Interviewer: Okay, so we’re going to go ahead and record. Okay, all right. Okay, so I’m going to ask the questions, and [Researcher]’s taking notes just in case our recording didn’t work, because we recently had on this other similar

project where the recording didn’t even work for us. So there we go. Okay. All right. So can you just tell me briefly about the experience here at the university where you were trying to rapidly implement new policies from HR during the COVID-19 pandemic?

Participant #1 (male): So [REDACTED](2), do you want me to go first? Participant #2 (female): Yeah.

Participant #1 (male): And [Interviewer], steer me back on track if I get off track here. I think back to March 2020 when the pandemic began. I mean, we were all just sent home one day to work from home, right? And so as far as HR policies and policy changes, the biggest thing was that, in my recollection, HR had to hurriedly update and create a telework or a virtual work—I can’t remember exactly what they call it—but there’s an agreement if you’re allowed to work remotely that you have to sign. And the agreement has

specific provisions in it that it’s a privilege, not a right to work remotely, that it may be revoked at any time, that it’s not a substitute for dependent day care, those sorts of things. So that was the primary and biggest policy change that I recall having to rapidly put into place when the pandemic started. Is that kind of what you’re getting at, [Interviewer]?

Interviewer: Yes, that’s great.

Participant #1 (male): Okay. [REDACTED](2), do you recall anything else right off the bat that we did when the pandemic started?

Participant #2 (female): I think on our own department level, we were scrambling to try to translate that for our staff so that they could understand how that looked. And there was a variety of abilities to adapt, and we had to sort of take the people who were struggling the most. I think that helped us inform our own internal expectations that we were putting out to our staff.

Interviewer: Great. Okay. So I’m actually going to jump ahead in my questions because you just brought up a question about what challenges did you encounter with staff at the institution in their abilities to work through this whole process and the different changes that were implemented.

Participant #1 (male): So I think the challenges…how do you divide this up? One challenge was related to equipment and making sure people had the proper equipment to work at home. And then the other challenge was related to more working

around their personal lives and personal issues related to childcare issues, schools going also to remote and having kids at home while you’re working. So those are the two biggest challenges that I think maybe jump to mind. [REDACTED](2), what do you remember?

Participant #2 (female): I remember some emotional challenges. For example, we had at least one employee who struggled with, you know, how much of my normal morning routine do I do if I’m not in the office and I’m sitting at home in front of my computer? And I think in the beginning, we didn’t expect people to be on camera necessarily; we were just trying to figure out how to get work done from home. And I had to a couple of times just respond and say just pretend like you’re doing your normal routine and keep your day going. Because emotionally, some people were struggling with not having their routine. They just felt like the whole ground had

been pulled out from under them. I think the other struggles had to do with technology and adapting to a whole new set of skills. And it was changing, because we were using Zoom, and then we switched over to Teams, so we had Version 1.0 and Version 2.0 of this chaos. And people who were normally an expert in what they were doing all of a sudden couldn’t function until they had this steep learning curve mastered.

Interviewer: No, that’s great. Yeah, these are great examples. Thank you. Were there issues that staff specifically raised when they were talking to you? I like the one, [REDACTED](2), the example that you just gave of how much of my routine am I supposed to keep? What am I supposed to be doing here? Were there other issues that staff raised?

Participant #2 (female): What comes to mind to you, [REDACTED](1)?

Participant #1 (male): Well, this is where it would be really helpful to have [REDACTED] and/or [REDACTED] participate. Because [REDACTED](2) and then [REDACTED] and [REDACTED], who are, again, they’re our main managers in our department and they oversee teams of, I don’t know, five to eight people, six to eight people, whatever it might be. So those folks, when those types of things came up, they would go directly to their manager. I didn’t really see or hear a lot of that. I would get it secondhand from my managers, again, primarily [REDACTED] and [REDACTED]. But I think that too, especially early on, you just had a lot of people that were, I think…I mean, we all dealt with it, right? Just the uncertainty of what was going to actually happen. There was a lot of uncertainty about just with the economic impact, I think people were worried about am I going to even have a job?

Participant #2 (female): Right.

