Interviewer: Okay awesome. All right, if you could just tell us briefly about the experience trying to rapidly implement policies from HR during the COVID 19 pandemic, what was that like?

Participant: So I was hired in about February, the end of February in 2020. And again, I was the provost at Middle Georgia State when COVID started to spread across the country. And we had just started to implement protocols, had just kind of shut campus down, and said, started remote learning in Middle Georgia. And then I moved across the country and started here. And so when I got here, everything was remote.

There was a lot, a real lack of clarity about how we would manage that. It was very challenging and on the instructional side because when we have, we're very heavy in the face to face environment. And a lot of the labs, a lot of instructional space, is just were not prepared for online instruction. So that was really challenging. But your question was directly related to HR policies, related to the COVID shutdown. Is that right?

Interviewer: Yeah, like, just what was it like trying to implement those policies so quickly? And, like specifically, what changes were made for staff about work arrangements? Now, were they, a lot of staff sent home? And how did that, how did that get implemented?

Participant: So that is probably the biggest challenge, and that is there weren't clear policies. And there weren't clear guidelines. We had a task force, a COVID task force that was initially chaired by our Vice President for Student Affairs and our Vice President for Community Engagement. And those, then that eventually that was transitioned to me, and I chaired it for the majority of the COVID timeframe.

But that was the group tasked with coming up with the policies, the then administrators would implement. And it was really challenging because there were so many questions we just didn't have answers to. And so implementing the challenge, implementing the policies, once they were identified, it was pretty straightforward. But coming up with a balance of protecting individual's health in an environment when, where we did not know what protecting health looked like –

Interviewer: Yeah.

Participant: – With keeping the operation of the university open, and moving forward. I don't think we ever had a date that we got it right. I think we had lots of dates where we shifted things back and forth trying to get it right. And I

think, so that was the biggest challenge is trying to find out what to do, and not doing it.

Interviewer: Yeah that makes sense, so many questions –

Participant: Yeah.

Interviewer: – During that time, for sure. When changes were implemented, do you feel like they were appropriately timed for the issues that needed to be addressed?

Participant: I do. I think the institution acted pretty quickly and was able to get people in a place where they felt safe, at least in the initial phases of the shutdown. There were lots of complexities with the vaccines once they came out, and mandates, and those kinds of things. But I think the institution acted pretty well in terms of timing of decisions and moving things forward, in and out, and face to face, and online, and those things.

Interviewer: Awesome. And was it mostly the COVID taskforce that you were heading

- was that the group that was in charge of deciding what policies would be changed and how?

Participant: Yes the COVID task force did all the analysis, got all the feedback, and then would make recommendations to whichever administrative body needed to implement it.

Interviewer: Okay, so when if at all, did those changes get reversed? Or have some of them been permanently implemented? And if so, like, what's been kept and what's been reversed now?

Participant: At [U3] we really deferred to the lowest level of decision making authority. So in the case of classrooms, you went to the faculty and said, "What are you comfortable with and when are you comfortable with it?" And we still have some faculty who were real opponents to online teaching, but found out they loved it. And they're still teaching in that environment.

And for the most part that's something we encouraged, to teach, for faculty to teach in the modality they think is best for the students. And so some of that has come back. We, during COVID, we reworked some of our remote work policies. Those will be in place for the long haul. But we, kind of, shut down pretty quickly but slowly eased back into normal life. And

we're mostly there now, but there's some parts of remote work that will continue to be what we do.

Interviewer: That makes sense. Thank you.

Participant: Sure.

Interviewer: So, what challenges did you encounter with staff in trying to implement changes?

Participant: Most staff, and again, you want this specific to staff, not faculty is that right?

Interviewer: Right.

Researcher: Although, we're happy to hear your insights on faculty, too, and, sort of, factor that in. Because I think there's a lot of overlap between –

Participant: Sure.

Researcher: – between what goes on for one group and the other group.

Participant: Yep. And so [Interviewer], remind me this question again? Would you read that one again?

Interviewer: Just, what what challenges you encountered with staff when you were trying to implement these changes?

Participant: Most people, once we had enough knowledge to assume we were somewhere close to the truth on anything related to health, how COVID was spreading, any of those issues, most people were on board and would act pretty quickly. The real challenge was the ideological divide.

