Interviewer: I will do that.

Researcher #1:Do we want to do quick introductions about who we are? Interviewer: Oh, yes.

Researcher #1:Yeah, okay.

Interviewer: Yes, thanks for reminding me. Do you want to start that out, [Researcher #1]?

Researcher #1:I’d love to. Hi [REDACTED], I’m [Researcher #1]. I’m a Research professor in the College of Social Work and working on this wonderful project looking at the impact of COVID-19 on staff, specifically on women staff.

But anyway, thank you so much for joining us. That’s who I am.

Interviewer: [Researcher #2]?

Researcher #2:Sure, [Researcher #2] from the Division of Public Health. We just got really interested in this work as COVID was unfolding. People were looking at what was happening in Higher Ed, talking a lot about faculty, talking a lot about students, but not so much about staff. So, that’s how this sort of originated. We really appreciate you spending a little bit of time to talk with us about that today.

Participant: Perfect! Yeah, that’s great.

Interviewer: I’m [Interviewer]. I’ve been emailing with you, so it’s nice to meet you in here. I am a Research Assistant working on this product and also an MPH candidate in school right now.

So, if you could tell us briefly about the experience at your institution trying to rapidly implement policies from HR during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Participant: Okay. So, the two scenarios that I was in during this time is that I was in the purchasing office and I was also the Staff Association President. So, those were two very different things that we had to kind of battle in there.

But as far as HR implementing policies, I was part of a committee that would recommend policies which was the COVID taskforce. We would meet and then suggest to administration our ideas.

Provost [REDACTED] was the lead on that committee. It was a direct connection to our administration. Usually I would say that it was filtered down from administration from the recommendations from the COVID taskforce down to HR

staff and then using avenues such as faculty, Senate, and also staff association to communicate the changes that were coming.

Obviously, we get feedback. But a lot of times we either didn’t get the feedback we wanted or there was not a lot of time to react to feedback. Does that make sense? There wasn’t a lot of time.

Interviewer: Yeah, that makes sense.

Participant: “Let’s talk about this.” There wasn’t a lot of that because if we were doing a surge, we had to implement something immediately, so—

Interviewer: Yeah. That makes a lot of sense. What changes were made for staff about work arrangements when the work from home happened?

Participant: I think COVID was the opening of flexibility. I would say this. I hope what I’m saying is not taken out of context. But I have some supervisors that are a little bit older than maybe the average staff—early sixties.

It was like, “We’re coming to work. If you’re not at work, you’re not working” type of deal. To watch that transition change there and they were kind of forced into that. Does that make sense? They kind of said, “This is what we’re doing.”

But then to see how when we came back to school, how a lot of people said, “This makes sense.” Like, “What we’re doing makes sense” and that could also be you guys mentioned the studies about women. That also helped people realize that, “Do I need to always have somebody in my office at all times?”

So, if somebody had the flexibility to work from home part of the day and not make it be that eight-to-five because there was a lot of moms struggling with how to get their kid to daycare, and make it on time to work, and all that. This allowed somebody to say, “Oh yeah. You need to come in at nine because you have children?”

Now in my opinion, that should be a father and a mother’s shared spot. But a lot of times it would fall on our female staff. They finally dared to say, “Hey, I’ll work an hour a night at home if I can come in at nine and make sure that my kid gets to daycare.”

So, I watched. I watched as people became okay with that where before it was like, “No.” Like, “We’re not doing that.

Interviewer: Yeah, that is so helpful. Thank you. Yeah, silver lining, right?

Participant: Yeah. It really opened up. In fact, the building that I sit in now is a brand new building on campus. It was the biggest insurance agent I think in our area which is [REDACTED] Insurance. They used to own this building and it’s right across from the campus.

We needed to expand. They didn’t have anyone wanting to come back. They were working from home and so the offices sat empty. Great advantage for us is that we were able to get a building right next to campus because they literally said, “We don’t have enough people wanting to come back.” So, we ended up with some good stuff there too.

Interviewer: Wow, yeah. It’s a win-win on both sides. That’s great. Did you feel like the changes that were implemented were appropriately timed for the issues that needed to be addressed?

Participant: I did. I felt like that we acted pretty quickly on some things. We would call emergency meetings, stuff like that. We’d say, “Come if you can, but we’ve got to hold the meeting.”

