, seeing different ways of running businesses in the United States compared to Dubai and so on. So, this idea of combining two strong universities in two different cities, I think will enrich the thinking and creativity of so many people. And that's why we would love many faculty from Rochester to come here and we encourage many of our faculty to go there because the more you communicate the more you will get new ideas and new research and you tap on so many new resources available here and in Rochester.

BOB: Briefly tell us about your smart city initiatives and how does that come into play here in Dubai itself but then a secondary question is what can we learn that we can bring back to Rochester, New York?

YOUSEF: Things, they don't happen by themselves, you have to design them, and that's why you design the future and you don't just walk in the future. And Dubai created an entity called Smart Dubai saying, look, how can you capitalize on and encourage
public entities, private entities, in order to create a smarter Dubai into the future? We created the programs and we graduated many people from these programs. Most people they come to the program, they are coming from the public and the private sector with a mission, “I would like to develop a smart solution into my area of work.” And during their studies in the program, they try to create smart solutions at their work, and that’s why many of the things if you see in Dubai that are smart, actually if you check you will find some of our students in the master’s program and the undergraduate program, they developed those. As we move into the future there has to be a new digital deal between all the stakeholders of a smart city, of the future, digitalization in order to make it successful. Many people are worried about, “Will I lose my job? Suddenly I might come out without a job.? What happens to my data? Is it secured or not secured? My opinion as a citizen, is it going to be taken into consideration when you build this smart solution or a smarter city?” So, there has to be a new digital deal among these stakeholders in order to make sure that it is a win-win situation as we move into the future.

BOB: How do you do that though? How do you get people to buy into this? Do you talk to colleagues back at RIT about these high-level issues and just what can we do to partner and move some of these things forward?

YOUSEF: Yeah, talking to our colleagues in Rochester usually goes into a specific project which we are doing, but not the bigger picture. And I think that it’s very important that we come together and we look into the bigger picture so at least we understand what we want and how do we really take advantage of what’s really happening? I think both campus’s people, they have the right intentions but maybe at one stage we need to form some sort of a plan saying, “Look, what is really happening in Dubai? RIT in Dubai is becoming part of the zone in Dubai which is in charge of innovation and creativity. And the region is really having some sort of targets to achieve. And how do we really get RIT Rochester being a leader when it comes to meeting this?” I think that will be beneficial to our faculty in Rochester, to the students in Rochester in addition to our students. So, I think there has to be an intentional effort among us as RIT global – RIT Dubai, main campus, Croatia, China, Kosovo, together with intentional effort. How do we take advantage of what’s really happening at every place we have existence?

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