I would say this is true, both in the staff and the faculty on whether or not COVID was a real threat, and how big of a threat it was? And if the vaccines were effective at all, or should be part of an employment agreement? And so implementing it, I don't think was as big of a problem as bridging the ideological divides.

Interviewer: Interesting, that makes sense. Were there any challenges that you noticed in the shift to work from home? Were there any challenges that seemed different for men versus women in shifting to work from home?

Participant: I don't know that I would have many good data points on that? My guess would be, there was a bigger difference between those who had children at home and those who didn't; kind of, the family unit or the home environment as opposed to men or women. I think some people that had kids at home found it very difficult to work from home successfully. And that was probably true for men and women.

And those who didn't have children at home probably made an easier transition, would be my guess; I don't have a lot of data there. We still do have a lot that work some flexible schedules, and we've implemented processes to allow that to get approved. I do think holistically that the whole child care issue affects women much more than it does men. And we've probably seen that some, but I don't know that we've got data or track that at all.

Interviewer: Sure, sure. What additional work did you take on to ensure successful implementation of these changes?

Participant: Chairing that task force, for sure, making sure that we had a lot of coordination and time. And a lot more involvement in the shared governance process that I would typically be involved with, and that's across the board with the senate, and faculty, senate, and the staff association, and the student association. So those kinds of things, we really ramped up shared governance during that time.

And not that it's not a regular element of what we do, but we needed it to be much more active. The senate started meeting twice a month instead of once a month, for instance, as we navigated each element of how to handle the COVID environment. But I think, at least in our office, we really try to keep the work at 40 hours a week whenever we can, and try to be pretty strict about that. Because if you don't, mental health and emotional health start to suffer.

And so I think within that timeframe, our duties and responsibilities shifted quite a bit. And there are a lot of other things that didn't get done that we're trying to catch up on now. But we really tried to keep the work- life balance in check. And I think that was one successful effort that we had during that timeframe.

Interviewer: Awesome. Thank you. Was there any kind of evaluation of what staff thought about the changes? Or if not, do you have any feel for, for staff members' perceptions of what they thought about the changes?

Participant: We had a few surveys we sent out at different times. And if you give me a second, I may be able to try to find some of those.

Interviewer: Sure, thanks.

Participant: If I can look in the background as we continue to talk? I don't want to tie up your time with this.

Interviewer: No worries, I think we're doing really well on time, actually. Participant: Okay.

Interviewer: [00:10:11] about it.

Participant: So we had a survey that we put out in 20, this, like, September of '21. It may have been August or September, but and then another one in January of '22.

Interviewer: Interesting.

Participant: Let me pull it up and see if we – take just a second to get 'em here. Interviewer: Was this a survey across the whole university or just specific departments? Participant: Well, let me pull it up, and I I can tell you exactly.

Interviewer: Alright.

Participant: Let's see. Yeah that was a survey for '22. All right. So in September of '21, we did a survey that I think went to the whole campus.

Interviewer: Okay.

Participant: And at that point we were largely just looking at trying to get a gauge of vaccine status. And we had 3,198 responses. There were faculty that - divided into three categories - Faculty, the second category was staff administrators, the third category was students. Seventy-some-odd percent of the responses were students.

And the whole idea was, that one looked mostly at a vaccine, how widely spread COVID was. We asked them if they had had it? If they'd been vaccinated, all of those kinds of things? And let me see.

Interviewer: Interesting.

Participant: Then we asked them to respond to vaccine requirements and the possibility of having one. So that was, it looks like September of '21.

Interviewer: Okay. That would be really interesting to look at. From, either from that or just from your own experience, do you, do you feel like you have a feel for what, what staff thought about the changes that were being made? And if they, if they felt good about them? If they felt bad about them?

Participant: I would say they were probably as divided as the political –

Interviewer: Okay.

Participant: – Environment was at the time. We had very strong opinions on just about every side.

Interviewer: I can imagine, that makes sense.

Participant: And so I think people generally were empathetic to what we were trying to navigate. But that doesn't mean they agreed with anything.

Interviewer: Right. Right.