Personally, I felt like some things were show more than anything. But implementations of having signs on all the doors on, we couldn’t require masks, but what language was used there.

So, I felt like it was implemented. Again, just personally I was like, “Well, it feels more like a show.” Like, “If we’re actually trying to keep people safe, what are the things that actually keep them safe more than just making a quick decision on having a sign on every door?”

Before you go into any office there’s a sign and you know what I mean? It felt like that was a little bit—like I said—just making sure that some people felt that they were safe. I’m like, “Well, the safe precaution is wear your mask, social

distance, things like that.” But a lot of reactive things.

It was fine. It was good. It was fast. Our administration was in total support. Having that direct connection to them, I felt like they just reacted very quickly. Like, “Hey, let’s go. This is what we’re doing.”

Interviewer: Good. Yeah, that’s helpful. So, were those decisions typically being made by that committee that you were part of? Were those coming from higher up? Who was making those decisions?

Participant: I think we were a recommendation committee. I think and that’s really how Legal saw it is that really, ultimately, the person over this is the president, right?

Really, and in our policy, that’s really where it comes down to is actually it states that the president will basically make the final decision. But I felt like they listened.

So, it wasn’t a recommend something and they didn’t listen. I felt like every recommendation we gave that we were listened to and that I felt like we had a really good, well-rounded group, and that there wasn’t anything extreme. It was just sometimes frustrations from professors about students and students reacting a certain way to again, we didn’t have a lot of mandates because of the state of Utah.

But it felt like it was, yeah, a little bit of frustration there like, “How do we make them do this?” There was a little bit of kickback on frustrations. Our professors were frontline employees and they wanted us to do more. By law, we couldn’t.

So, I could see that there was frustrations there. So, I feel like it took every recommendation we had right up to the top of the law. You know what I mean? As far as we could take it, but within the law if that makes sense.

Interviewer: Yeah, that makes sense. Well, thank you because you’re actually leading right into the next question which is about challenges that you faced with staff at the institution. Can you tell us a little bit more about those issues that staff raised about challenges?

Participant: Yeah. There’s a lot of departments that are front-facing. You can’t go to the cashier offices and pay something without someone there.

So, them feeling like we really didn’t offer them options for being safe? They had glass. A lot of us got glass and print. They already had that being in the cashier’s office. Like, “Man, am I dealing with this?”

This was really early though when we didn’t know how serious COVID would become or maybe still wondering, “Is this going to just kill off most of us?” It was that scariness of like, “I have to be here, but I don’t know how to be any safer.” We can all wear masks, so yeah.

So, that was where staff was and some were more nervous, right? Then you guys know the data on COVID. It was really hurting a lot of people 50 and above. I think that’s the number.

But then you get a staff number that falls into that age category, and telling them they have to be here, and deal with this. It made them nervous. So, the complaints were more, “How do we protect ourselves?”

The other complaints were, again, just that. Facilities couldn’t go anywhere. Facilities can’t work from home. So, you saw frustration from Facilities saying, “I’ve got to be here every day.”

My boss gave us a choice and most of us chose to stay. So, no real complaints there. We just chose to stay and I think we were more flexible with people as far as if they felt any kind of sickness at all they stay home and work from home especially for new employees that didn’t have a lot of sick time built up.

But then we did. We were offered the COVID sick time from the state. So, we, again, just working through those challenges of saying, “Hey, yeah. You can stay home if you need to.”

But Facilities had some frustrations. I don’t think they were frustrated. I think they felt unappreciated that they were having to be here, and having to front-face everything, and they can’t work from home, and that there was no extra compensation or anything like that for them.

So, that’s what—

Interviewer: Yeah.

Participant: That’s what we were seeing on our end.

Interviewer: Yeah. No, that makes a lot of sense. That’s tricky. What challenges do you see as far as those who were making that shift to work from home? Did they bring up any issues that they were having?

Participant: Campus was really good to say, “Hey, in this case scenario where we’re telling you to stay home if you’re sick or if you feel like you’re immune compromised— " normally the rule is that you can have a laptop that can plug into a port here and there. But some people didn’t have the laptop, so IT went out of their way to basically strip our surplus and said, “Let’s get you a computer at home. Let’s do anything we can.”

