Interviewer: Record to this computer. Yay, I think we’re working. Woohoo. Okay, alright. So our questions… just a minute. Trying to make it a little bigger. Okay, so can you briefly tell us about the experience at your institution when you’re trying to rapidly implement policies from HR during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Participant: Yes, the first thing that we did is we established an action team, or the first thing our president did was establish an action team that really would consider the full sweep, broad implications of COVID. So going back to March of 2020, as we began—and I’m assuming where you want me to go is when the governor announced that campus was closing, that we were closing the face-to-face, and we were going remote. So at that point, the president here at [U2] convened sort of a taskforce to consider all of the different policy implications of [U2] going remote.

There were representatives from the academic side, so academic administration, namely our provost and one of our vice provosts. We had representation from our facility side. We also had HR representation by way of our executive director, of course we had legal representation, myself. And that taskforce actually met, and we began to go through the different implications of what going remote would mean here at [U2] for those three populations. What it would mean for our students, what it would mean for our faculty, and what it would mean for our staff. And we really looked at each one of those three groups.

Now in many cases, the policies that we were considering applied to all three. In some cases, the policies would only apply to one or two of those groups. For example, when we were looking and considering what this would mean for our courses, that of course would only apply to our faculty and to our students. So we thought very closely about those two populations. Certainly for our staff, things that we talked about were really identifying different levels of critical work and how that critical work could be accomplished remotely.

We talked about those critical jobs that must be done on campus, even though campus was, in essence, closed. There still needed to be work being done. We still had students in residence halls, for example, that needed to eat, that needed things. So really when it came to the population of staff, it was really identifying subgroups within the staff, a staff that could be full remote. Staff that still needed to be on campus for essential jobs, and staff that were in between those two different categories and then developing policies and ways that we would address and support those staff. Is that answering your question? Is that getting it?

Interviewer: That’s excellent, yes. Thank you so much. That makes total sense. Great. So the changes that you were just talking about, especially for the staff in terms of thinking about how do we tier this out, were they appropriately timed for the issues that needed to be addressed?

Participant: I felt like our president’s strategy of getting this, really this strike team is what I’m going to call it, the COVID strike team together right at the beginning and having it be representative of the different populations within our institutional community, I felt like we were getting all of the information at the table that we needed to have in order to consider. For example, the different subgroups of our staff population, realizing that we did in fact have staff that could be fully remote.

But we also had staff that couldn’t be. We had work on this campus, facilities work, again, dining and housing, things like that where we did need to have staff here. What would that look like? How could we accommodate them? And then of course we then began looking at, okay, if staff needed to be on campus here, what does social distancing look like? How are we taking care of things like masking and looking at those? So I felt like we were brining the necessary ideas to the table in a timely manner in order to address the needs of our staff.

Interviewer: Great. Okay, so you have mentioned some people in here that made these decisions. Who was involved in the true decision-making about all of this?

Participant: So ultimately of course our president was the final decisionmaker, but she feels very, very strongly about the council method and this idea of getting a team together where she can hear and discuss all of the pertinent information. So for staff, it was really having our executive director of human resources at the table, our people representing public safety. Our vice president for business and finance, where HR reports up through.

Eventually after that initial March—and I might be jumping ahead a little bit. But as we moved into the COVID period following that March, our president did establish a series of different working groups that met regularly via Zoom to address many of the issues and the intricacies of how this is impacting our staff. We had what we called a COVID action team, and we had different groups that all really focused on different policies that needed to be addressed and changed for our staff.

And so that representation include our [staff organization]. We had our [staff organization] president that was part of a couple different groups and committees after March. Again, that strike team was sort of the first emergency group. Okay, what do we do? How do we start this? But then

as we moved into later March and April, we set up more formal committees that had greater representation, like our [student organization].

Interviewer: Great, okay. So as they’re thinking about making these changes, how many of these changes either—as we’re moving out of the pandemic, how many of these got reversed, so you don’t do that anymore? But then how many of them sort of became permanent?