Participant #1 (male): I think that a lot of people, you know, kids were struggling. If your kid’s struggling, you’re struggling, as the saying goes. So there were a lot of those things going on. But I don’t really recall getting a lot of that firsthand. There are other folks in our department I think that could probably provide more insight on that question.

Participant #2 (female): Well, the other thing that comes to mind is that again, you have this staff who is professionally trained. They’re good at their jobs.

They’ve worked together for quite a long time. They know how to do things. And now suddenly, I think it took a while for us to realize that our capacity to deal with what used to be easy and we were accomplished at was reduced significantly. Because our brain space was being kind of hijacked by all this emotional uncertainty that [REDACTED](1) is talking about. Is the earthquake going to continue? My kids are freaking out.

They’re out of school. I don’t know how to get toilet paper. There were so many things we were trying to straddle that doing our jobs that we already knew how to do, suddenly we felt kind of incompetent for a while.

Participant #1 (male): The challenges I think evolved over time too, like once we got through the initial six-month period of the pandemic. And, you know, things kind of went up and down in terms of infection rates and what we were all watching. We got through that first winter, things seemed okay, and then Omicron came along that next fall. And so it seemed like the challenges just evolved over time about how were we going to work together, were we going to stay…I’ll tell you one of the biggest challenges in my mind at least was when the university kind of gave us some leeway about you decide. Are you going to be hybrid? Are you going to be in the office? Are you going to be remote? That was a pretty challenging process to work through because you had a lot of disparate opinions about what was best or what worked best. So that was just…I’m rambling at this point. The challenges just evolved over time.

Participant #2 (female): No, that’s a really good point, [REDACTED](1). And I think there was this underlying fear of this virus that no one really knew what to expect. Should we be hiding in our houses? Should we be pooh-poohing the rules? There was such a wide variety. And some people were still trying to live their lives relatively normally, and then one by one, we started seeing staff come down with COVID. And in the beginning, people were more stressed about it. What were you thinking, [REDACTED](1)?

Participant #1 (male): No, no, that’s exactly it. There was no formal channels of communication about like has anybody had COVID, but that information would get ferreted out after a while. And then it became all this conversation like

who can go the longest without catching it, or something like that. And then I also want to add in too—and again, I’m not attempting to delve into politics—but you layer onto all of that the 2020 presidential election.

Participant #2 (female): Oh.

Participant #1 (male): And there were lots of discussions, not necessarily about who won or who didn’t win or who incited a riot, it was just more of, again, another level of uncertainty that caused just so much angst about what’s going to happen. Where is this all leading us to? And so again, the challenges changed and evolved over time.

Interviewer: That’s great. This is wonderful, okay? So do you think in consideration of these challenges, was it different for men than it was for women?

Participant #2 (female): We’re going to have to preface that with how many men in our department, [REDACTED](1), versus women? We’re mostly women.

Participant #1 (male): So me and [REDACTED]…

Participant #2 (female): And [REDACTED].

Participant #1 (male): [REDACTED]. [REDACTED] was with us for a while.

Participant #2 (female): Out of 25, six or seven, so yeah, it’s a pretty small percentage. So I think probably what we’re talking about mostly applies to what you’re asking, because those were the squeaky wheels.

Interviewer: Okay.

Participant #1 (male): Will you restate your question, [Interviewer], just so I can make sure I understand it?

Interviewer: Yeah. So just wondering, the challenges that people faced during the pandemic, was it different for men than it was for women?

Participant #1 (male): I think absolutely, and I think part of that too—at least what I observed in my own home and in our department—is I think also what adds to the complexity of that is do you have young kids or not? And that probably applies outside of the pandemic as well. But I think absolutely it impacted or affected women much differently and in much different ways than it did men, at least in my observation. So one thing that we had to work around or talk to people about is some of our folks have really young kids. Some have elementary-age kids or middle school/junior high kids, high school

kids. And so we had to work through flexibilities around like can I leave for 45 minutes to take my child to school in the morning and then leave for 45 minutes in the afternoon to go pick them up.

Participant #2 (female): Or my kid is sick and they can’t go to school.

