

An Interview with David Sinclair

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

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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 David Sinclair, former Assistant Director of Recruitment and Admissions for University of Nevada, Las Vegas Honors College, and was conducted on 3/31/22 by Kelliann Beavers and Peter Grema. This interview covers topics including reflections on leadership, organizational challenges, and opportunities for collaboration.

Interview with David Sinclair

Date: 3/31/2022

SPEAKERS

David Sinclair, Kelliann Beavers, Peter Grema

Kelliann [00:04]

Okay. So to confirm, David, you're comfortable with us recording and using your name, just so we have it within the recording.

David Sinclair [00:12]

Yes, yes. I am comfortable with the recording and with using my name for reference purposes.

Kelliann [00:17]

Okay. Thanks so much. So we'll start with a few general questions. The first one being if you – and I think for you, for these questions, you can speak toward while you were at UNLV, although if anything that you have going on currently is something you want to chat about, of course, we're also interested.

David Sinclair [00:37]

Sure.

Kelliann [00:39]

But the question is to describe what your position was and your role in the organization.

David Sinclair [00:47]

Okay. So I am the former Assistant Director for Admissions and Recruitment at UNLV Honors College. I held that position for almost five years – or actually, it was like five and a half. You know what? Since COVID happened, time has no meaning. So I've been there for a long time. And in that time, I was tasked with helping to grow the Honors College. During that time, I also not only was successful in that I tried to move the needle, and I was successful in doing that in terms of bringing in more diversity into Honors College, so it more reflected the UNLV campus, and also the larger Las Vegas campuses well.

And it was during that time that I got my master's degree in Urban Leadership at UNLV Greenspun. And during that program I got into a lot of different things – and I'm a generalist by nature. This will come up during the interview. My background is varied. It's not just in education or higher ed in public administration.

But I went into a generalist's master's degree, to make the most of use of my experience. And I got involved with a lot of things, including trying to retool pre existing organizations and programs, to have a more thorough and effective wraparound service for opioid recovery in Las Vegas, which COVID has made more necessary not just in Las Vegas, but across America.

And then I really started delving into something that's deeply personal to me, which is looking at inequality and specifically, in hunger. Which led me to the paper that I ended up writing and publishing. And also, before that, I was even cross referencing data for incoming students against publicly-available big datasets from the government. To find out that the students who were coming into Honors College not only exceeded the national trends, where they were coming from in terms of – if they were coming from a food desert or had food insecurity. But we also exceeded the ratios for Las Vegas, which were already above the national trends.

And it's something that I care deeply about. I've spent the last six months since moving to Charlotte. Because Charlotte can be cold and rainy like it is today, and it has been since I moved here. I've spent a lot of my time doing more research and working towards a bigger project, where I'm going to make larger and more generalized recommendations to large urban centers, to start producing their own food and distributing it like a utility, which is the big idea. That is the big idea of my work, which is making food a utility so it's something that we eventually, hopefully, will take for granted that we have. Because of its impacts, not just on hunger, but the impact of hunger in terms of public health, childhood development, etc.

And I'll stop there – because Mr. Grema can tell you I'm a "talker." So I will let you know when I'm done, and that's now. I'm done.

Kelliann [04:13]

I am grateful, so grateful that we're speaking with you. Not only because of the role that you've played but because of your passion about all these aspects. I knew, of course, that you would have been exposed to experiences that were relevant. But to hear about just your own personal commitment to the depth of some of these things, I think, really makes a difference. So thank you for sharing all of that. And we encourage talking in the interview, so you're in luck. (laughs)

Our second question is – and you did speak a bit to this in terms of your role. So don't feel like you have to reiterate.

David Sinclair [04:49]

Mm-hmm.

Kelliann [04:51]

But anything else that you'd like to say about how you saw your role or your organization's role during the pandemic?

David Sinclair [05:00]

Honors College took on a strange role. And I'm going to say "strange" in the fact that it was uncommon amongst, I would say, higher ed in general, with students. In a sense, we became a bastion of hope. And hopefully, for incoming students, in the way that I would interact with students – I was already – this is going to be me tooting my own horn a little bit. I was already preadapted to the environment of COVID because of the YouTube advertising that we were doing. We were the first unit on campus doing YouTube ads. And I don't know if we broke any rules doing that or not. I don't care. Because it needed to be done – and you know, UNLV needs to be in the 21st century and we're two decades behind.