So, really I felt like the accommodations were made as much as they could, right? What do we use all of this COVID money for and all this stuff. So, the accommodations were made.

I bought a lot of stuff. In Purchasing, we bought more masks, more computers, more anything than we ever had—docking stations, you name it. Administration’s like, “If they need it, they need it and we need to supply it”, so—

Interviewer: Yeah, thank you. Were there any challenges for men versus women in terms of the shift to work from home?

Participant: I would say that most of our Facilities crew is men and that would be probably the most obvious one that that’s the burden that they carry during that time is that they couldn’t work from home. Yeah.

So, other than that, I don’t know that I can think of anything directly. I’m trying to think. It was a long two years of—

Interviewer: Yeah. Participant: (Crosstalk) Interviewer: Yeah, okay.

Participant: I don’t think there was. I think that one of the challenges was it just goes back to moms in particular. I noticed a lot of moms because sometimes schools would get closed down.

There was a lot of burdens on moms. Working moms that are like, “I have to go home because I have to be there. I can’t just leave my kids at home alone.” There was some burdens on, again, moms in particular.

I saw it help with the burden that they could be more flexible. But I also saw that when school was out, I saw more moms worried about that than dads and that male versus female there.

So, that’s something that I would say that I noticed, but just no data. Just noticed them.

Interviewer: Yeah. No, that’s super helpful. Thank you for sharing that. When if at all did the changes get reversed or were they permanently implemented?

Participant: Well, there’s still signs up today—just general safety signs. There’s still updates on the website. The website still exists.

But gosh, I hate to say exactly when. Things kind of went back to normal maybe I’m thinking, so when I hired my employee six months ago I wondered. I knew we had access to masks and stuff. I think maybe before that, so eight months

before now I was wondering, “Hey, should I get them some masks?” just not

knowing what was going to happen.

But I really felt like about that time that really 90% of the things went back to normal. The only thing that didn’t go back to normal was just a more flexible work schedule for some.

When I say “flexible”, it was either they could work from home. There’s other things. Those are the type of permanent things that kind of stick around. When somebody says they’re working from home now, it’s not just related to COVID. It’s just maybe they’re personal circumstance and what they’re dealing with.

Interviewer: Yeah. Yeah, definitely made it more flexible. Are there people who are working full-time from home still or is it more just on a case-by-case, “I’m sick”, “I’m going out of town”, “I need to work from home temporarily”?

Participant: I think there is still some. I do. I think some people were frustrated to come back.

Some of them are more front-facing.

When the students were all gone and everything, they really didn’t need to be here. When we were holding classes online, unfortunately, cashiers and stuff like that, like I said, they kind of needed to be accessible and sometimes people would come in because the campus wasn’t closed-closed. It was just they weren’t holding classes and in class.

So, there were some frustrations and some kickback to people that really enjoyed working from home. But part of their job is supervision. Part of their job is that.

So, we probably—if I total guess here—maybe five percent of those who stayed home, stayed home? But most people came back. But I’ve noticed more flexibility. I’ve noticed a couple more people working on Wednesdays from home, noticed those type of scenarios.

Interviewer: Cool, okay. I feel like we’ve talked some about what you’ve noticed about

people’s perceptions about the changes. Was there any kind of formal evaluation of what staff thought about the changes?

Participant: Yeah. We ran surveys probably once every couple of months and we also hold open forums every single month in the staff association. The hardest thing is that such a polarizing situation and such also a political situation where - that was where it got divided.

I saw some very [00:17:01].

Interviewer: Uh-oh. Looks like you froze. Participant: Oh!

Interviewer: Oh, there we go. Participant: That better?

Interviewer: I can hear you again, yes.

Participant: Oh, I was just saying, yeah. So, it really felt like politics at some point meaning it felt like you were either against COVID or for COVID. You know what I mean?

Interviewer: Uh-huh.

Participant: I think it got muddied. Towards the end it got muddied as we were talking about vaccines, as we were talking about those kind of things. Booster shots—do you get a booster? It felt way more political than it did actually listening to what we were being told, and taking the data for ourselves, and considering that.

So, that’s all. I didn’t see much kickback. This is a very, very conservative area. What you notice is you notice a lot of people saying, “Well, I didn’t believe ever in it. I’m not going to get my shot. I’m not going to do this.” It was difficult.

