

An Interview with Keith Whitfield

Perspectives from the COVID-19 Pandemic: Leadership and Learning in Nevada

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Principal Researchers:

Magdalena Martinez, Ph.D. and Kelliann Beavers, Ph.D.

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Each interviewee had the opportunity to review their transcript. All measures have been taken to preserve the style and language of the interviewee. This interview features Keith Whitfield, President of University of Nevada, Las Vegas, and was conducted on 10/11/22 by Kelliann Beavers and Taylor Cummings. This interview covers topics including reflections on leadership, organizational challenges, and opportunities for collaboration.

Interview with Keith Whitfield

Date: 10-11-2022

SPEAKERS: Kelliann Beavers, Taylor Cummings, Keith Whitfield

Kelliann Beavers [00:11]

All right. So to confirm, you're comfortable with us recording the interview. We will then provide you with a transcript for you to review and refine. And after that, you're comfortable with us using your name if we were to quote you.

Keith Whitfield [00:26]

Yes.

Kelliann Beavers [00:27]

Okay, great. So our first question is, can you describe your role, throughout the pandemic, and the subsequent economic downturn, and how you saw the role of UNLV, as well as your role, during that time?

Keith Whitfield [00:41]

(laughs)

Kelliann Beavers [00:43]

I know that's a huge question.

Keith Whitfield [00:45]

Yeah, I was going to say. I don't know if I've ever been asked that about my role. So, I serve as the president of UNLV. That means my responsibilities go for the faculty, staff, and students, both in terms of being able to continue either their working or educational pursuits at the university throughout the time of the pandemic. I'm also responsible for the external relationships that go on between the university, community, and beyond. And I'm also responsible for fiduciary aspects of the university as well.

Kelliann Beavers [01:29]

The next question is also a "biggie." Can you walk through a timeline, as you remember it? What happened, and what did you do? Obviously, just include the highlights that you feel you would like to speak about.

Keith Whitfield [01:43]

Highlights relative to the time during the pandemic?

Kelliann Beavers [01:46]

Yes. So just as it unfolded. And keeping in mind that we started doing these interviews much closer to the height and peak of the pandemic. And obviously, time has passed, so we just ask

folks to sort of look back and articulate, in their memory, how things happened and what they remember most strongly.

Keith Whitfield [02:07]

Okay. Let's see. Well, first and foremost, I started in August 2020. As we tend to do, we mark the middle of March as the beginning of the pandemic.

So it was up and going. As I applied for the job, actually, that was one of the critical things that I did was to look and see what the response had been. One of my decision-making, in terms of being interested in pursuing the position, was that the values of the current leadership matched mine, which was that the people come first. It wasn't about trying to make sure that we had classes or whatever. It was really the safety of people first and foremost. And then all those other decisions that needed to be made came after that and related to that issue of safety and the importance of people first.

So I started, actually, on August 24, 2020. I will say that I virtually broke my neck to pack up my stuff from Detroit, and to move here, to be here on the first day of classes. Because I thought that it was an important marker, as we faced the challenges of the pandemic, for there to be a new leader in place on that first day of class. So I was here and began all of the work of, one, learning about the university, but also thinking about the kinds of responses that we needed to make. Understanding what our resources were relative to being able to pivot – because I knew that it was going to be something that was going to change constantly, and it, sure enough, did. And worked to make sure that we were communicating appropriately. That is interesting from a president's position because it usually means more than just written communication. It involved a lot of time, which I'm quite uncomfortable with, in front of a camera, to try to make sure that we had plenty of recordings of things, and so they saw who was actually making some of those decisions.

That took us through, I would say, through the fall. And trying to figure out ways to creatively make sure that we kept things as normal as possible. I thought about decisions relative to how many people we should actually have on campus, and balancing out, again, safety for people first. And then making sure that our faculty had the resources that they needed to be able to deliver remote education and have most of it that way. I think it was over 80% that was remote.