So we started doing that. And I started realizing, very early on, that I needed to outreach to students in a different way. Because even doing Zoom outreach and these things, it was meaningless, and students really didn't like it. So I really started to emphasize very small group one-on-one interactions. And in a sense, was I recruiting students? Yes. But also, we were giving hope to a lot of juniors and seniors. And I would also spend that time talking to them about their emotional states and letting them know, pandemics don't last forever. They just don't. And it takes a lot – and I know this because I used to teach biology. It takes a lot more than just one natural disaster to end a species, especially one that's global. We have to have a lot more.

Now, since the early time of the pandemic, we've had a lot more catastrophes happen. And this interview is actually happening underneath – hopefully not – but underneath the shadow of fears from the 1970s and 1980s of nuclear war. So I don't know what these high schoolers are thinking right now across America. But I can tell you, my wife works in a school district out here, and they are very depressed, these kids. And hungry, which we can talk about.

So I was giving a lot of hope. Now, for the recurring students, I was also the scholarship manager basically, or the scholarship guy, and I worked very closely with our development officer. She would go out and scare up extra funds for students because we knew that the students were needy, right? I already proved that we were bringing students with higher rates of hunger and food insecurity, amongst other issues, and that they needed more funds, really, because you need money. At the end of the day, you need money. The kids needed money to pay for their classes, so they didn't feel like they had to work during the pandemic. They needed money just for books, all sorts of things. I mean technology – how many students were not prepared for this?

And so, I had already worked out, even before the pandemic, just schemes. Using Excel about, 'if I had this much funds, how would I break it up amongst these groups?' And so it became very easy for me to expediently take money that I was given, whether it was CARES Act or through a private donor, and just distribute it amongst as many people in the Honors College, as we possibly could, to take care of them.

And also, I mentor students. In fact, I had a mentor group of 25 students that I had scholarships for. I was teaching them leadership skills. They were creating content for me for Instagram. And I keep in contact with a lot of those students to this day. And then there were students who just chose me to be a mentor. In fact, one of them is here today. And I keep in touch with them too, to make sure that they – not just intellectually are sharp – but emotionally, are grounded. And not being afraid of the emotional development that they need to be successful in academia and beyond as human beings. And that's something that, I feel like, our role, that's really where we shined in Honors College during the pandemic.

Kelliann [09:19]

That's beautiful and informative for me. Because, of course, I had some descriptive of your role. But that really allows me to gain so much more depth, and I appreciate you going into it.

The next role – I mean the next question is, which groups do you believe were hardest hit by the COVID recession?

David Sinclair [09:42]

Wow.

Kelliann [09:43]

And there are some sub questions to it that I will just say, and you don't have to memorize these. But whatever stays in your mind of it you can speak to, and I'm happy to repeat them.

David Sinclair [09:52]

Okay.

Kelliann [09:53]

But the sub questions are, how your organization's goals may have changed to accommodate hardest-hit groups, and whether – well, we'll stop there, and then I'll ask the other question separately.

David Sinclair [10:05]

I'll start with the one that only makes the most sense. Because I think the pandemic hit most Americans, I guess, to varying degrees. Unless you are a member of one of our opulent classes, I think for most people, they suffered in some way. And we talked about hard-hitting, that was kind of a vague, open-ended thing. So, do you want to define that further, into, like financially, emotionally? Or do you want to leave it open?

Kelliann [10:40]

I think that's a good question. And I think we can leave it open. But if you want to clarify, as you speak as to what you're referring to, that would be great, and whatever you feel the most compelled to speak about is also what we're interested in.

David Sinclair [10:53]

Okay. I think – and all of these groups are going to overlap, right? We're talking about Venn diagrams of intersectionality here.

I think the three groups that were hit absolutely the hardest, and I think it's in this order was: children, absolutely hit the hardest. And I believe that in emotional development, and also in terms of material financial security, and there are a lot of studies to back that up. And they were suffering in America even before the pandemic. The pandemic just kind of made it a little worse.

And we can talk about public policy decisions that happened, even specifically in Clark County, that I think really harmed children long-term. People that are working class across America, I think most people who are earning below, at, or even just above minimum wage. And I would probably put this number at about – anyone earning you know, probably, \$40,000 to \$50,000 or less a year. Absolutely devastated. Because in the working class, you also get people – we don't always equate with working class people like small business owners. They were hit very, very hard during the pandemic.

And then, anyone suffering from any type of addiction or a mental health disorder. Which, during the pandemic, anyone who was suffering from a mental disorder, of any kind, for a while,

that was the number one comorbidity for COVID, which is a little mind-blowing when you think about it. It's now diabetes. But for a while, it was mental health which was the leading comorbidity.

Kelliann This is.

David Sinclair [12:48]

Yeah. It mostly affected elderly populations, right, and still does. So it kind of makes sense. But even if you take the COVID death out, and you look at excess deaths, or even, just what's happening with hospitals across America. Fentanyl became the leading cause of death for people under 35. I'm sorry. I get emotional just thinking about that.