Participant #1 (male): Yeah. [REDACTED](2), did you have other thoughts about that particular question? I think absolutely, yes. The answer is yes. And I can think of some more examples where I think I observed that, but [REDACTED](2), you might have some things that come immediately to mind.

Participant #2 (female): I think I’m going to answer yes but for a different reason. And I

don’t want this to sound sexist, but I think that women’s perception and filtering of all that was coming at us can be more emotionally charged, or at least it’s accepted that it’s more emotionally informed. And so I feel like our department, since it was mostly women at the time, it was bubbling and churning constantly for those reasons, just being kind of on a higher anxiety level. Just my perception.

Interviewer: Okay.

Participant #2 (female): Yeah, [REDACTED](1). Participant #1 (male): I didn’t mean to interrupt. Sorry. Interviewer: No, go ahead.

Participant #1 (male): I just want to say what’s interesting about that too is—and maybe it’s just how men and women project those sorts of things differently—because I will tell you—and I can only share from my own personal perspective— but I was on the verge of a meltdown for about a year and a half myself.

Just, again, the anxiety and the angst about not really knowing where

we’re going, what this all means, how it’s going to impact our jobs, society at large. So maybe I didn’t express it in the same way and maybe I didn’t emote it in the same way, but…

Participant #2 (female): Right.

Participant #1 (male): …but for a long, long time, I was on the verge of melting down as well. So I don’t know that that was unique to our female employees versus our male employees, and I never talked with our male employees…

Participant #2 (female): Yeah.

Participant #1 (male): …male employees, but…

Participant #2 (female): That’s interesting. And then on contrast, my husband, who tends to be an introvert, was elated that he wasn’t expected to do all of the things normally that he’s expected to do.

Interviewer: I had a colleague who emailed me, and she said, This is great. I don’t have to come in. Because I am an introvert. I don’t have to interact with people. And I’m like, okay.

Participant #2 (female): Yeah.

Interviewer: Totally different perspective, right? Participant #2 (female): Yeah.

Interviewer: Yep. Great. Okay, this is really great. So when you’re thinking about the changes that had to be implemented, were they appropriately timed for the issues that needed to be addressed for people?

Participant #1 (male): I think so. I think that the university was very proactive in getting people home, allowing people to follow public health guidelines to isolate, and then making it possible for us to actually do our work. There were challenges, the ones we talked about, but making it at least possible and supporting our ability to do our work. And there was never this underlying, you know, we let you go home, but don’t get comfortable with it sort of thing. I thought [U1] as a whole was incredibly supportive of just making this work the best that we could.

Participant #2 (female): And I think it took people a while to trust that, like it seems too good to be true in the beginning. But I think gradually people started realizing that in the long run, the university wanted us all to succeed and they were going above and beyond what people would expect to make sure that would happen. I also think that as we started becoming more comfortable and more veterans at managing this chaos, when I started hearing our staff complain about things like, Well, I want a stand-up desk, maybe the university should pay for that, I took that as a positive sign that people were finally out of trauma and making normal kinds of requests.

Interviewer: Right. No, I like that. That’s really good. Nobody’s said it that way before, so thank you. Yes. So who made the decisions about the policies and changing things in your office?

Participant #1 (male): Well, I’ll be interested…[REDACTED](2), why don’t you answer that question first.

Participant #2 (female): The way I would answer it is our management team. We didn’t make decisions, but we definitely identified issues that we needed to have answers to. And I feel like from each manager there was definitely open communication channels to the teams and back about what these issues were, but in the end, I think the management team with [REDACTED](1)’s guidance made some clear decisions on things that we needed some black and white guidelines on. What do you think, [REDACTED](1)?

Participant #1 (male): I didn’t want to answer the question first because…I feel good that you said that you felt like our management team made those decisions.

Because that’s what I felt like we tried to do.

Participant #2 (female): Yeah.

Participant #1 (male): And there are a few things that came down to me. I will tell you the biggest pandemic-related challenge was whether we were going to go back into the office and how often would we be going to go back into the office. And we had hours and hours and hours of discussion about that. And it was funny to watch people’s perspective about that evolve over time.