I continued that in the spring of '21. And as the pandemic then changed a bit – was that '21? – gosh, you're making me remember the timeline here.

Kelliann Beavers [05:00]

(laughs)

Keith Whitfield [05:03]

So, one of the things that we decided was that as we saw the wearing of the pandemic on people, was that when things actually started getting better towards the spring of '21, we would do an outdoor graduation – which came with much questioning about that. But several things had changed, and even the distancing had changed at that time, and we thought that it would be

appropriate for us to be able to do that. We were then able to pull up classes from both the fall and the spring, to be able to actually have an in-person ceremony. That went very well.

And then, as we went into the fall, and vaccines became necessary – or became available – that was another whole line of challenges and questions. As you may know, for students, that was dictated by the Southern Nevada Health District, and then for personnel that were placed on NSHE, and then two presidents. And while we had an exception policy, people could both put in their exception requests and if they didn't like the answer, they could appeal it to me.

So I used most of the information that was actually coming from the reviews of the committees that make those decisions. And there were – I don't even know what the stats were in terms of how many we actually approved in terms of appeals, but we did do some, trying to make sure that we provided as much flexibility as possible.

Then, when mask mandates came off, we wanted to make sure we used that as an opportunity for people to be able to wear masks or not wear masks. And so they had some personal choice and personal decision-making, which I think is very important. But making sure, again, this whole time, making sure that we're trying to be very clear in our communications. That safety came first, and we should even make sure that we take into consideration other people's circumstances. Because some people wore masks, not because – they didn't wear a mask because they wanted to be free from the mask. But people who wore masks wore them for a purpose and a reason, and we needed to be appreciative of one another.

And so, that was some of the other messaging that came in, over time, was making sure that we tried to encourage a sense of community around this. One of the things, in terms of public health, is the idea that it's the public. It's not just an individual. And so we encouraged people to make sure that they were understanding, and also, to reach out; so that, if they saw somebody who might be suffering, and experiencing difficulties in trying to navigate the pandemic – that maybe they didn't offer help, but maybe they offered suggestions for them to seek out help.

Then, as a university, we made sure – my background's in psychology. Our provost's background is in psychology, and so we were very cognizant that there were some mental health challenges that were going on. People [were] experiencing stress, depression, anxiety, loneliness, and isolation, and those things cause other kinds of problems. They even cause physical health problems.

And so, to try to combat that, we worked with some of our faculty to see what kinds of programs we could put in place, and there was some training on wellness that we did for one group of faculty, and also, we increased the number of psychological counselors that we had. Increased our CAPS – our psychological services personnel – by about 65%. And if we have our way, we're going to double that as we finish up finishing the hiring. We have found that those hires are fully-subscribed. There are people going to them and seeing them because there are a lot of issues that are out there.

And then – I'm trying to think of the rest of it. I guess, moving into the fall of '21, we had our first kind of "normal" graduation. And then, in the spring of '22, had another "normal"

graduation. No more social distancing. Masks were not necessary. But always making sure we actually continually sent a message about trying to manage safety and manage expectations.

Kelliann Beavers [09:52]

Thank you so much. I didn't know about your background in psychology, and it's really helpful to hear you share so many of those things.

The next question is, how did you work with, or observe, groups who were hardest hit by the pandemic, and who were those groups, in your opinion? And this may overlap somewhat – your response at the end, with respect to the mental health of the students. But anything that you'd like to share?

Keith Whitfield [10:15]

One of the other things that we tried to keep mindful of was that we had frontline workers. We had people that were keeping – our campuses remained beautiful, and all of the systems have remained active. And that came from what we call "frontline workers" being here and being on campus.

And then also, making sure that people had the kinds of resources that they needed to be able to do remote work, both in terms of course instruction, as well as just some of their day-to-day jobs. The interesting thing is that one of the many transitions that were made was that once we didn't have to do remote work, the idea was well, so, would we allow remote work to continue on? And we made those decisions, and one of the priorities was that the student-facing offices, once we returned to work, really needed to be back at work.