Kelliann [13:20]

It's an emotional reality we're living in right now, so I don't blame you.

David Sinclair [13:21]

Yeah.

David Sinclair [13:27]

Yeah. And anyway, I feel like those are the three areas that were really hit. Now, for UNLV – I can't speak for all of UNLV – I know that my Legacy Project, which was what I did to get my master's degree, was to start up this opioid recovery program that we called "The Farley Group" – we named it after Chris Farley – as a shining example that you don't always know what's going on with somebody. You can't tell, right, when someone has something going on, whether you have a material addiction or whatnot.

So we started this organization, and we'd actually gotten buy-in from the Henderson Courts to start this program that's based around Vivatrol. And using pre existing organizations, and programs, and government resources to save lives, basically, and to reintegrate them into the community. But also, to do it at either low-cost or to savings to the municipalities who join on. And the person who really was a spearhead for this is someone who had done this on a smaller scale already in Ohio. So we were just taking this idea, in a small county where this guy used to work, and expanding it to a larger area, which would be Henderson, and then exporting that to all the different jurisdictions and municipalities in the Valley.

And one of the first things we came up against – this is a side note – one of the first things we came up against is that we were working with law enforcement. And law enforcement is ignorant of, even within their own jurisdictions, their own institute – their own departments – of what they have. We had someone say, "Oh, there's nobody working in Juvenile Corrections that does probation. There's no one who does that." And actually, one of the other team members was that person, and she said, "I'm right here." So we started talking about community-mapping and stuff like that.

Now, I was in contact with the group who picked up after we graduated the Legacy Project, and they went in a different direction with it, apparently. So I don't know if they're following through

on the plan or not. So that's – are they trying? Maybe. Are they successful? I have no idea. And that's something that is hard.

In terms of children, all I can say is that for Honors College – again, we provided hope. I provided an outlet. I was overworking myself because of – a lot of the time, talking with parents and with students virtually. Just to be able to let them know that they could be taken care of at UNLV. What kind of services we have to offer, and what kind of hope, and what kind of achievements? Let's face it, right. What kind of achievements we can offer these people. We had to give them a future, and that's something that we did. For the rest of the university, I'm not sure.

Now, for the working class, working-class people, if UNLV did anything, why don't you let *me* know? Because I don't know if that's something that we were even prepared to do. UNLV, in a sense, was uniquely not ready for community outreach and engagement. A lot of other universities – and I used to bring this up all the time – I was working with early outreach in the ESS side of admissions early. Because I was like, universities that are big, that are top-tier – and we are top-tier. We need to start acting like a top-tier university, and we need to be more engaged and more visible in everything that happens in our community. And there's a lot of institutional inertia – or that – at UNLV. Not everything. UNLV is a great place. You can start programs overnight with the right people. But with this area – and I know, with advertising and marketing, they only had a budget of like \$20,000 or \$40,000, something *insane* for a top-tier school, like low. So I don't think UNLV had those connections to really do anything, especially not at Honors College.

So those are my top three. And I'm going to hit the last one, which is going to seem uncommon too. But I think there's a certain type of white collar professional that found COVID to be extremely difficult. Maybe not financially, but in terms of everything, from screen exhaustion to anxiety, to a host of other issues. And I think I fell into that category. I mean just from overwork, just because it felt "normal." So I wanted to feel normal all the time, so here I am, checking applications at 2 am. Because you want the world to be better and want people to be better, right? I would say, those are the three main groups though, not the white-collar professionals. Because I count them, but I think for the purposes of your question, it's those three.

Kelliann [18:39]

Right. I'm glad you mentioned that, though. And there are two things you said, that if you don't mind elaborating on. One is the policies in Clark County that you spoke about that you felt like were harmful to children. And if you want, I'd like to hear more. When you said about community-mapping, that was a completely separate-

Peter: [19:02]

Also, before that, let me clarify ESS. You mentioned it before.

David Sinclair [19:05]

Oh, "Enrollment and Student Services."

Peter: [19:08]

Thanks.

David Sinclair [19:09]

That's part of the 'alphabet soup' that makes up UNLV administration. So thank you. I always forget that there's nomenclature that comes with higher ed that sometimes we – and it doesn't always go from place to place. I've talked to universities out here, and have to do the translation in my head about what they mean versus what I know how that works in higher ed.

So I'm sorry. The second question was about community-mapping, and the first question was about-

Kelliann [19:38]

When you spoke about the impact to children, you said there were specific policies that you felt like were harmful. And you don't have to go down a rabbit hole, if you don't want to, but I'm interested to hear your perspective.

