Interviewer: It looked like the recording wasn’t working. There we go.

Participant: So every single staff member went on some sort of furlough, whether it was 100%, 10%, 50%, depending on their job duties and what they could or couldn’t do during a shutdown. I heard we were the first ones on campus to ask if we could let all of our employees keep their benefits, even though they were—

Interviewer: Let’s see. Okay. Hopefully we won’t have any more recording issues.

Alright, go ahead.

Participant: So we asked, it’s a pandemic, the last thing we want to do is have our staff lose their health insurance. We’re hoping this doesn’t last very long, and we’ll get them all back. We did lose—definitely lost some people that were at 100% furlough and had zero income coming in. So no surprise we did lose a few people, and a few people chose early retirement rather than riding it out. So we did that. We, like everybody I think, as we started to reopen, started do—we’d never done a hybrid work schedule before.

We’re a public institution. People come to us. So we’d never even really had remote work here before. Found out it works great for some

departments and doesn’t work at all for others. So there’s an internal

dynamic that’s been interesting to try to navigate ever since. Those that can and those that can’t. Just still to this day kind of an issue internally, but we’re working through it.

We were fortunate to be largely an outdoor venue. We have very few indoor facilities, so we were the first ones to open back up of the cultural institutions on campus. We just opened the garden. We didn’t open the gift shop or anything like that initially or events. Nothing like that. Those all stayed shut down. Basically, just built a corridor straight through the visitor center. They just came straight in, out the back door, and then came out through a separate exit. So we also worked with movement of people, which was actually—some nice things came from that, too, that we’ll probably implement in our master planning. Just we found it was nice to actually route people and not have them coming and going through the

same entrance or exit. So that’s something we’re actually probably going to tweak in future buildings because it turned out to be so nice. I just lost my train of thought. I was about to say something else.

Then as we also started doing kind of micro events. We didn’t want to get into anything big, but a lot of things like really small wedding ceremonies, family portraits. Things like that were people could come with their bubble. So we started doing that. And when started doing that, other people heard about it, so I ended up on an events team for campus, trying

to figure out how to reopen events. And that took a while, trying to help draft the policies and give input on the policies that were coming from campus. We sort of elected to not really do anything big if we had to keep people separated. It’s just too hard. I know a lot of people—if we would have had fixed seats and things like that, like a theater or something, we could have done that. But we chose to just sort of sit back and not do much of that.

The biggest one that we did was when [U1] ran into a crunch about how

do they handle commencement ceremonies. We weren’t using our amphitheater because we couldn’t do events, so we did do spaced-out

seating for commencement ceremonies. So we did do that for that 2021 commencement. It’s all sort of a blur. I’m trying to think of everything else we did.

Interviewer: No, that’s super helpful. It’s super helpful to hear how it worked in your unique circumstances. That’s wonderful. When these changes were implemented, were they appropriately timed for the issues that needed to be addressed?

Participant: Yeah, I think we were probably one of the squeakier wheels trying to accelerate the timeframe on campus just because we were outdoors, and we were still being told no, no, no, no, no. And I think the big one for us was we were being told no, no, no, no, no, and then the stadium announced a giant Garth Brooks concert with 50,000 people in it. And that changed everything. It was like, well, wait a minute. Hold on. We’ve been told we can’t do anything, and you’re going to put 50,000 people in the football stadium.

Interviewer: Oh, gosh.

Participant: So that was the switch that flipped pretty much everything. And then we, a few months later, started doing events after that.

Interviewer: Oh, gosh. That’s crazy. How about when things kind of started to shut down? Do you feel like the timing of that was appropriately timed?

Participant: When we shut down?

Interviewer: Yeah.

Participant: Well, it was sort of—I mean, we did it just a couple of days, I think, ahead of most people. We were in a weird transition that our executive director had just left, he’d just retired. So we were in a weird position where we

didn’t really have anybody in place, so I just made the call on a Friday. It was a Friday, the 14th of March, I can remember, and just told everyone don’t come back until you hear from us. So we didn’t know what to do. We really didn’t know what to do.

And I think that next Monday was when the other orgs all shut down. Or maybe even over that weekend, but we all just were talking as a group that Friday. I remember not knowing what to do, and we decided let’s just close. Hopefully, it’s only for a week or two. Clearly, it didn’t turn out to be the case. So yeah, so we just made that call, especially without having an executive director in place. Didn’t really know what to do, so we just closed.

Interviewer: Yeah. Were you in charge of making a lot of those decisions?

Participant: Yeah, I was the interim director, so now I’m the executive director. But I was interim at that time.

Interviewer: Yeah, that makes sense. Okay, when if at all did that those changes get reversed, or did some of the changes get permanently implemented?

Participant: Well, some of it was permanently implemented, but we only closed for a couple months. So a lot shorter than most. We kept everybody still on various degrees of furloughs as we reopened. We needed our horticulture staff to come back and maintain the garden, and they could work outside. And they could spread out, so they were able to come back pretty quick. But our private events team and major events team and our guest services team was all very, very slim. So again, like I said, we just opened the garden initially.