And then we allowed there to be more local decision-making about possible flexibility in work requirements. Remote work was an issue well before the pandemic. And so, you know, that's one of the changes that's happened, I think, in higher ed, period, and in lots of our lives is the issue of remote work. But for some of that we were making sure that if there are people – one of the adjustments you were saying is for people that may need additional time off, sometimes to care for family, parents, or children, we try to be as flexible as possible. Even making sure that people could donate some of their time – their time could be donated to somebody else. That's a program we have here as well.

And one of the other things that our HR department did was to make sure that, coming back, we provided some things to try to reduce stress. I mean you could get a massage if you wanted. Somebody would come and do a massage. There were other kinds of activities to do, to try to make that reintroduction as easy as possible for the people who were coming back to work.

Kelliann Beavers [12:30]

The next question is, is there anything you wish that the government, at any level, had done differently, or could do differently now, in response to the pandemic or the downturn of the economy?

Keith Whitfield [12:44]

So for the pandemic piece of it, there was a point at which the CDC suggested that we should

discontinue the use of masks, and just from my perspective, I thought it was still early. And then when we saw a reintroduction, and we needed to kind of go back, it was ten times harder. You kind of, once you let Pandora out of the box, it's hard to fit them back in.

So I think because we had moved to the ability to not necessarily be happy with masks but to use masks, I think retreating from that should have been done, actually, after there had been an ample amount of time to really know that we had tried to suppress, as much as possible, and even let the vaccine take its hold for a little while beforehand. So, overlapping strategies.

What was the second part? There was – oh, about the economic piece of it? Is that the other half of that question?

Kelliann Beavers [13:53]

Yes. I said in response to the pandemic and/or the economic downturn following the pandemic.

Keith Whitfield [13:59]

Relative to the economic downturn – that one's interesting for us here in Las Vegas because it was a downturn that was caused by things turning up by housing prices, mostly, which is – usually, 25 to 35% of people's income is related to housing. And so the increase in housing that came from problems with logistics, that came with people sometimes not being able to pay their rent – all of those things. That was one thing that, unfortunately, we're not in a position to be able to help that much with. We do have a bit of an issue with the level of our salaries here in higher education in this state.

And so there wasn't really – I think you were asking for my opinion of it. I think that the financial support that was provided was good. I almost wish that there could be a way that it could have been extended to more people, and also, had been extended longer. But there's a cost to pay for doing that sort of thing. And so, I know that balance was something that was struggled for by our political leaders, to try to figure out what to do. But I think that it offered a little bit of a soft landing. It was temporary, but it still offered a soft landing, at least for some people, for a little while, and probably made a little bit of the transition back to engaging in workforce sorts of things a little bit easier, so I felt that was useful.

Kelliann Beavers [15:45]

Thank you. The initial part of your response also made me remember something. That it's so interesting how, each time I do an interview like this, I realize how I've almost blacked out things that happened during the pandemic, and not realized it. I think when you were talking about the CDC making the recommendation that it would be okay to stop wearing masks, I think there was a moment in there where the CDC was recommending "X," and our local health district was recommending – "Our strong recommendation is that you continue to wear masks," if I'm remembering correctly, and I had sort of forgotten that that wasn't married all along the way.

Keith Whitfield [16:19]

Yeah.

Kelliann Beavers [16:20]

So it's interesting to reflect on.

Keith Whitfield [16:22]

And even – there was, I think, one point where the governor was making it optional. And so then we, as an institution, had to decide what was going to be our policy on campus. I think what we said is that we have to follow the governor's rules. That "Yes, it's optional, but we strongly suggest that you wear – it was always leaning towards caution, rather than the easing of the restrictions which are difficult for people. But, again, hoping that we could stretch them out as long as possible, to try to reduce the numbers as much as possible, and with the help of the vaccine, public health kinds of precautions that are made; that's masking. That we would do our bit to be able to try to help.