David Sinclair [19:50]

First of all, I think the school district – and I want to make sure. If this is going to be shown to other people, I want to make a brief distinction here. Is that when we talk about schools, people don't understand that there is a huge difference between the administration of a school district, the teachers, the administrators at the school, and the teachers and parents. And the way that most school districts work in America right now, it is literally, a war of "all against all." We're the school districts and the teachers are in conflict. And the administrators at the school are in conflict with the teachers and with the school district, and the parents may or may not be on board with any one of those three groups. I want to make sure we're clear on that.

So my beef specifically was with the school district. And I think they make a lot of really critical errors when they could have made some really critical good decisions about what's best for students. And the decision making – and I don't want to call this person out – but his title is "Doctor," and his last name is Jara. He had a public meeting over the phone, and I got to ask him a very, very pointed question at the very early onset. And I asked him very early on, I said, "Look. We are dealing with a medical and public health issue with COVID. Why are you trying to find out if the parents will be okay with students staying home? Like why are you making scientific and medical decisions based after the input from people who are not scientists or clinical medical workers?" He couldn't answer the question, right. So he talked around it a whole lot. And I think that meeting, unfortunately, kind of went down the drain from there.

But it's important to ask, and I got to ask that very early on. Like, why are you even doing this, right? So here's somebody that – I hate to say this – really was not interested in the well-being of students. And I think certain things, rolling out Canvas for the school district. And first of all, it's a terrible idea. Canvas, as anyone who's an expert in Canvas, whether as a user-end or the other end, will know is that it has to be set up well, and it has to be set up well – well, well, well in advance for it to be a meaningful learning tool. And teachers were basically given a month to, literally, write books of instructions and to use creatively and well in Canvas, for students of not just different age levels, but also different learning styles, or if they had different disabilities. And find the seams of it on the programming issue, it's –

Kelliann [22:50]

Sorry, I'm a bad chatter. I mentioned that to Peter to reorganize this.

David Sinclair [22:56]

Yeah, that's fine. We'll stick around. So anyway, I feel like that was really bad. I feel it was good that they continued food service for students. But also, the amount of overwork that was placed on teachers is also a disservice because actually, it hurts students. Teachers were being asked to make wellness calls with students that weren't even students in their classrooms.

Kelliann [23:19]

Hmm.

David Sinclair [23:20]

And that's an uncomfortable situation, and the student has to answer the phone, like you call up, "Hey, I need to talk to Johnny." "Well, Johnny's sick." So then I'm like, "Yeah. Well, I'm a teacher from Clark County. I'm doing a wellness call," right? And Johnny may not even know how to even contextualize if there's an issue going on. When really, what needed to happen is first of all, they needed someone else if they're going to make phone calls, someone else to that. And you really needed social workers, or somebody in the role, with some sort of crash training, to at least go into the homes to figure out what was going on. So anyway, I could go down that rabbit hole – we could go on with that forever.

Now, community-mapping is an idea that, I feel like, more people need to get involved with in the public sphere. And so, our idea with the Farley Group was that one of our future stages was to do community-mapping of all the different law enforcement agencies, and all of the recovering agencies in groups for opioid addiction in the Valley, because they're just unaware of each other.

Kelliann [24:25]

I think this is so important. And I want to our interview focused on what it is supposed to be focused on. But I wholeheartedly agree with you, especially with perspective, the entire nonprofit community in the Valley. I think there are so many hands that could be holding other hands that just don't have the time and capacity to know they exist.

David Sinclair [24:47]

The only group that comes close to doing this, right. And they actually do – I would say probably because I'm not an insider and I just speak from the outside – 80 to 90 per cent, and they just nail it – is all of the groups that deal with homelessness.

Kelliann [24:59]

Mm-hmm.

David Sinclair [25:01]

They have their own network, where you can log into any one of their websites and you start filling out a form: "I need help." And if this organization is not the one that specifically is going to help you, they refer you to the other one.

Kelliann [25:12]

That's good to know.

David Sinclair [25:15]

They have a network in the homeless – yeah. The homeless nonprofit community in Las Vegas has that. But every other sector and even law enforcement. That's a mind-blower. They are unaware of all the different agencies, or all the different departments that exist in all the different jurisdictions. And again, that was something that was shocking to me, when I just started poking my fingers in here, like, "Hey, let's talk about opioid recovery." That's something that I feel like is necessary. If we're ever going to feel the ills of our society, we have to know what's there. We have to know what blocks we're already building on and how we can rearrange them.

Kelliann [25:59]

Yeah. I think that speaks a lot to creating regional strength too. Thanks for highlighting that.