Participant: And then back to the other COVID survey results, in January of 2022 we surveyed people again, the same group. We got about 2,700 responses. And just to gauge where people were with their vaccine status and those kinds of things, and what they thought about coming back to campus, so.

Interviewer: Interesting.

Participant: Those –

Interviewer: Okay.

Participant: – That what's we, that's one tool we used to try to collect data as we were working through with those surveys.

Interviewer: Yeah. That's helpful to know about, awesome, thank you. Did you notice any differences in, in what people thought about those changes for men versus women? Or was it more along those lines of ideology?

Participant: Yeah. None of us, we didn't really talk about gender much in any of our conversations. We mostly talked about faculty and staff because their jobs were so different. Right? And we talked a lot about jobs at different

locations on campus. We have a lot of areas that are probably more…. And this is just a guess, I, I haven't looked at the numbers, but are more heavily female than male that had a lot more flexibility.

And so if you look at jobs like administrative assistants, if you look at academic advisors, if you look at academic support areas and tutoring, those are probably more female oriented jobs than male just by self- selection. And then if you look at our other areas where we really couldn't shut down a lot, they're more male dominated fields like our facilities crews, custodial crews, those kinds of things.

And then all our trades, the plumbers, electricians, that group, largely male, not all but largely male in those areas, I would guess. And so just based on the job type, there would be some differences. But I don't know that we had enough conversation to be able to tease out the impact on male versus female in those environments.

Interviewer: Okay great. Shifting a little to thinking about individuals, what, what are the characteristics of an employee who did well with these changes versus those who struggled with it?

Participant: I would say, again, my first cut in answering that question would be it largely depends on the work environment on the job. And that determined how much flexibility that they could have. I would say those who responded well already had within themselves a fairly strong sense of resiliency and an ability not to be heavily persuaded by news stories or exaggerated examples on either side of the political divide. And those who were swayed by strong emotions with small pieces of information didn't handle it as well. That would be my guess.

Interviewer: That makes a lot of sense, thank you. Well, I would like to ask [Researcher] and [Researcher] if they have any, any questions they want to ask? But first for you, [Participant], is there anything that you wish that we had asked or that you think we should have asked that you'd like to share about your experience working on the task force and with the staff?

Participant: So I, I appreciate the questions you've asked. And it made me think about some of the elements of that whole process in a different way. I hadn't really thought through the big differences in jobs as in detail as much as we just talked through. But that has a huge impact. Because you can send

– anyone who works in an office can almost be sent home to do their work with Zoom and meetings like we're having now. But if your job is to fix pipes on campus, you can't do that remotely. Right?

Interviewer: Yep.

Participant: And so that, that's a huge part of it. I think one thing we didn't talk about that is really worth noting is the sense of community and the collaboration that was an outcome of COVID. That, we generally have a pretty tight knit campus and people work together pretty well. But during COVID, that's when that culture was put to the test. And I think overall, we held up pretty well. So I think that cultural piece is an important thing we didn't really touch on.

Interviewer: Awesome. That's good to hear, thank you. [Researcher] and [Researcher], do you have any further questions you want to ask?

Researcher: I don't. That, I love that last part about culture. I, I think. We, I have a quote on my wall that says, "Culture eats strategy for breakfast." And and that just such a huge piece of it all.

Participant: Well, as a strategy professor, I agree with your quote. Interviewer: I love it. That's great.

Researcher: Thank you so much. This has been really very helpful and you've identified some things that we haven't heard yet. So that's really nice to add that to the list of what we're putting together.

Participant: Was it what you were looking for or are there any details we left out that you'd like to cover?

Researcher: No this was great.

Interviewer: It was wonderful. Thank you. It was great hearing your perspective.

Participant: Yep. I'm glad to share anytime. I'm glad we finally got the chance to connect.

Researcher: We appreciate your flexibility on that. Participant: Yes.

Interviewer: Thank you.

Researcher: All right, bye-bye.

Researcher: Thank you. Have a good day. Participant: Yeah, thanks you all. Great to meet you. Researcher: Thank you. Nice to meet you, too.

Participant: Take care.

Interviewer: Bye.

Participant: Bye. [END OF TAPE]