One of the interesting things is that, as you track the pandemic, our campus numbers were actually lower than the city numbers. And so – we didn't ever brag about this – but in some ways, being on campus was actually safer than being in the city. I think that's because, in some ways, we really did encourage people, and they did follow those encouragements or even some of the rules that we set up for the public health and safety sorts of precautions.

Kelliann Beavers [17:38]

That's really interesting in retrospect. Thanks for sharing that. I know that your leadership, especially when the pandemic was new, and you had just stepped into your role, was so meaningful for all of us. And we were all sort of restless to see what the new roles were going to be and waiting for that email or announcement. And I was grateful for how sensitive and measured your responses always were. So thank you for that. I know it couldn't have been easy.

Keith Whitfield [18:08]

It was a cakewalk. (laughter)

Kelliann Beavers [18:11]

That's a wonderful way to think about it.

The next question is, what do you think we can learn from the COVID crisis that could be a lesson for future crises?

Keith Whitfield [18:24]

Well, first and foremost, I just want to make a comment that we have to learn from this event. We have had many events, actually, when you're talking about the economic piece, and thinking about the 2008 downturn, the recession. We haven't really learned that much from that. I mean there are some regulatory things that are in place, but I think the American people, we don't have much more in our savings account than we used to have before. So that was one of the things that I think - the pandemic it was a health issue, we were thinking that it was a health issue – but it was an issue that affected our economy in so many different ways.

And so it's my hope that we can learn from it. We need to learn a bunch of lessons. One of them is quick, measured responses. As you're talking about infectious diseases, hopefully, there are

enough of us that – it depends on how soon the next one is. Hopefully, there will be people who embrace the idea of masks – I have masks everywhere – that we won't be searching for them. We'll know where they are, and we'll know to be able to wear them. I take that, in part, from having been in China a number of times over the years. And that wearing a mask there is just – it happens all the time, especially in Beijing, where the air quality is so, so poor. It is not an odd thing to wear a mask. And so, hopefully, we will remember that lesson, and that we can be a little less resistant to having to wear a mask, and to be able to adjust to it.

I think the other piece of what we need to have learned is the idea that this is an infectious disease – or an example of an infectious disease – that we need to understand that it is very, very communicable in lots of different ways: airborne, surface, or whatever and that those kinds of precautions are actually necessary. That we need to see if we can push back less and accept it more because that will actually have the result of being able to bring it under control more quickly.

One of the other pieces to learn; I do go back to the economic piece and say I wish everybody had at least \$400 in their savings accounts. That's a number that we continue to hear, that Americans don't have – and it's just a very, very basic sort of number – but the idea of understanding that there are lots of things that can create economic hardship and that we have to figure out a way we can best be ready for that.

We also need to have plans for being able to deal with and help our most vulnerable populations. As we saw, this truly, differentially, affected older people and poor people. And that we need to figure out ways to be able to make sure they get the same quality care and the same amount of care as everyone does. And that's a goal that needs to be an everyday goal, particularly when we're put in crisis situations.

Kelliann Beavers [21:38]

Thank you, yeah. That's been one of our largest takeaways, and that's sort of a new focus for this project since we began looking at the inequities that existed prior to the pandemic, and how those have been amplified or responded to in ways that we consider more sensitively as we go forward.

Taylor's going to ask another – the rest of the questions, so I'm going to pass the baton to her. And thank you for letting me lead the interview thus far.

Keith Whitfield [22:02]

Sure.

Taylor Cummings [22:03]

All right. So, what do you think have been the most innovative ways organizations, the university, or citizens have dealt with the challenges of the pandemic and recession? These can be examples of collaboration, programs, or anything else that comes to mind.