David Sinclair [26:04]

Mm-hmm. Yeah.

Peter: [26:07]

Thank you David, appreciate it. Turning it back to higher education; has COVID and the recession affected recruitment of prospective students, and the retention and graduation of existing students?

David Sinclair [26:19]

Okay. So I think I can speak a whole lot more to the first part. And that first – you know, 2020, that 2020 recruitment year for fall 2020. All across America, there were students who just – that "I'm not going to college." And unless someone else has done some sort of massive longitudinal research paper that I haven't read yet, those kids have disappeared. So let's just get that out of the way. We have at least one year, one cohort of students that is sizable across this country that have disappeared. And that's going to have huge impacts on not just our society, but even on higher ed, right, because so many schools need enrollment.

When I was looking for work, I was getting phone calls – I was getting interviews for very, very small schools that said, "We have one year to get this many students. Do you think you can help with that?" And these are places that you've seen in movies. I'll leave it at that. I don't want to give anything away. But I was kind of surprised.

So repeat the question again because I want to get the details right. It was about recruitment-

Peter [27:37]

Yeah, will do. How has COVID and the recession affected the recruitment of prospective students?

David Sinclair [27:43]

Okay. And money is absolutely huge in terms of scholarship and "bang for your buck" when it comes to what you can offer. In that first year – not Honors College. Honors College actually

dropped just a little bit in that fall of 2020. It was hard for me to be able to keep students because the thing is, how do you encourage people to want to do more, and be extra, when everything is really hard to begin with because of COVID, right?

And we had this long conversation about "Why am I paying all this extra money for online classes?" And I'll do a side note about NYU in a minute because that's actually where I got my undergrad. We'll come back to that. But UNLV had – we were one of the only schools in America that increased enrollment, partly because of "bang for your buck." And apparently, because we were preadapted in our scholarship strategy as an institution, and also through different departmental scholarship strategies.

I think money has become even more important. I now have a nephew and a niece who, each year now, have entered different schools, and they made those decisions mostly based after the bottom line, where before, they may not have. So maybe it's kind of forced younger people who may not have financial awareness to be a little bit more aware of "How much am I going to pay for this?" It's also become much more difficult to contact these students, especially – things are changing now because we're lifting mask mandates, we're having in-person schooling. That's a whole other issue; about what is correct and what is not.

Again, it's one of those things that I have to put out there. The virus is airborne. Everyone acts like it's not. And if you have an issue with that, I have a triple-peer reviewed study from MIT I can share with anyone at any time. That proves it. It's airborne. It's about duration. That's another issue I had with CCSD.

But spending so much time in front of a screen for the past two to three years, these students don't want to spend any more time having someone talk *at* them about a school. So it's harder to inspire, and also, these students, they want to casually look at schools on their own. So again, this is something I was already preadapted to. I came up with very rich emails, and I would send them out to students based after the wave I put them in. Every other week; every third week. So they could casually look at UNLV, and honors college, on their own time, when they wanted to do it. And I was like, "I'm available," and I would make myself available at certain times. "You can make a meeting with me or go to this event online." We didn't feel burned out because a lot of students just felt burned out.

And I think what's interesting, I think with college recruitment, parents, during COVID – and I don't know if this is going to continue – but I think they played a smaller role during COVID as well, at least in the population that I was dealing with. Parents are burned out and they're just like, "My gosh, just take care of it, please," and I think they're hoping that their students can take care of it. And so I think that's really how it's affected those things.

Now, for retention, I might be the wrong person to ask because I don't have – and I never really was interested in retention, although a lot of what I did was for retention, in a sense. Honors did very well with retention. I think UNLV is doing a better job overall but nationwide, I'm not sure. And so I don't feel like I can answer that one and give you a quality answer.

Peter [31:24]
All right, thank you.

David Sinclair [31:26]
I'm sorry.

Peter [31:28]
Yeah, appreciate it. That's all right. Did you see any admissions deferrals for undergrad students?

David Sinclair [31:36]
Well, funnily enough, when you mentioned that, I thought about my international students, and I think that's something we overlooked. I had international students defer and they thought they were going to come in fall of '21. And then fall '21 happened, with all the waves that we've had, right. We had a small summer wave, then we had the bigger wave, and so those international students didn't come. And I think that's also another population that gets overlooked a lot when we talk about admissions, recruitment, and enrollment, and even continuing students.

So unless those students got permission – like we had a few students from Korea who had permission to do UNLV remotely, and they would have to wake up at 4 am, 3 am, to do live streaming. By the way, I salute those students, and their commitment to education is wonderful. But yeah. I think that – yeah. I'm just going to say, I'm done because I don't want to go any further. Because I think I could, but it's going to be conjecture at that point, and I want to make sure that again, I give things that I can back up with things that I know, or things that I can research.