And then I don’t know the exact timeline off the top of my head, but then we worked on a—we brought back our local art shows in the upper-level of the visitor’s center to start doing at least something and give even artists a place to display. So we had a display people could at least go through and purchase art if they wanted. So that was nice. Small, tiny drop in the bucket of our revenue stream, but it helped. After that, we took a look at— and again, I don’t remember exactly how many months in I am at his point. We looked at our gift shop, figured out a one-way route through the gift shop and routed people through that and opened the gift shop. And that was a big help.

We implemented a timed-admission system that we’d never done before, which we aren’t using on a day-to-day basis, but we are still going to use it for big events going forward, like our plant sale, free days. Things like that

where we do have huge crowds. We found that, especially for our plant sale and our fall [REDACTED] Festival. It just made the experience so much better when we could meter out who was coming and when. So

we’re going to do that in perpetuity because it’s such a better experience,

and we’d never tried that before.

So and then that fall we brought back our fall plant sale for the first time. We held it outdoors, so people could spread out. And then slowly started getting back into the event world in 2021. We pretty much sat out all of 2020, other than those little micro events that we were trying.

Interviewer: Interesting, cool. It’s so interesting to hear about the changes that you’re

like, oh, this actually works better. I think we’ll keep this.

Participant: Yeah, there’s a few things. Well, the hybrid thing has been nice. There’s a lot of people that we are on top of each other here. We physically run out of desk space for people, so it’s nice we’ve got rotating schedules with offices and things. So some of that, it’ll probably be around if not forever but for a while. But the timed-admission thing and the routing people the way we want them to go, those two things we found were just so much

better. So much better. And we’ll implement those in our designs going

forward.

Interviewer: Cool. So when you were first making these changes of people being furloughed, work from home, different things that had to change, what challenges did you encounter with staff?

Participant: Well, how do they pay their rent? How do they pay their mortgage? That.

That’s the biggest one, and that’s where we lost a few people. We also found a lot of people sort of reassessed their lives. I want to move back home. My family’s all back East. I’m out here alone. It’s scary. I’m going home. So we had some of that with our staff. There were three or four people that did that. They just felt scared out here by themselves. Came out for college or whatever and had no network here other than their friends. So we did lose people to that. But I think the biggest one was the financial hit to them.

Interviewer: Um-hmm. Yeah, that makes sense. Did you notice any differences in challenges for men versus women?

Participant: Not specifically. I wouldn’t say—no. And we’re overwhelmingly—we have way more women than men here. I mean, men are definitely the minority here. But I didn’t notice anything related to gender specifically, no.

Interviewer: Okay. What additional work did you take on to ensure successful implementation of the changes?

Participant: Well, I had to write all the policies. Interviewer: That’s a lot.

Participant: I had to submit them all to the university. I did all of that. Every policy around COVID I wrote and submitted and got approval. And then like I said, I was on some committees on campus to try to set policies for how the campus in general was going to implement some of this stuff, since I think we were one of the squeaky wheels again, like we were the first ones back open. So we were the first ones asking all the questions. Well, what do I do about this? What I do about that? Can I do this? Can I do that?

Here’s an idea. What if we try this? So I was the one sort of lobbying ideas at campus and trying to keep them reasonable because some of it got a little out of hand, especially in the event policies. They were just pages of things that were just—they were trying to write a blanket document that will work for everyone. And you know how hard that’s going to be. So tried to just help clean that up a little bit.

And I did do a lot of walk-throughs with people that wanted to come see how we were doing, like the [REDACTED] museum next door. They all came over and wanted to see what we were doing, how they might take some of the things we were doing next door by the time they opened. They were closed way longer than we were because they’re an indoor facility, but we did have them come over and look around and see what type of signage we were using and what kind of language we were using for the public.

Interviewer: Well, in regard to the changes that were made early on with COVID, I mean, obviously I know some people left, but those staff that were still there, has there been any kind of evaluation since then of what staff thought about the changes? Or if haven’t had a formal evaluation, what has been your perception of what staff thought about those changes?

Participant: There was no formal evaluation, but I think people knew that we all just need to try to figure it out and get through it. I mean, they knew it wasn’t going to be—it wasn’t fun. Nobody liked it. But everybody—those that stuck around, which was the bulk of the staff I should say, I think everybody was about as accommodating as you could get because they knew there’s nothing they could do about it. Nothing any of us can do about it. And then what was really interesting was how eager and excited

most of them were to get back and just do anything, whether it was here or at home. Just anything.

Interviewer: Cool. Cool.

Participant: I guess I should say the other thing that’s sticking around from the pandemic is this, Zoom meetings. We’d never done that before, and that’s turned into something that’s pretty nice. You can definitely cram more things in a day with a Zoom.