Because we had a couple of people on our management team who were adamantly opposed to remote work arrangements prior to the pandemic, and then after the pandemic started became adamantly against coming back into the office. And then we had other people that were a little bit neutral, but that neutrality I think was based on how horrible their commute is every day. And so they’re like, Well, we’ll come to the office if you want us to, but, you know, the commute’s really bad so we don’t mind staying home either. Again, I’m back to rambling, but I guess the

point I’m making is we had a lot of discussions about when we were going to come back to the office, how often were we going to come back to the office, and at some point we couldn’t really come to a specific full agreement. And so the other people on or management team just said, Okay, you get to decide. You need to decide this. And so that was left on my shoulders.

I also want to say—and [REDACTED](2), jump in if I say this incorrectly—but we had started making some come-back-to-work plans. I don’t remember the exact timing, but we planned to come back I think after Labor Day—I don’t think it was 2020 when they invited us come back; maybe it was 2021—and we planned to do that. And I believe that’s when all the Omicron variant then went wild. So we scrapped those plans.

We said okay, we’re not going to come back to the office while we have this new spike, and so I felt like we were really flexible too with those plans. So we ended up landing on…we only come back into the office for one week of the month, and it’s really just…

Participant #2 (female): One day.

Participant #1 (male): …one day. One day for each team. But we’re in the office essentially overall one week a month, basically, for the whole department. And to be honest with you, I think the biggest reason that we did that was because we have leased office space. And who knows where we’re going with that, and I’ll be interested to find out where we’re going with that, but if we

didn’t have leased office space, I don’t know. I don’t know that we would be coming back in at all. But at any rate, now I’m rambling again. Sorry about that.

Interviewer: So that change that you made where you just come in one day a month and it varies among the team members, is that still in place?

Participant #1 (male): Yeah.

Interviewer: Okay, so that was a change that got put in place that it didn’t get removed;

you’re continuing to implement that.

Participant #1 (male): Yes.

Interviewer: Okay. Were there other things that you put in place that you’re like, okay, we’re not going to do that anymore or things that you didn’t put in place and it’s like oh, yeah, we need to do that now.

Participant #2 (female): It kind of evolved. In the beginning when we were still all remote, when we felt like it was safe to gather and keep our distance, we were scrambling to try to return to needing to be together to be team members, right? So we would have these really awkward gatherings where it was six feet apart, bring your own chair and your lunch. And we tried that, and it didn’t seem to really change anything. What else did we do as far as coming into the office?

Participant #1 (male): We did those sorts of things. This wasn’t coming to the office, but we did I think what a lot of other people did. We tried to create some Zoom gatherings here and there.

Participant #2 (female): Oh, yeah.

Participant #1 (male): Yeah, we would do some trivia games and give away like five-dollar Starbucks gift cards just trying to maintain some sense of community and department or office culture. I will tell you that in going back to the coming into the office versus not coming into the office, my preference would have been to come to the office one day a week. That still would be my preference, but there was a clear and concise desire by almost everybody to not come into the office or to not come to the office very

often at all, and so that’s where we landed on one month instead of one

day a week.

Participant #2 (female): There’s another factor that was going on too. So right before the pandemic hit, we had expanded our office by about 60 percent more—I don’t know what percentage. We didn’t double our space; we increased it by about 60 percent.

Participant #1 (male): The worst timing in the world, right?

Participant #2 (female): Right. Not even a month after we’d all figured out how it was going to work, we end up being completely exiled from the office for an extended period of time. So after about the first year and through at least one budget cycle, we started realizing that we may not be going back to every day in the office, like the old-school model, and that it didn’t make sense for us to maintain all of this space based on the occupancy. So at some point, we decided which space to keep, and we started clearing the other space. But what happened is that the space we decided to keep was smaller than would accommodate our complete staff all at once. So what happened is very few people have their own dedicated workstation. There are a few, but the rest are just touchdown stations, and whatever’s

available you can use. That shifted everybody’s attitude about going into work when you don’t have all of the things you’re used to keeping as your creature comforts in your little space. And now, people really didn’t really want to go in because they didn’t have their lotion and their extra fork and all of these things. So I think one day a month, people just sort of pack everything, but more than that, they really pushed back.