Peter [32:48]
Got it, thanks. In terms of employment for high school or college graduates, have efforts to find job opportunities changed in the wake of the recession?

David Sinclair [32:58]
So basically, have job opportunities changed because of the recession? Is that what you said?

Peter [33:02]
Correct. And COVID, yeah.

David Sinclair [33:06]
Okay. I would say, yeah. And I think there is something happening right now that I'm seeing on my end which I know, you and I have talked about a little bit. I think there are two major things that are happening. So for high school graduates right now, it's very bleak for them. If you don't have a college degree of some kind, I think it's very, very bleak. Because you have to balance out in your mind, am I going to go work this job that's not going to pay me enough to live, and eat, and buy gas? Or am I going to try to do something else, which maybe is entrepreneurial, or maybe it's, I need to just get together with people who have money, like my parents, and just ride this thing out.

And I think, on the other end, for those of us that have degrees and we are professionals, we have two big things that are happening right now that's making it very difficult. Number one, on the hiring end, HR departments are now starting to really rely on what they think is AI, to scan CVs and resumes of people who apply. And it's not AI, it's not artificial intelligence, you know. It's a learning machine and it's looking for certain keywords. And I'm finding out – and I've read about this too – that there are certain agencies that are using these tools that are rejecting people's resumes based after – if they have a header or a footer with page numbers because the machine doesn't know how to account for that. It makes the machine go a little crazy, the algorithm.

There was a survey of HR professionals in higher ed that said we are probably throwing out over 60% of qualified candidates for positions. And that's higher ed, and that came from, I think, *HigherEdJobs.com*, right.

On another note, I think people who are managers are figuring out, "Wow, we can still get a tremendous amount of profit with less people, even if the services we provide are terrible." They're squeezing the profit out of the work of people who maybe can't leave for some reason because "I feel like I have to keep this job for my insurance," or "I have to keep it for my family," for some reason. Which is creating a situation, especially in the public sphere, where public – and I would put food workers in this area too. But people who work in the public sphere are finding themselves almost in a form of indentured servitude; where they are so in debt or have such a great need that they are working harder and longer for less pay just because they need something out of it. And this was going on even before the pandemic, but I feel like the pandemic ramped this up.

As an example – and I'm going to be done after this one. My wife, who's a schoolteacher, started off in this school district, signed on to get a bonus for working at a Title I school back in 2010 – I want to say – 2009. That bonus was never funded. She never got her bonus. There was a pay freeze. And during that time that she was teaching in the school district, up until this past August – she had earned her master's degree; there was supposed to be a step increase. But because of all the decisions that were being made at state and at the school board level, her take-home pay was less than when she had started 10 years prior.

That's the situation a lot of us are finding ourselves in. And again, if you work at UNLV, for people that started before the time I started there – because I started in 2012 – people who were there for the first big recession, they never got their pay raises back. And so there are people who are either making the same amount that they were making 15 years ago, maybe a little bit more, but that just doesn't account for increases in inflation. And we already had that problem just with wage earners in Las Vegas, from the first recession, from about 2007-2008. They never really recovered well. Their wages went really down during that time. They only started going up, kind of, sort of, with inflation, but all the wealth in the Valley was then concentrated into a small group of people at the top. So it's bleak. And I think that's really where the details of the bleakness of outcomes for students right now.

Peter [37:39]

Thanks. I appreciate it. What have been some innovative ways that schools and school districts have dealt with the challenges of the pandemic and the recession?

David Sinclair [37:47]

You know, the switch to online learning is a great opportunity I don't think anyone has really taken full advantage of. Because they, whether they don't have the time or support to really think it through – it was just kind of haphazard. But really, it's a great opportunity. Some students really thrive in this environment, whether it's livestreaming or working at your own pace. And having a rich environment, that you could modulate for students, depending upon again, learning styles or learning style deficiencies that they may have. So there were some great opportunities there.

Schools: I think also, could – and again, this is different from district to district. But I think schools really should be centers of social health. Like out here, most schools have a social worker, which a lot of schools in Clark County don't. And there are a lot of things wrong with Mecklenburg County Schools. But having a social worker at your school, that's kind of a cool thing to have. They have outreach where there's somebody at the school who goes out and checks on people and saying like, "Hey, this kid hasn't shown up for a week. We just want to make sure everything's okay. We're not cops. We're here to make sure everything's okay." Like, "Do you need something? I'll bring the social worker with me. Can we get you some resources?"