Keith Whitfield [22:20]

Here in the valley, I think one of the things that this did was to offer an opportunity for higher education. And part of it is leadership because there's a personality piece to it. But in times of

crisis, sometimes you can make friends with folks that you didn't necessarily make with before. And one of the things that we've done, as an institution, is to be able to better connect with the community, particularly with the K-12. That's a longstanding issue for us, but I think that the pandemic actually opened up the possibility for the collaborations that we've been able to start. And so I think that's been fantastic.

I think that it's also given us an opportunity to take a closer look at how public health is actually run in this state. It's a lot on the Southern Nevada Health District, but it basically has to be for multiple agencies. And I think there was a lot of coordination in multiple agencies, and Commissioner Marilyn Kirkpatrick would hold a Monday morning – I don't know what she called it – but a meeting of police, fire, education, health district, and water, for everyone to think about ways in which they could actually work together.

So I think that it actually improved some coordination. I don't know how long it will last. But I think even just knowing that it's possible – will open up opportunities where if some coordination is needed in the future, to know that these entities can actually work together and communicate with one another.

Taylor Cummings [24:02]

Yeah. That's something that has been coming up a lot is this idea and the need for collaboration, and not us working in these separate silos. But knowing that everyone has to come together to sort of address these issues.

And I do have a follow-up question, though, in regard to the K-12 collaboration, just because this interview is existing in our education sector, and so we'll be talking to other educational organizations. But what sort of supports, or if specific educational organizations come to your mind – but what specific supports were you sort of doing, or looking to do, with K-12?

Keith Whitfield [24:37]

So with K-12, some of this is pandemic-related, but most of it is just normally what should be done.

Taylor Cummings [24:43]

Okay.

Keith Whitfield [24:45]

And that is – one is to be able to address the teacher shortage that we have. So we created a teacher pathway model during the pandemic, to try to help people who are already at CCSD but didn't have the qualifications to be able to be a teacher. And so we created a pathway for them to more quickly do that. We're working on some online content. That's not been finished yet, but that would be another opportunity to be able to better prepare and educate our teachers.

Taylor Cummings [25:13]

Okay.

Keith Whitfield [25:14]

Some of the other pieces have been just saying that we're going to figure out ways to work together. And one of my big pushes is for summer programs so that kids can continuously be educated and inspired to be able to go as far as they can. And you know, some of it is even softer stuff that's happened in the past of what we're trying to put stuff into action now. And that is the idea that we need to increase the number of college-going students that we have. This connects with the economic diversification; this connects with even what's going on in the strip, you know.

One of the kinds of adages that people have said for years is well, you know, you don't even need a high school diploma. You can go work on the strip and make a good salary and be able to take care of your family. And, even for those who are parking cars now, you're using more technology than ever before. And so there is a need for a life-long learning perspective and a perspective where a high school diploma is the very, very minimum. Honestly, you need these additional sorts of things to be able to engage in the world that we have, and in the opportunities that are coming to engineering and hospitality, to lots of other different disciplines, and even to try to help encourage people to take pathways into things like engineering and nursing, which we're very, very short on. They're occupations that are in high demand, and we need to be able to figure out ways to get more kids interested in them. Supporting the STEM programs. That starts in the K-12 space, but then extends, and it's truly supported by higher education the best, to be able to provide opportunities for STEM learning.

Taylor Cummings [27:01]

Well, thank you. That was very helpful. Were there any specific policies at the university implemented that you noticed impacted people, either positively or negatively?

Keith Whitfield [27:15]

Well, the mask mandate was both positive and negative. Having people come back and having in-person classes had positives and negatives. Let's see-

Kelliann Beavers [27:30]

If there's anything you want to share about, I'm not sure how this funneled through, or parallel to the university, but the CARES funding or the ARPA funding. So that it's more about policies outside of the university and how they supported the university. I don't know if that's relevant. But if there's anything there, you could also talk about that.