We went through a really big scenario of whether we were going to mandate students to get the vaccine shot and staff leaned towards no. Students—the Student Body President said no and then the faculty said yes.

There was a divide there and it was very difficult for administration to say, “We’ve had these three people vote.” I said, “I’m not voting for me. I’m voting for I represent staff and that is my role. We’re taking a vote from them and

whatever their vote says is what we’re going to do.”

It was difficult to represent to split that vote because then faculty doesn’t feel heard, right? No matter what you do, faculty feels like they have been left out of that decision where at least they gave us an option to vote.

It’s very difficult because without the students we don’t have a university.

Without the faculty, we don’t have a university and without all of the pieces

coming together with staff, and all of the staff too, we don’t have a university.

So, our president is very, very equal to all groups and that has been difficult for faculty because that plays out differently at different universities. So, her giving staff the voice was a really, really, really difficult to some faculty. But we were trying to say, “Hey, we’re here with you.” Like, “We care and we understand that we voted differently than you. But it’s not a shot at faculty.”

And I say, you know, there were votes for. There were staff that had your back and wanted these protections. I hope that makes sense. It was a very difficult time because you had a lot of no’s, and a lot of yes’, and there felt like no right answers.

Interviewer: Yeah. Yeah, I can relate to that. That makes it so tough with the political divide. What are the characteristics of an employee who did well with the changes that happened?

Participant: I feel like most people are pretty resilient. I felt like most people handled it really well. There was a couple of immune compromised employees that were really,

really nervous for a long time. It was very, very difficult to say, “Of course! Of course you are feeling this extra pressure.” Like, “You don’t want to be the next victim of this terrible disease.”

So, it felt like the people who handled it best listened to the recommendations, didn’t politicize it, right? Just said, “Hey, I’m listening for myself.” I was personally vaccinated and I personally received a lot of crap for that.

But it was a matter of saying, “Hey, you know what? I’m not asking you to do anything you’re not comfortable with. But this is what I’m comfortable with.” Those who handled it that way, I felt like didn’t get dragged into the weeds of it all and I felt like we had more of those people than not.

There was extremes both ways and I felt like those who were adaptable, who tried to listen to the data, and to what was happening really got out of it best. But if you really believe strongly one way, I think that that time was extremely difficult. I think it was extremely trying for a lot of people, and caused a lot of stress, and a lot of anxiety, and a lot of frustration, right?

I think the people who made it through best let people choose what they’re going to choose, but also really just said, “Hey, I’m going to look at data. I’m going to look at the facts and then I’m going to make the best decision for me and my family. No judgement either way whether you do what you do or not.”

So, it felt like that was probably the strongest group throughout the whole thing.

Interviewer: Yeah. Well, that makes a lot of sense. Well, I definitely want to open things up for [Researcher #2] and [Researcher #1] if they want to ask any follow-up questions. This has been super, super helpful. But first, [Participant], do you have anything else that you’d like to share with us? Anything that you wish that we had asked?

Participant: No, like I said, it was very interesting on the Purchasing side of things. In fact, when I first got this invite I thought this was Purchasing related and then I was like, “Oh, this is staff association! Okay.”

I’m not the president, but I was president during the majority of that time. [REDACTED] is also another. She was president during that time and I was also president.

So, kind of two faces there. She could have some different opinions. She was great to work with. I kind of took over her role on the committee when she was done.

She actually remained on the committee at my request. I said, “I don’t want to come in here and not have some history as to how we got to this scenario.” So, [she] was great. So, do you guys have anything set with [her]?

Interviewer: I recognize that name. I know I’ve reached out to her. I need to look at my notes. I think I need to do a follow-up email with her.

Participant: Yeah. Interviewer: Okay.

Participant: [She’s], she’s in a league directly with the Vice President [REDACTED]. She might have, again, some good insights and she could also give you that female perspective because she was female Staff Association President and then it went to me. She could have some insight on your guys’ research.

But no, I’m so glad we’re to the point where we’re at. I’m actually really glad to

be at work. I have four kids and I don’t do well at home. I’m glad to be back.

But I also have my very own office and my very own space. So, I’m happy to be back.

I also think it’s been really great to have one of my employees call me and to be able to have that flexibility to say, “You know what? You’re a new employee. You don’t have a lot of sick time. I trust that you’ll get some work done at home.”