So I think there's a lot of opportunity there for schools overall, from what I've seen from dealing with students here and out there. I don't think they did a lot of things right. And I hate to say that because the students there, emotional development is very low from where it should be, and a lot of these kids didn't get the help they need. And you'll see that if you look at suicide rates right now too, which is terrible. But high school suicide rates are really high. In fact, even at my wife's school, she's had two this year. Two. And she works at one of the "best high schools" in America. So I want to see more, and I think there's a lot of opportunity. And I'm done.

Peter [39:57]

Thank you. I appreciate that. In what ways has housing and food insecurity affected students, schools, and staff?

David Sinclair [40:08]

I think it's gotten a lot worse as well, and I think it's getting a lot worse. In fact, I was looking at a terrible meme earlier from our current president. Where, before he was president, he was saying, "Food shortages are a matter of leadership. There's no reason we should have food shortages in America." And then there was a quote from him, from last week, underneath that, of him saying like, "Well, things are about to get a lot worse because of food shortages." And some of that's out of control, and some of that is actually – I had to chalk up to a lack of imagination about how to deal with food in this country. And again, look at this. We're at 1:45, and this is where I would start really delving into where my lectures are about imagination and about food. But I feel like it has gotten a lot worse. Everything from the production of food, the transport of food, supply chain issues. To even just the way that food workers are treated. Food workers who have died because of COVID, or because people are stressed out and took it out on a food worker.

So again, I'm going to focus on the food part because that's my area. But I think we're going to see some really bad things – and gosh, I don't want to sound like that. But I feel like we're going

to see some really bad things before we start really wondering why we have let some things so essential to life on planet earth for any organism be left up to the market. Like why are we commodifying food when – we can commodify water – but we pump water to everyone's house in this country. And if I had said 120 years ago, "Oh, everyone's going to have a toilet, and you can have water, and you can drink from the sink," you would have thought I was crazy or a Communist. But today, it's something we take for granted, right.

Kelliann [42:06]

Do you want to talk a little bit more? You're welcome to talk about your thoughts on the solution, like you said that food is a utility. You're welcome to speak on that if you want if you want. Because we're going to make a series of policy recommendations. I'd like to learn from you.

David Sinclair [42:20]

Okay. So even since I published my article, where it has a policy recommendation in it, that looks at – I don't know if you've read it – but it looks at a lot of different sectors. And I have to start by critiquing things we're already doing. Like, as an example, food recovery is great. It's a noble thing, but it just perpetuates the problem. I mean it's a band-aid. And it's a band-aid we need to use until we have something to actually solve the problem, until we have a panacea.

Kelliann [42:56]

By that, do you mean taking food that otherwise would have been wasted, and allowing people to-

David Sinclair [43:00]

Yes. Yeah. So Three Square [43:04], in a sense. And again, three-square is the largest food recovery organization in America. And when I lecture about this, I say it's not by choice, right, it's by necessity. So what we really need to do is look at the landscape of our urban environments or regional environments, and we need to say what's possible with what we have.

So I have already kind of – working on the new project I'm working on, I'd want to make revisions to what I've already been published on for the recommendations I would make. But here's some things I would say that Las Vegas really needs to start looking into. And this is what I call, "Zone I and Zone II" of food production and delivery. And it's going to need some support, right? So let's talk about the support real quick.

So number one, we need to start – first of all, UNLV and UNR, that other school up north, they need to get their act together and start having agricultural departments to finally stop being in violation of the Land Grant Agreement. We're supposed to have departments of agriculture because of the land grant, and we don't, so we need to do that. And we need to really tool agriculture to all the environments that we have, and we need to study it on that level. We also need to have CTE for high school students to do agri business. And specifically, for both indoor and urban food forests for our environment.

Now, the county can get involved, and I'm going to get more specific, but I just want to lay the groundwork here. The county can get involved by taking up BLM's offer to purchase land at huge discount prices. We need to do that.

Kelliann [44:53]

In the same way that you can for affordable housing?

David Sinclair [44:55]

Yeah.

Kelliann [44:57]

Are you saying that the same sort of type of program is available for other types of uses that are public purpose?

David Sinclair [45:03]

I don't know if it's available for other uses. But I'd show up and negotiate, and say-

Kelliann [45:07]

Right, have a dialog about it, yeah.

David Sinclair [45:10]

But what would help us, not just with affordable housing, is to have affordable food. Because the prices are going through the roof, right. And also, the state needs to come in to fund this, and you start on a small scale, and you build it out.

So my big idea was to have multipurpose state ventures, and it cannot be public-private, and it cannot be private. It has to be a state venture, and you start small. Where you start producing not just food inside of a vertical environment – which by the way, that vertical environment can be one story that's really long, or it can be a really tall building. But also, the counties need to get involved, and I was going to say, and even use eminent domain when necessary. Because there are a lot of empty, vacant buildings that can be transformed to do this, and there's a lot of great technology out there that the state could purchase to use. And expertise, they could purchase from people to use.