Keith Whitfield [27:50]

Sure. Well, it's interesting, that point, how that helped the university was that rather than having some really incredible economic hardships – the CARES funding and the HEERF funding actually helped us in lots of different ways. We would use them both to be able to support students, so that they could continue their education, but as well for some of the kinds of losses that we were facing because lots of funding was cut as the pandemic went in. For example, we had an engineering building where all of the funding was for the medical school, all of that was cut.

So that helped to return not those two particular examples, but they did make it a little easier to make sure that we could have continuous operations without fail. Some of that was for salaries for things that were of high interest and high need and support for students and for faculty. And so those fundings were very, very important for us.

Taylor Cummings [28:53]

And our last question, are you hopeful? And if yes, what are you hopeful for?

Keith Whitfield [28:59]

Wow. So it's too funny. Because I actually quote Charles Barkley, who I've never previously been a huge fan of. His style is not one that I really necessarily identify with. But he was doing an interview with Seth Curry, actually, and he said, he goes, "You know, this is a two-choice decision as we go forward. You can be either hopeful, or you can be hopeless." And he goes, "I choose to be hopeful." And I was just so surprised because I was like – I actually agree with Charles Barkley. This is one of those things where there's nothing to celebrate. We need to remember all of the people who we've lost, and who are experiencing complications from having contracted COVID. But we really do need to use this as an opportunity to be able to move our society forward, and to be able to move – in my world, it's our educational opportunities forward.

The economic diversification piece of it is one that I know has been talked about in the state before during the downturn. And for me, I think that it's a perfect opportunity to actually demonstrate the power that universities have. That I don't think it was appreciated as much before – we have moved into that space, and really shown how we can help to attract business and diversify business. And be able to better prepare people to be able to go into the workforce in highly-technical jobs, and in jobs that are in high demand.

And so that's what I'm hopeful for, is that legislators and folks that are dealing at the state level actually understand and appreciate the power that universities actually bring. I'm not fooled into believing that it will be perfect, but I'm hoping that we can just move the needle on that a bit. And the other places for people to be able to understand and appreciate that the university, through tracking, tracing, vaccinations, and testing, that we played an incredibly important role in the community to be able to move through this. And that they figured that out and learned that that's just one example of the many ways in which the university is actually an incredible plus for our community.

Taylor Cummings [31:19]

Thank you. That's very, very helpful. And just really quickly, our last, last, question is, are there any other people that you think would be helpful for us to speak with?

Keith Whitfield [31:31]

Possibly, Adam Garcia.

Taylor Cummings [31:32]

Okay.

Keith Whitfield [31:34]

If you haven't spoken with him. The other person who really took an incredible leadership role, in our university's response, is Provost Chris Heavey.

Kelliann Beavers [31:58]

Yeah. Thanks for sharing both of those names. Sometimes the names that seem the most obvious don't necessarily come to mind when we're reaching out. So it's really good to have a reminder of who it would be good to reach out to if they have time to talk to us.

Keith Whitfield [32:11]

Good.

Kelliann Beavers [32:14]

Well, thank you again so much for your time and for everything that you've shared. It's been immensely meaningful for your leadership as a whole. We're very grateful to you on many levels.

Keith Whitfield [32:23]

Well, thank you very much. It sounds like this is dissertation work and policy institute work, which I have valued greatly since I've been here. You all are a wonderful repository for information, and you have those quirky questions. And so, hopefully, this will – in ten years, we'll look back on it, and your report will be something that will be one of those quirky questions of that "How do you respond to a pandemic? Everybody knows how to do that."

Kelliann Beavers [32:49]

I sure hope so. (laughs)

Taylor Cummings [32:53]

Off the record, I know you talked a lot about communication and clarity during that time. For me personally, the communication was not very clear. And I almost lost my assistantship because I didn't know that as a student, and I guess, as faculty, I needed to have two vaccine exemption forms. And so, me and my advisor, I only submitted the one for my student status. And then I got all these letters about termination, and I was like "Whoa, whoa, whoa! I got approved. I got approved." And so, I had to go through the process of just trying to make sure that everything was set in stone so that I could continue.