Interviewer: Okay. Great, thank you. So was there an evaluation about what the staff thought about all of these changes, like some kind of a formal evaluation of this?

Participant #1 (male): [REDACTED](2), didn’t we send out…I want to say we did like a Survey Monkey survey of some kind. I could be mistaken. I’d have to go back and look. But I want to say especially when we were getting to the point of creating a hybrid work arrangement, I thought that we did a Survey Monkey survey sort of thing where we asked people about their

preferences on how often to come into the office and things related to that. Does that ring a bell?

Participant #2 (female): I feel like we did too, but it’s all kind of a blur. But I think whether or not we did it formally, the fact that we weren’t all together as an office strengthened how each team communicated with each other. And whether or not people responded to a formal survey, they definitely tell their managers what they think. I mean, it’s made very clear.

Participant #1 (male): Yeah, we don’t have many shrinking violets in our department, which is a positive and sometimes a pain in the neck.

Interviewer: So my last question is so what do you think the characteristics are of employees who did well with all these changes during the pandemic?

Participant #2 (female): Just for your and my record, [REDACTED](1), we might use some

people’s names because it might be easier for us.

Interviewer: And then we will delete the names in the transcript. Participant #2 (female): Yeah.

Participant #1 (male): Or just use a position, if that’s easier. Participant #2 (female): Yeah. Who did really well?

Participant #1 (male): [Interviewer], I think that’s a really super interesting question, because again, I might say I think this person did really, really well, and if you talked to them, maybe they don’t think they did. I don’t know. But in my observation, everybody on our management team I thought adjusted quickly and did extremely well with it. And each of them have quite different circumstances. Two folks on our management team have young kids. And then two folks—[REDACTED](2) is one of them and then another one—have no kids, at least no kids at home.

Participant #2 (female): Right.

Participant #1 (male): I had…

Participant #2 (female): Teenagers.

Participant #1 (male): …two teenagers and one in like fourth and fifth grade.

Participant #2 (female): Oh yeah. I think the characteristics—I’m trying to get on track here.

Participant #1 (male): Yeah, sorry about that.

Participant #2 (female): The characteristics of people who did really well I think are people who tend to be a little more tuned in to operations and logic. [REDACTED](1), I’m thinking of [REDACTED] in particular.

Participant #1 (male): Yeah.

Participant #2 (female): I think it really depends on what was going on in their lives. People who lived by themselves at home struggled more. I do know I heard more about that.

Participant #1 (male): Yeah.

Participant #2 (female): Because they didn’t have that social element. My husband had just retired six months before all this happened, so at least I had a warm body in the house. I had someone to talk to. But we have people who are single and live alone, and I think they struggled a lot because of that. Also people who are single, a huge part of their social life was pulled away.

Participant #1 (male): So thinking more about your question, [Interviewer], it seemed to me that folks who wanted to work at home even before the pandemic—and I can think of two people in particular that I think thrived and were just fine with going home and working from home and not having to come in at all. And so maybe that’s attributable to them having a more introverted type of personality—I’m not really sure—but the folks who already desired to work at home I think adjusted more quickly and adjusted better. I can think of three or four folks that I know had a hard time, and as [REDACTED](2) mentioned, I think some of it had to do with some of those folks being single and then being almost, for lack of a better way to say it, caged in their own home with no other interactions. We have a couple of folks I know that kind of struggled with things who I think in general are probably not very adaptable people, if that makes sense.

They’re just not the type of folks that are going to adapt well to especially sudden and major changes.

Participant #2 (female): Right. Yeah, like the billing complaints coordinator position. Participant #1 (male): Yeah.

Participant #2 (female): I mean, she really likes things just so. And also a couple of other people on [REDACTED]’s team were really, really thrown out of their equilibrium.

Participant #1 (male): And some of those folks may have struggled with some preexisting issues that were just exacerbated by the sudden changes in the pandemic.

Interviewer: So do you think it was different—I’ve got to ask this question—for men versus women in being adaptable to these changes?

