Interviewer: It’s working. Yay! Love it when it works!

Okay, so again, thank you so much. All right, so can you tell us briefly about the experience at [U2] when you’re trying to rapidly implement policies from HR during the COVID-19 pandemic?

Participant: Wow! That’s a loaded question. How much time you got?

It was a very interesting time, of course. Being in Dining Services, we had a little bit of everything going on because we had the HR side and everything we’re trying to do to take care of faculty and staff.

At the same time, we’re totally transitioning our business models to totally new things. Very, very unique. One of the best things that I think happened as we were given the direction by the president to not lay people off, to get them actively engaged.

As we did that—as it evolved into that—I watched a lot of my staff— especially my leaders on my team—become very inventive or innovative as to what they could do to keep their employees productive and keep them, so they felt they were doing something. They weren’t just free, along for the ride.

They were doing a lot of different things and kudos to them. I gave them a lot of liberty to do what they needed to do.

We had one in our department that totally transitioned as far as our Catering Department. But other than that, we didn’t have a lot going on. Let’s just put it that way. Is that kind of where you’re going with that?

Interviewer: That is where I’m going with that. So, that sort of leads into my next question, right?

Participant: Yeah.

Interviewer: Is what changes were made for staff about working arrangements specifically?

Participant: Yeah.

Interviewer: When suddenly it was like, “Oh, we’re going to work from home?”

Participant: Yeah. We had some of ours work from home, but not a lot. We did a lot of innovative things. If they were working from home, we really utilized the LinkedIn programs. I don’t know if you’re familiar with that.

Did a lot of coursework there. I had my one of my chefs and my Culinary Team got very creative in that he actually used this to basically take a lot of his underlings so to speak. I had my Executive Chef and really taught classes.

He’d bring the team in and they would have classes. They would literally have coursework led by him. Of course, they’re not certified or anything. But coursework on culinary—how to do sauces, how to do this, and things like that.

The next day, they would come in. They would actually go in the kitchen and do it. We had on one side my Executive Chef—like I said, kudos to him—actually created a culinary school for all of his team. They made great use of the resources.

Some other things that I did internally—and it was also supported by our administrative staff here in HR—is that I told my staff that, “Bottom line is you’ve got an hour every day on the clock to take care of yourself. Feel free totally to eight hours a day and one of those hours—” whether it’s exercise or whatever works for them to make sure they maintain a good mental health perspective on what’s going on and things like that.

There’s a lot of different things going on with regards to that. We used it in a lot of our operations and opportunity things we wish we always had time to do. That can be everything from creating training materials, standards, policies and procedures, things like that. A lot of that goes on. They can do a lot of that at home.

I had one of my dining hall’s that they—you’re going to laugh at this— they spent a lot of it—especially in their early onset—employees becoming painters and different things like that. I have one dining hall that we exposed beams that have been painted probably 400 times over the last 60 years as long as that building’s been there.

These employees—mostly part-time at that point—but we were committed to them as well. If they didn’t go home, they were up on scaffolding painting and actually literally painstakingly putting grains. You go in there and look at these things now, they look stained instead of painted.

It’s the most amazing thing they did. We remodeled that whole place, did a lot of painting, different things like that. So, we took time to do things like that. All those things that we wish we always could’ve done and never had time to do.

A lot of my team members—especially Customer Service side—they upgraded their skills in Excel, or Word, or everything. That LinkedIn was a really good godsend.

When we first started out, I was just buying it. I got permission from my boss to buy it for several of my employees that it really applied to and get a membership. The university bought it for the entire university.

All employees, you toss that university hat into that access—that LinkedIn Learning and I don’t know if you’re familiar with that. But that gave us a huge resource of opportunities to grow.

The other thing—I’ll be honest with you—we really looked at, in Dining Services, one of our core values is dedication. We say all the time,

“There’s work to be done, not time to be put in.”

So, I didn’t get wrapped up on tracking every second of every day what they were doing. We just relied on them to make the best use of the time they could.

Now if they had concerns, they would come to me. But most of them worked from home. It was interesting because our Catering Team was taking care of a lot of students that got quarantined.

We delivered right to their door three meals a day, and left it for them, and took care of them that way. I did have chefs that would cook and prepare food quite a bit.

There was some of that going on. We did everything we could, tried to follow as many rules as we possibly could. But I tell you what. It’s a little tough sometimes.

So, a little bit of everything is kind of the answer of how we dealt with it. I really let my employees be empowered. That’s another core value is empowerment. Really empowered them to say, “Hey, what do you need?”

Some of them would come to me and say, “[Participant], you got some

ideas?” and I could give them projects to do, building new systems or

whatever like that, or I would recommend to them what they might focus on as far as their professional growth and development through LinkedIn and things like that. Just whatever we could do.