Keith Whitfield [33:29]

Well, I'm glad that we did have things in line, that actually were redundant systems, to be able to catch people. Because you are a certain slice – that you were in both camps, and you know, you answer one, and then – wait a minute – there's two checkmarks, and you only checked one of them. So that does happen. But it is funny. Communication at a university, on a normal day, before the pandemic – if I sent out something, maybe 25% might actually have opened up.

Taylor Cummings [33:58]

Oh, yeah.

Keith Whitfield [34:00]

During the pandemic, it was probably more like 75 to 80%.

Taylor Cummings [34:02]

Really?

Keith Whitfield [34:04]

Because everybody wanted information. But even with that, there were still unique circumstances that we had to try to pivot from, and I'm glad it was a positive one for you, Taylor.

Taylor Cummings [34:15]

...it became positive. (laughs) But yeah.

Keith Whitfield [34:18]

Well, you're still here. You're still enrolled. So it must be positive.

Taylor Cummings [34:20]

Yes, absolutely. Absolutely. Absolutely. And that you can't be scared to talk to us. You've got to get in front of the camera and send us messages because we're trying to see stuff, and I'm like "What is going on?"

Keith Whitfield [34:33]

My problem is that I do that all the time. And actually, it's not a problem. I do like doing – making sure that – it's one of those things where I consider myself – I call myself, sometimes, to my cabinet, I say, "I'm a working President." I said, "Don't do all the work and then send me something to sign. I actually want to do the work."

Taylor Cummings [34:54]

Yeah.

Keith Whitfield [34:55]

But part of my work is communicating those things. And it takes an enormous amount of time. Even the external relationships take an enormous amount of time. And you don't get to do the real, "cool" stuff, where you're problem-solving, you're trying to create something new, or to do whatever. It is the struggle, depending on who you are as President, of what you have to do and what's important.

So, just for you, I will make sure that I continue – or actually, the real solution is the Digital President. You guys didn't ask me that.

Taylor Cummings [35:25]

I saw you – I tried to talk to you. You don't have all the answers online, though.

Kelliann Beavers [35:29]

(laughs)

Keith Whitfield [35:30]

Well, but see if you don't engage, we don't learn. It's artificial intelligence.

Taylor Cummings [35:34]

Okay. All right.

Keith Whitfield [35:38]

And actually, it was never meant that it would have everything. We had to launch it so that there would be questions. And then they actually go back every single week, and stuff where it looked like it fumbled, we start making more ties and connections.

Taylor Cummings [35:49]

Nods. (affirmative)

Kelliann Beavers [35:51]

Oh, that's so cool! I'll definitely have to explore using it. We'll encourage our students to do the same thing. Because I saw an article about that – I haven't used it yet. But it's a really neat tool.

Keith Whitfield [36:03]

And that's another thing, too, for your report. The purpose was that yeah, we've got this great tech. But the purpose was that I was concerned about the students that we weren't connecting with. I was worried about the students who – Taylor, you know – you went, and you were beating down doors. Some of our students were much more passive and weren't getting information, and time was going by, which usually complicates the problem.

So this was just yet another way in which, for us in administration, we're trying to reach out to students, to connect with students, and to make sure those who might – most recently, for example, we have a mental health module that's to try to help give students where they need to go. But boy, Taylor's just too hard on me today.

Kelliann Beavers [36:46]

(laughs)

Keith Whitfield [36:48]

We didn't get the – we didn't need the vaccination study part. We haven't got the Digital President right. Boy! I tell 'ya.

Taylor Cummings [36:55]

It's how we have solutions, you know? We've got to talk about this stuff.

Keith Whitfield [36:58]

Okay.

Taylor Cummings [37:01]

The pivoting.