Interviewer: Yeah, now it’s just totally natural and what we do, right?

Participant: Exactly. And so that was something we still do going forward.

Interviewer: Cool. As far as staff perceptions, did you notice any differences for men versus women?

Participant: I didn’t. No, not along gender lines. No.

Interviewer: Sure, sure. Along what lines did you notice differences, like were there characteristics of an employee who did well with the changes?

Participant: Well, I don’t know how I would describe their characteristics. There were, I mean, definitely people that did better than others. I mean, we had some pretty—some people did not handle it well at all. And most of those people left. Just affected them mentally. One, it short of triggered some PTSD. She was former military, so she had a really hard time. And she’s one of the people that went home to be with family. There were a few people that really didn’t handle it well, and I think a few people—and I

don’t know how to word this politely. I think there were a few people that once they got to stay home and were getting a percent furlough just wanted to stay home and get a paycheck. There were a couple of people that we had to—you need to produce something. You can’t just sit home. So that was definitely a minority. We’re talking like two or three people. But the bulk of the staff took it pretty well, I think.

Interviewer: Okay. What would you say were descriptors of employees who especially struggled? I guess it sounds like those who—you mentioned the lady with PTSD, or those who didn’t want to produce anything at home. Anything else come to mind?

Participant: For the characteristics?

Interviewer: Yeah, just people who struggled versus people who did well with the changes.

Participant: One thing I noticed, the people that struggled were also the people that

sort of struggle with everything, whether it’s their schedule, or their pay. Or they’re sort of the people that will have something to say about anything all the time were the ones that sort of struggled with it. Again, it was such a minority here. I think we were very lucky. It was so few people considering the size of our organization.

Interviewer: Sure. So we kind of touched on this already a little bit, but I’d love to hear a little bit more about if there are particular positions that the changes work well for or particular positions that the changes did not work well for.

Participant: Yeah. Well, when we were—so you can’t take care of a garden from home. You have to be here. So that was hard for that. And there is still this internal dynamic of the people that can and can’t work at home that we’re still trying to navigate. It worked great for development, marketing, design, administration. That works fine. They can do their jobs from home, but you can’t build events from home. You can’t welcome the

public to the visitor’s center from home. You can’t maintain the garden from home. You can’t do a concert series from home. You can’t clean the place from home. So the staff sort of split in half. Those that can and can’t work at home.

So we’ve actually—and we have not come up with a good solution for this, but we’re trying to figure out through either flexible schedules or whatnot how to give the people that can’t work from home some sort of

benefit that’s similar. So we’ve been very flexible with schedules if people want to come in earlier and leave earlier, that’s fine. If they want to work a Tuesday through Saturday shift, we can accommodate that. So we’ve had to get creative with schedules, which I think a lot of people have liked because there’s more options.

We’re open seven days a week, so we can play Tetris with schedules. As long as somebody’s here, we can usually accommodate it. But that I think has been the weirdest thing for me is that as the head of the organization, I try to keep everybody okay with some people can and some people can’t.

Interviewer: Yeah, that’s super helpful. That makes a lot of sense. That’s such a challenge.

Participant: It is.

Interviewer: So I love how you’re being creative with it. That’s super cool. As we’re kind of wrapping up, is there anything else that you would like to share with us about your experience with COVID-19?

Participant: No, just that we’re—everything we do, that’ll be in the back of our heads going forward. Pandemic proof the place as best we can. We’ve decided we’re going to keep your six months reserves on hand should any other catastrophe ever happen. I think everybody’s hygiene and attention to it has changed, so touchless everything is going in everywhere and anything we replace. You used to come in to work when you catch a cold. Nobody does that anymore. It’s like stay home if you’re sick. So that’s been nice. We’re not seeing everybody catch colds like they used to. I think that’s probably about it. I already touched on the admissions, the timed- admission type of thing, and that’s been great.

Interviewer: Awesome. That’s super helpful. [Researcher], are there any followup

questions you’d like to ask?

Researcher: No, this has been really informative. We talked to one of the people down in [the theater], and that was the first time we really heard about public

facing that weren’t just students. And you have touched on some of that here and given us some good ideas about additional things to consider. What we hope to do is come up with some best practices, and you guys have done some creative and wonderful things. So thank you for sharing those with us.

Participant: And I’m sure I’m missing some things, but off the top of my head, that’s

all I could come up with.

Researcher: Well, we appreciate it. And at some point after we’ve gathered information from all over the place, we’ll send it back out and say as you read through this, is there anything else you want to add because you saw something in someone else’s response that you said, oh, yeah, yeah, we did that. We’ll share that with you as we get down the road a little bit.

Participant: Perfect.

Researcher: Alright, thank you so much.

Interviewer: Thank you.

Participant: Yeah, thank you. Have a good day. Have a good weekend.

Researcher: You too, bye-bye.

Interviewer: Thank you, bye.