Like I said, I think the biggest thing is we didn’t get wrapped up on tracking every second of every day. There was no value there, given everything else that everybody was going through, so--

Interviewer: So, for the team, we’re going to skip ahead. I’m going to ask a question because I think it’s a good follow-up for what you’re talking about here. So, what challenges did staff encounter? I think that what you’re saying is you tried to put things in place, allowed people to be flexible about things, some self-care activity in there and that kind of thing. So, what challenge did they experience as you were trying to put things in place at the university for managing cope?

Participant: I think some of their biggest challenges were because they were so, here you’ve got people that are doing x and now they’re asked to do a, b, or d. At first it was like, “Oh, cool. We’re doing something different.” But it got old fast and it got to where, “No, this isn’t what I’m doing. This is what I’m trying to do.”

I think there was a lot of challenges with people feeling like they were gainfully employed or actually being productive. I think that was a challenge. Different employees have different ethics and things like that.

But a lot of my employees, I think one of the biggest challenges was just them feeling like they’re accomplishing something. They’re doing something.

As a leader and as a manager, that was the challenge when they come through saying, “[Participant,] I’ve got nothing” and you have to find things for them to do.

I think we came out pretty good. A lot of good things happened and we did. We joke all the time in Dining Services that we’re always putting out fires and how much we need to get ahead of the fires, so that we can make fire breaks or destroy the stuff that’s going to start a fire. We did a lot of active stuff.

Once we got them in that mode where they say, “Okay. What are the kind

of things that you always wish you had time to do?” and do them. It really,

a lot of it focused on training programs, building training programs especially for part-time employees.

You can imagine with 500 student employees, with turnover, and training challenges, and motivational things, and all of those kind of things. So, a lot of our operational teams really worked on training opportunities and things like that. It’s because we just didn’t have anything else.

Fortunately, like I said, because we were feeding quite a few people, I did have some production going on the Culinary side. So, my bakery was actively engaged, and doing a lot of the products, and stuff like that, and doing everything we couldn’t as far as that goes.

We were fortunate because we had our revenue stream too with the COVID CARES money picking up the tab on a lot of that. We also had some employees that did some different things. They worked for different people. They did some testing. They - all kinds of different things that they ended up doing. And that was a challenge for them too.

It’s like, “Yeah, this is what I do” and then there’s all kinds of apprehension when you’re in there testing a whole bunch of people that may have COVID.

So, yeah. Just kind of a myriad of challenges depending on the person and what their perspective was on it.

Interviewer: So, when we think about the challenges to how men and women might’ve experienced it the same or differently, how do you think men and women staff experienced it differently?

Participant: Wow! Holy cow! You know, it’s really - I don’t think it comes down to men and women in my team. It comes down to a lot as far as their own dynamics and how they think.

I don’t really see a difference between the men and the women. I think maybe the men were a little more flexible, a little more willing and maybe they have some more other skills outside of what they’re doing, whatever it is.

But I don’t really recall anything that I could say right out. It’s more people specific--

Interviewer: So--

Participant: --people specific and job specific.

Different people were more concerned about COVID. Some people are like, “Eh”. “I’ve lived this long. It can’t touch me.”

So, you had all kinds of dynamics going on there. Some of them were very concerned about their job and spent a lot of time ensuring them that they do have a job. They’re going to continue to have a job.

I know the directions we got from the president. So, I spent a lot of time making sure, letting them know that that was not going to change. I think there was a lot of that.

So, I think you look at more their personal situation. If they’re the sole provider for their family, if they’ve got kids at home, they end up going home because of COVID. I think that changed a lot of dynamics and stuff. I don’t think I can put anything from a male-to-female. I think it really has to do more with real-life situation.

Interviewer: Okay. Great, and so, when you think about your employees, about—okay, we don’t necessarily need numbers or percentages, right? But about how did you make decisions about who was going to be onsite and who was going to be working from home?

Participant: It was basically work requirement. Obviously, you can’t cook a roast from

home. You can’t virtually cook a roast.

We really tried to focus on, “Don’t come in unless there’s a valid reason to come in. If your job this week is to heavily clean the dish room or just gut it and just really do a good job of cleaning, obviously you can’t do that from home.”

I really empowered them to take care of business and do things. As they’d reach out to me, I’d tell them stuff. I’d say, “What about this? Have you thought about doing this?”, or “What if we did this with your team?”, or “What if you did that?

I really became dependent on the job they were doing or what they were accomplishing. There was a great cross-section. I would have staff that they might spend two weeks at home taking a course on LinkedIn, and learning, doing some different things there.

The next week they might come in with their staff and do deep cleaning or like I said, the one that did the Culinary training - he would do that three times a week and then the other days they were allowed to do some other things.