Kelliann Beavers [37:02]

I will say, what you said about not reading the university president's emails until you came on board is absolutely true. I had been at this university for over three years by then. And the point at which you started sending emails, I was like "Oh, how exciting! We've gotten an email from the university president."

Keith Whitfield [37:19]

Well, everybody was hungry for information because it was helping you to make decisions. And so, people were – I was telling the provost this the other day. I said, "You know, there's going to come a time when people are going to go back to where they were before."

Kelliann Beavers [37:31]

No – I open your emails *still* for that reason, though.

Keith Whitfield [37:33]

It doesn't look too much like that.

Kelliann Beavers [37:36]

I feel like you're my – you secured my trust.

Keith Whitfield [37:40]

Okay. (laughs)

Kelliann Beavers [37:41]

And now I always read your emails because, at a time when I needed communication, you were there. I think there's something to be said about that. I don't know what the statistics are like, but if I see an email from you, I always read it now.

Keith Whitfield [37:55]

The response is far higher than it used to be.

Kelliann Beavers [37:56]

Yeah.

Keith Whitfield [37:58]

It's just that you were asking the question about, have we learned lessons? And I think that with the information overload that all of us deal with, we will select certain things. And so, again, you know, I do try to focus our – what we put out there, it's important. We don't put out just anything. We put out stuff that's important. So, hopefully, that will stay up, so that again – that's another avenue that, when we're shifting, when we're making changes, when we're advancing, when things are exciting, and when there's opportunities to be done, we're going to use that as a method, and hopefully, as many people as possible use it.

But like I said, people like to go back to that – and well, too, again, it is trying to process a lot of information. With certain things – and you go "Eh." I do it with my email all the time, you

know? If *Inside Higher Ed* sends me stuff, I just delete it. I'm like, "Look. I'll search for you if I need you. I don't need you to tell me what's going on."

Kelliann Beavers [38:57]

I was grateful for your leadership about DACA this week, or last week when you sent that out. I forwarded it to someone else, and said, "This is what it is to have good leadership." And we got that quickly; we got it promptly, from you. It was clear. It was compassionate. It was a really important message.

Keith Whitfield [39:12]

Well, thank you. That is one of the – it's so funny – you all are doing research on the pandemic. But there are these other big issues that were there; social justice is another one that the pandemic kind of intersected with and just exploded. Both the partisanship, both the concerns, both the curiosity and all of those sorts of things. And for our university, who we are, which is that we're one of the greatest because we're one of the most diverse. That's just an issue that it's easy to think about wanting to try to make opportunities for people because that's what we do every day anyway, so we want to give it to anybody and everybody.

Taylor Cummings [39:56]

Well, thank you. You're doing a fabulous job and thank you for all the work that you do.

Keith Whitfield [39:59]

Thank you. And we need to then cut off right there for Taylor because- she might say that something else happened.

Taylor Cummings [40:07]

No – I really love it here. I love it. My program is exceptional. I came here because of the research. Dr. Hilpert is my advisor. I do complex systems. So I love it. I'm having the time of my life here. Everyone, they get me. They support me. And I'm involved in a lot of different things; The Nevada COVID Recovery Project wasn't like my research interest. But it speaks to my understanding of the way I see the world, and just how to ensure an equitable recovery for all people, and it allows me to do that. And so I'm grateful to be here and I love it here, so-

Keith Whitfield [40:41]

Well, we're glad to have you.

Taylor Cummings [40:42]

Yes. Thank you very much.

Kelliann Beavers [40:45]

Thank you again so much, President Whitfield. I hope you have a lovely afternoon. And again, we appreciate all the insights you shared. I will send over a transcript, as soon as we have one, so you can take a look at it.

Keith Whitfield [40:57]

That sounds good. All right. Take care. Have a good day.

Kelliann Beavers [40:58]

You too.

Keith Whitfield [40:59]

Bye-bye.

Taylor Cummings [41:03]

That was cool.

End of audio: 41:07