To be able to do that was the biggest advantage COVID costs for the workforce, I think is to be able to just offer that flexibility to your staff where, again, I was told for a long time, “No, we don’t work from home. We don’t do that.”

I loved how it opened up people’s mind to say, “Listen, a good employee is a

good employee.” There are people who show up to their offices every day and

don’t get a dang thing done. If someone’s good, someone’s good. They’re going

to work from home and they’re going to get their job done.”

So, that’s where I love the flexibility it provided us. So, that was the positive I got out of COVID. Lots of really good relationship.

Provost [REDACTED] was excellent. I didn’t get to work with him. I’m totally on the Finance side of things. Other than him signing a few documents, I got to see him lead and I was very impressed with his leadership style.

He didn’t hold the committee as though he was in charge. He directed the conversations, but he would never give his opinion unless asked. He said, “I’m

here to get your guys’ opinion and then share them back to Cabinet.” He said, “If I share my opinion first, just naturally a lot of people will follow. I want you guys to give me your opinions, your data, what you’ve collected from faculty and staff. I want to do that.”

That’s where I was like, “Wow! He’s really leading this group, but not controlling

the group” if that makes sense.

Interviewer: That’s awesome, yeah. We had an interview with him last week and he seemed like a really good guy. So, that’s really cool to hear.

Participant: Yeah. He was great throughout that. The funny thing is somebody once said, “Oh” and I’m telling you this because they came in. They’re like, “He’s an anti- vaxxer. He’s—” all this stuff.

So, when I came into there I was thinking, “Here we go”, right?” Like, “We’re going to get a lot of, ‘This is how we’re doing things’.” I could not have been more wrong. That person could not have been more wrong. I wouldn’t know what side that guy fell on.

To this day, he took all recommendations seriously no matter what it was. He listened to faculty and when faculty said, “We need an adjustment on our

schedule” or “We need a better way to remote into students”, he was just like, “Let’s go.” You never could tell me that he was anything other than completely cordial and accepting of whatever faculty needed.

I thought, “Man, this was the right person to be here.” So, I let Provost [REDACTED] handle the leadership role there in a way that I haven’t seen many leaders handle it.

Interviewer: That’s wonderful. Glad to hear that. Well, thank you so much, [Participant]. This has been so helpful. I’ve been putting together some information from these

interviews for a conference and there were several times you said something I’m like, “Oh, that’s a perfect quote for this section!” So--

Participant: Right.

Interviewer: --thank you so much. [Researcher #2] and [Researcher #1]— Participant: (Crosstalk)

Interviewer: --anything you want to add?

Researcher #2:No, this has been a great chat. Thank you.

Researcher #1:Yeah. Thank you so much. Very, very informative. Thank you!

Participant: Hopefully. I didn’t know if I could answer all the questions. I was like, “Man, doesn’t it feel like years ago?” We’re all in this weird funk.

So yeah, it was really like I said, we got a lot of good out of a very bad situation. We wouldn’t be meeting on Zoom today. Actually, so I take that back. So, one of the biggest advantages is over half my meetings are on Zoom now. I love it!

Interviewer: Yes.

Participant: I’m in my space and I don’t have to schedule parking. I don’t have to schedule anything. That has been the true lifesaver, so--

Researcher #1:I know. Now it’s on occasion I have to schedule time to travel between meetings

and I’m like, “What? Wait. Wait!”

Interviewer: “This isn’t—"

Researcher #1:“I’m not going to make that meeting. I know.”

Interviewer: Right?

Participant: When we first started Zoom - and I feel like I’m pretty tech savvy - I just thought,

“Oh my gosh! People are talking over people.” But we’ve adjusted. We’ve

learned how to discuss, and use verbal cues, and all that stuff to just really…

When I’m on Zoom I might as well be in person. Loved it!

Interviewer: Yep. Yep, I agree. I love it. Awesome.

Participant: Sorry about the technical difficulties at first. I’m glad my phone ended up coming through for me and I’ll have to work that out before my next meeting.

Interviewer: Yeah, good luck. I hope you can get it worked out.

Participant: Yeah. You guys are awesome. You can follow-up with email or call anytime. Interviewer: All right.

Researcher #1:Thank you so much. Interviewer: Have a wonderful day. Researcher #2:Goodbye.

Interviewer: Thanks.