It’s really more task specific whether they came in or not what they were doing. We were fortunate because there - fortunate or not fortunate I guess depending on how you look at it -

But there were things to do here. In my business, there’s always time to

clean. There’s always stuff to clean. There’s always things to do—

organization. There’s always stuff to do, but there’s always stuff to do at

home too. So, it was really task specific whether they came to work or not.

Interviewer: So, when you think about the policies that were implemented, right?

During COVID-19, how did that have an impact on your team specifically and were the policies changes, were they timely for your team?

Participant: I think they were. They were very timely especially because of the business we’re in. There was a lot of unknowns out there and a lot of different things, a lot of different perspectives.

I had a run-in with the vice president. Well, first off, it was kind of one of those things once again, depending on how serious people took it. You may have a chef that would pull his mask down to talk and you may have somebody else that’s so upset because he pulled his mask down to talk. They’d take a picture and send it in to administration that my chef pulled his mask down to talk.

So, you ended up some of those dynamics which was really frustrating that it put my team-against-team based on how concerned they were about COVID.

As far as timeliness, it was really I don’t want to say a crapshoot. But we had a couple of things going on. We had the university putting in their policies and procedures.

On the other side, I’ve got the Health Department putting in policies and procedures. On top of that, I’ve got franchises that we own and operate putting in their policies and procedures. They didn’t always meet in the middle somewhere.

We’re trying to stay ahead of this, and do this, and that. I’ll never forget where we were trying to feed all of the students. “How are we going to feed the students?”

I was on a conference call actually with our attorney and their answer was, “We want every student. We don’t want anybody in your restaurant. We want everything takeout for all these 2,000 kids on meal plans because we want them to get the meals, and go home, and eat.”

I says, “With all due respect, they’re not going to go home and eat. Rather than going into my restaurant where I can control where they seat—they seat far apart—they’re going to go to a lounge somewhere. They’re going to hang out next to each other on the couch and they’re going to eat their dinner.”

But because some direction had been made from higher up, then it was this kind of black and white, “You’re supposed to not do this.” This

doesn’t make sense especially when they didn’t want any dining in.

The state came out with policies. There was not supposed to be anybody dining in restaurants anymore. Well, we still had a couple thousand kids on meal plans.

So, the attorney says, “They can’t eat at any of your locations.” I told her. I says, “They’re so much safer if I can bring them in and control where they sit. Keep them apart from each other because we give them to go they’re just going to leave.”

It really came down to the rule versus what made sense. That was very frustrating and I think some of my employees, we followed the black and white letter of the law in the certain situations--especially in our industry-- where it didn’t make any sense at all.

A lot of things we did that, of course, there were people second guessing all kinds of things about the disease and how it’s transferred, all of that. But the things that didn’t make sense that we were enacting, that was really, really frustrating and the fact that we were getting it from every direction.

The president would say, “You’re supposed to do this” and then the Health Department would come out and say, “Well, we need you to do

this”, and then franchise, and then federal government. It was a myriad of

things coming down our alley because of the business we’re in. Sometimes--

Interviewer: Yeah, I know.

Participant: --I show you one experience I had that had the vice president upset because one of my chef’s didn’t have his mask on one time. He says, “Oh! How can you prepare all this food?”, and “He’s breathing on this food!”, and blah, blah, blah. It’s not even a food borne illness. You can’t really pass it by coughing on food and eating the food. I’m sorry.

There’s a lot of misperceptions that we fought with and we dealt with. I’ve sent many a email to certain people within our university that came from the Health Department or from the State with regarding to food because we have specific directions from the State on food and how we did things that counter or may be against what the university wants us to do, vice versa.

So--

Interviewer: So--

Participant: --that was a challenge.

Interviewer: --no, it sounds a bit messy there. Yes. So, when you think about the changes that got implemented, did some of those get reversed? Are some of them now permanent for what you do?

Participant: Some of them. For example, the ones that are permanent right now, we used to not allow takeout on our meal plans because there was a lot of they would share it and stuff like that. Especially we have a meal plan that’s unlimited. In other words, they can come and go as many times as they please. Totally unlimited how many times they come in the dining hall.

With that meal plan, we used to not allow takeout for obvious reasons. They could take it out and share it, come in and eat, take it out and share it. It just wasn’t cost-effective.

But with COVID, at that point where it became we did not want them in the dining hall, we allowed them to do takeout and that has continued to this day to where we still allow the unlimited meal plan folders to do takeout.

At first, we were very—and this is a kind of a negative thing—but we were very conscientious. In order to do takeout, they had to be part of our Reusable Container Program where we would wash containers for them.

They had to buy into a sustainability initiative in order to do takeout. It was very positive in nature. But with COVID, we were required to provide containers that were disposable.

The negative impact on our environment, we needed to make it as simple as possible. To this day we still do that as well.