Participant #1 (male): I think so. I think so. And again, to me it goes back to who has what responsibilities outside of their work life. I think so. Because I think that those responsibilities, at least in my observation, were kind of just even more exacerbated by the pandemic, because the females in our office that came into the office then didn’t have any detachment from those at-home responsibilities. And so I do think I observed some things that suggests that yeah, it was very different for men versus women.

Interviewer: So we are over time, sorry about that, but this has been such a very helpful and interesting discussion. Is there anything else that you would like to share with us about your experience in the office with the COVID-19 pandemic?

Participant #1 (male): What I think has been fascinating about the pandemic—and I flip-flop back and forth on certain things about working in the office versus not working in the office, what that means towards our work culture, towards our productivity, effectiveness at doing our job—and one thing that I have to keep reminding myself about is that just because we’ve done something a certain way forever doesn’t mean that that’s the best way to do it or that’s the way we should do it going forward. But that doesn’t also mean we should just kill everything about what we’ve done in the past. And it’s been interesting to watch the pendulum swing back and forth between employee empowerment versus employers holding all the cards and being able to dictate everything the employees do. I think it makes me think a lot more about being flexible and trying to gain some level of comfort with if people are being effective and they’re getting their job done, then I don’t need to worry so much about exactly what time they’re doing or exactly how they’re doing it. So I hope that make sense.

Interviewer: Yeah. Yeah, that does.

Participant #2 (female): Yeah. In terms of your expectations as supervising other people, yeah, that’s definitely a change. The only other comment I have, and you can take it or leave it, but it’s just an observation that I feel like a lot of

people in our office struggled with weight gain over the pandemic. And it’s just been rough. And I think it’s not having a schedule and trying to dedicate your limited bandwidth to the most important things, which are getting your job done, getting your kids to and from school, making sure

all the essential things are taken care of. And I feel like people didn’t have enough bandwidth to make sure to save some for self-care.

Interviewer: Yeah, I think that’s another excellent point. Yeah.

Participant #1 (male): And this may not be directly responsive to your question, but something else that I’ve just observed is that when you go through some really difficult times, all those layers of things we brought up throughout the entire pandemic time, at least I started to observe and figure out who I could really lean on and trust versus who I couldn’t, and in the workplace in particular. And thank goodness our management team in our department just shone. They just proved themselves to be so reliable and so steady in the face of all these difficult things. So that was super nice. And we also found some folks that we knew we couldn’t rely on, and we had to react to that accordingly. But that was an interesting revelation in a way, I think.

Participant #2 (female): Also, a lot of people have small animals, which I think ended up serving as service animals for us all during the chaos that we went through. And we can invite them to our meetings.

Participant #1 (male): Yeah.

Interviewer: Mine’s right over there. Yep.

Participant #1 (male): If a kid or a dog or a cat showed up during the meeting, it was like the best part of the meeting.

Participant #2 (female): Yeah. It was salve for the soul.

Interviewer: Yes. And it sort of—I’m not trying to put words in your mouth—made everybody human.

Participant #1 (male): Yeah.

Interviewer: Oh, that’s what you’ve got going on there. Oh yeah, that really helps me see, right? So yeah.

Participant #2 (female): Yeah.

Interviewer: Yeah. That’s great. Participant #2 (female): Absolutely.

Interviewer: Well, this has been fantastic. I want to thank you so much for your time on this. This has been very informative. Really great.

Participant #2 (female): Yeah, thanks for inviting me, [REDACTED](1). I feel like we kind of bounced ideas off each other.

Participant #1 (male): Yeah. It’s an interesting discussion. I think we could talk about it for a few more hours if we had the time, so.

Interviewer: Yes. And we’re hoping at some point in the near future we will be able to.

So this is great.

Participant #2 (female): Okay. Keep us posted on what you end up doing with all this lovely information.

Interviewer: We will.

Researcher: We will. Thank you.

Interviewer: Great. Thank you so much. Participant #2 (female): Thanks.

Participant #1 (male): [00:35:07 – cross talk].

Interviewer: Have a nice weekend. Participant #2 (female): Bye.

Participant #1 (male): Okay, take care.