Participant: Sure. So I would say the first thing that comes to mind that most institutions across the country were all influenced by thanks to COVID and that’s we came out of a COVID with a telework policy. I mean, we just did. Would we have had a telework policy implemented in 2021, in 2022 had we not had COVID? Probably not. And so first and foremost, I would say the behemoth, the elephant in the room was we had a formalized code policy addressing telework that came out.

And so now we have a telework policy with three different types of telework. We have a [REDACTED] process where employees and supervisors can submit for telework approval that goes all the way up to their division head for approval. So we not only have a policy, but we have a process, infrastructure put in place for that policy. That most like likely would not have happened had we not been nudged and pushed by COVID. So that was probably first and foremost. Just an overall idea of teleworking and working remote, that things could be done remotely.

Before we know it, by 2022 we found ourselves in a position where now teleworking and remote work is becoming a job perk. And frankly it’s also being talk about in terms of job satisfaction and in terms of job security.

And from an institutional standpoint, teleworking and flexibility in terms of keeping good people and keeping good staff here. So all of a sudden, this idea of teleworking and flexibility is now part of our hiring process. It’s part of our retention efforts for our staff. We’re finding it coming up now, and it’s become a very common discussion point.

Interviewer: Um-hmm, um-hmm. Okay, thank you. That makes total sense. So what kinds of challenges did you encounter with staff while you're trying to implement these changes? What things did they, staff say, oh, I think this is going to be a problem?

Participant: Yeah, I think one of the areas, perhaps, that we were especially sensitive to was, [U2], we have about forty percent of our total workforce—that includes faculty, but we have about forty percent that all have dependents 18 years or younger. And so we knew very early on and what we were hearing as all the local schools went remote, too, is we quickly knew and

understood that we have challenges with not only with our staff but with our faculty, too. This idea of we have staff working remotely from home, but they’re also caregivers.

And they are not only trying to do their jobs remotely, but they’re also now that third grade teacher for that dependent at home trying to do classes remotely. And being sensitive to that and being flexible enough to realize that many of our staff were being pulled in a lot of different directions. Again, they were being asked to do their work remotely, but also they were being asked to just as a caregiver of the dependent, a 0- to 18-year-old dependent, also being asked to be a public school teacher now. Or provide daytime dependent care that the school perhaps was providing. So we recognized early on that that was a real challenge that we had to address.

The other area that we quickly realized is just saying to a staff member “go remote” is real easy, but how’s that staff member going to go remote? Do they have a computer at home? Do they have inappropriate home or setup? Do they have adequate network capacity? Do they know how to use a VPN, so that they can log in [IT dashboard] so that it’s secure in making sure that all of the communication is being done behind a firewall that we took for granted when they were on the university network on campus?

Something as simple as, do they have a comfortable chair to sit in at home for eight hours a day? We had employees asking, can I come and grab my office chair and take it home? We would never have thought of that.

It’s not just a computer, but it's an office chair. It’s do they have an environment at home where they can be successful in their job? Whether, again, it's not having a quiet room, network capacity, VPN, dependents at home. How is that changing the work environment for our staff and recognizing that and being flexible and being able to address that and make sure that our supervisors understand that contextually for our staff things have changed and that we need to be open and be aware of those changes.

Interviewer: Great. So how did these challenges affect men and women differently?

Participant: I think that from what we could see from what we found out going back to this idea of dependent care, I think it was probably—though I don't have the data to be able to prove this, but I would hazard a guess to say that perhaps our female staff, when it came to dependent care, were under a lot more pressure than our male staff were. I would be shocked if the data

didn’t bear that out. Again, I don't have quantifiable data to be able to

show that, but I would be shocked if the data didn't show that our female

staff with dependents at home were under a lot more pressure than our male staff were. It just wouldn’t surprise me.

I think from that point we—just from a facility side, I think if we were, again, to look at the data, which I don’t believe we have, I think we probably most likely ended up with more male members of our staff in critical type work where they still needed to come to campus. I’m talking about more of the facilities type of work, the maintenance where traditionally we have a higher percentage of male staff in those positions. So again, I haven’t looked at the data to see, but I would imagine that of the staff that we still required to come to campus because they were in those critical on-campus jobs, I would be shocked if a majority of them were not male. And so I’m sure there was a difference there, too.