Other things, I think some of our service styles have changed the way we look at things. In our industry, there’s a lot of touchless systems that came out as far as the way that the product is handled especially more consumer-driven product.

All kinds of touchless things whether it’s a lid or it’s the you can get your own fork out without touching anybody else’s fork or napkin dispensers. There’s so many things and so much innovation in our industry that came out because of that. A lot of that innovation we kept because it still makes sense. You may not be passing COVID as much, but there’s still a lot of diseases and stuff that you can pass human touch and things like that.

Another one that stuck as well to this day, we still have sanitizers all over the place. People appreciate that. A lot of things like that, that we still carry over. A lot of innovations came about. A lot of innovations.

Interviewer: So, was there an evaluation about what the staff thought about the changes?

Participant: For as far as the service styles and things like that? Interviewer: Uh-huh.

Participant: I get a lot of feedback from my staff. Most of it they were just kind of along for the ride. They’re like, “Whatever.” You get to the point. I have to share with you. I’ve got a folder on my computer that says, “You can’t make this shit up” and a lot of those emails went into that folder.

My managers it’s like, “Okay, what today? What’s going on next?” No offense to the group, but there was a group that met every single day at four o’clock. These were presidents, vice presidents, Directors of Emergency Planning. These were very, very high level administrators.

But we started calling them the Good Idea Fairies because somebody in that group would go, “Hey, we’ve got a great idea! What if we did this?” All it took was the right people in the room to say, “That’s a great idea!” and we did it.

There was some things like that that came down. You’d push back a little bit, but things were so fast-paced that it just wasn’t worth pushing back. You just said, “Okay” and did some things.

The few times I pushed back, I found out that it was - we aired on the side of caution which is good. But there was some crazy stuff, just some crazy, crazy stuff that came down.

Interviewer: So, when you think about the staff, were there characteristics of people that made them much more successful when this happened?

Participant: I think the ones that think outside of the box. I talk about core values a lot. But in Dining Service world one of our core values—and we really stress this—is continuous improvement not only as an organization, as people and things like that. We have a saying that, “Perfection is not an end result, but a process you go through every single day.”

The people that were very continuous improvement minded adapted well because they saw this almost as an opportunity to do something. “Oh man! You mean I can do this?” “Sure, why not?”

The people that don’t like change, they don’t like their cheese moved? They struggled. They liked to come in at eight o’clock, and sit down, and do x, y and z, and have breakfast. You know what I mean?

The very rigid people that can and have to change struggled a lot more than the ones that were more interested in new and exciting ventures. To be honest with you, most of our staff are really quite interested in continuous improvement because that’s a culture we have here. We always change. We’re always doing new things, at least trying new things.

I think that helped them for success and the fact I think that our organization isn’t so wrapped up on like I said, the time—how many hours you work and exactly what you did. We focus on results.

I think that helped them going into the situation with COVID where they knew that nobody’s going to be asking, “What exactly did you do for eight

hours today?” But it was more about you accomplished this. We’re getting things done. You forget about where we’re going or whatever. We focus on results.

The fact that we’ve always done that as an organization I think helped us through COVID—that they knew as an organization never get wrapped up on hours. There’s work to be done. There’s things to accomplish rather than just a bunch of time to check on the clock. So, I think that helped them.

Interviewer: Great. Yeah. No, that’s great. Okay. I want to thank you so much for everything that you shared with us. This is really helpful, very informative. Is there anything else that you’d like to tell us about?

Participant: Just kudos to an amazing staff. I can’t say enough about my team—the things that they did and that they just kind of took it in stride, and didn’t push back. I have kids that are delivering to people that we know have COVID. That’s some scary stuff to walk up to somebody and deliver food to people that you know for a fact they have COVID.

So, a lot of things like that. But kudos to them. They all kind of just buckled up and stuck it out, so--

Interviewer: Great. Thank you so much for your time this evening. We really appreciate it.

Participant: No problem. You guys have fun in your research, for sure. Interviewer: Yeah. It’s been informative so far!

Participant: I’ll bet! Is it going to be published or-- Interviewer: Yes.

Participant: Would you please--

Interviewer: Yes.

Participant: --please share with me whatever comes out the other end? Interviewer: Yes. Yes, absolutely. It’ll be a little while, but yes.

Participant: Yeah, that’s fine. No.

Interviewer: We would be happy to do that.

Participant: I take part in a lot of student projects and I always ask them, “Send me

your final report as well.”

Interviewer: Yeah. Let me know, right?

Participant: Sure.

Interviewer: Yeah. Yes. Yeah.

Participant: Hey!

Interviewer: Great!

Participant: Well, you guys have fun and--

Interviewer: Yeah.

Participant: --see you later.

Interviewer: Great! Thank you, [Participant]. Researcher: Thank you.

Participant: Bye.

Interviewer: Bye.