Interviewer: Um-hmm, um-hmm. No, that makes sense. Thank you. So was there any evaluation of what staff thought about these changes?

Participant: That’s a really broad question. Do you mean at the time or later on or hindsight because hindsight is 20/20? But like what did they think of it in April of 2020, or what did they think of it is in March of 2023?

Interviewer: I think let’s go with what did they think of it in March of 2023. Let’s go with that, yeah.

Participant: So what do they think of it now when you look back in retrospect? Based on what we’ve heard, I believe staff understood that the institution truly was looking out for their best interest and doing the best that we could. We had a president who we did a number of live townhalls, remote, where we opened up and tried to engage with the institutional community, again with those three populations. We did different townhalls to be able to give people a chance to voice their concerns, to ask the questions. We tried as best we could to communicate as much as possible and make that communication consistent and not just rely upon immediate supervisors but get word out at the institutional level.

So I think in looking back that staff saw and understood that we had their best interest in mind, that we were doing the best that we could. Things like testing, we very early were one of the first institutions in the state, along with [another university] to provide testing, free testing for our faculty, students, and staff. I think staff appreciated that. I think that was an area that they really appreciated.

So I think for decades to come, no doubt, there’s going to be second- guessing on what we did and we didn’t do, but I think in general based on

what we heard, staff were appreciative for the policies that we put in place, the communication that we put in place.

Interviewer: Great, great. Thank you. So overall, can you think about or identify what were the characteristics of an employee who did well when these changes were being implemented?

Participant: If we’re talking about the—would you like it from a perspective of, say, an employee that went totally remote back then?

Interviewer: Yeah. No, that’s fine. That’s fine.

Participant: I certainly think there was frustration. I think there was—I mean, there are so many variables, it’s hard to answer that because, again, is it an employee that is one hundred percent remote? Is it an employee that did have an appropriate place at home to be able to work a quiet place? Did they have adequate bandwidth? Did they have good network? Did they have a good chair? Did they have dependents at home that were putting pressure on them to serve in multiple roles? So I really have a hard time answer that considering all of the different variables that could be at play.

I would say if I were to answer that in general, I would say certainly going back to March and April of 2020, there was a lot of frustration, and there was a lot of concern about how were we going to do this? And how am I as a staff member going to make this work? I think as time moved on, I think that settled down, and we put policies in place, and we had communication in place where we found our groove.

And then we started inviting people back to campus, things like social distancing and those sorts of things, there was concern. We particularly had concern about staff who were in high-risk medical groups. What did coming back mean to them? And so putting the necessary protocols in place so that staff could feel safe when they came back. Or if they didn’t feel safe, accommodating them until they did feel safe.

I think that was a variable that became really critical and that’s we have different staff at different stages of life with different health situations. Some were eager and couldn’t wait to get back. Some were scared to come back. And recognizing that and understanding that I think was important. Now you got to a point where we finally our president in August of 2021 declared for fall semester, we’re back. And so bringing people back. But even there, what were they coming back to, and what were the safety precautions in place to be able to help them feel comfortable?

Interviewer: Yeah, yeah. Great. Okay, this has been incredibly helpful. Is there anything else that you would like to share with us?

Participant: No, I think that you asked some really important questions. I hope I remembered as much as I could. I would say I might be blocking out on purpose some of what happened during that wonderful time. But I’m proud of the way our institution responded. I think that our staff knew that we worked and tried really hard. But like I said, there were so many variables, the best that we could do was get the right people in the room that represented the needs of our population and just really work to address those needs as efficiently and effectively as we could.

Interviewer: Great. Wonderful. Thank you so much for your time, [REDACTED]. We really appreciate it.

Participant: Of course, of course. Happy to.

Interviewer: Good, thank you. Alright, we’ll let you go because we promised we’d only keep you for a half an hour, so you have a lovely evening.

Participant: Okay, thank you. You too, bye-bye. Interviewer: Great, thank you.

Researcher: Thank you.

Interviewer: Bye.