And the thing about indoor farming is that you can actually do a lot more than you know, than a lot of people imagine. It's not just "Oh, look. We grew some lettuce." Because I know there's a company out there that does heirloom small lettuce. You can do certain types of seafood that can be done in such a way that it's a lot less wasteful, a lot less poisonous than large scale fish farming, which is a disaster. If you have ever looked into that, it's – don't do it. There's no such thing as ethical seafood. In fact, I've stopped eating seafood since I discovered that, which is a tragedy of my life. I grew up in Florida, right, but I won't do it.

So you can do a variety of things, and you can get a variety of different types of proteins with insects. Not just to grow insects for human consumption. Because that's – for American palates, that's a thing, right, were we going to go that route or not. But you do it so that you can feed the fish that you are growing there, that help clean the water and recycle the water for all the other drip irrigation that you're doing. You can cultivate bees. You can grow trees on tops of these buildings and different flowers for the bees. And then the county can start taking those bees, and we can rent them out to growers in other areas. And you know, they make about \$5,000 a day. And if you have 10 buildings, that each have 10 different beehives in each building on the roof,

and you can screen it in on the roof with this garden, and trees that grow fruits and other things. That's what I call "Zone I," right. So it's industrial, it's urban.

And then, when you distribute the food to people, we have these wonderful devices called cell phones. And I've had people tell me – because when I start talking about this, people catch feelings. I've been on podcasts, and they're like, "Well, you can't just tell people what to eat," and I'm like, "You don't need to. You don't need to. You can build an app." Water is something where, yeah. Water's pretty universal. But with food, you can say, "You know what? I'm Jewish," or "I'm Muslim, and I need the food to be blessed," or "I can only have these things," or "You know what? No fish for me. Don't make a fish delivery for me once a month," or whatever, how long.

And the idea here is not to feed all of the people all of the time. The idea here is to, at least, provide weekly sustenance for people. Not just to get over hunger, but also, the effects of being malnourished. Because America is in a unique position that we have people who are obese and malnourished, right. We have people who are – and in addition to having people who are hungry because they just don't have access to the food, or they can't afford the food. They can't afford the shop that's right across the street.

So the idea here is to provide an avenue universally. And it has to be universal because if you means test it, there's a stigma that comes from the people who receive it. And means testing has historically been a great way for any public service to get derailed. Imagine, if we mean tested water. We will only put sink water into people's homes who really need it. How do you know? Like, it's necessary for life. And so we need to have at least one avenue where food has been removed from the market, that we can actually provide people food that has nutrients. It's going to be mostly vegetables, right. And you can have some fruit involved with that, with Zone I, in a small scale, and you can have some protein.

And something I've been looking at recently is, proteins that can be made from fungi, from the – I think it's called mycoprotein, which actually has the texture of meat when you put it in your mouth. Which I am looking into right now and I want to try, and it's extremely cost-efficient to produce. And there's no reason you can't create these almost artificial environments, all across the Valley, to service these people. And we already have a huge transportation network; so you know, you can be like, "I'm out-of-state next week, but let's continue my deliveries on Friday. Don't give me the char this week. Just give me another head of lettuce." And you can pick it up. You can have it delivered.

And the transportation's a huge part of it too. Because if you look at the USDA Food Desert Map – and you actually look at people who live in areas that don't have access to cars. Las Vegas has just popped everywhere. People, low-income, who live in what I call "mini food deserts." And so we have a huge transportation fleet, even with the nonprofit sector that can play a role, right, with United Way or with any one of those groups, and they have a huge fleet that we could all work together. And I'm not saying, stop doing all of the other things. I'm just saying, we need something else. We need something more than a band-aid, and we really need to think outside the box and outside of what – in other parts of academia, we call capitalist realism. We need to start being imaginative.

Kelliann [51:43]

Did you say, "capitalist realism?"

David Sinclair [51:45]

Yes.

Kelliann [51:47]

I like that word. I want to honor your time, so I won't make you educate me on it. I'll look it up. But I appreciate you saying it.

David Sinclair [51:53]

Let me tell you, if you guys want to go over, I can go over. I'm fine. Anytime we can talk – you guys good?

Kelliann [52:02]

It's probably fine for me to go over for a bit. I have another call here in a little bit. But we can continue to chat.

David Sinclair [52:07]

Okay.

Kelliann [52:07]

Peter, did you have follow-up questions to anything?

Peter [52:08]

I would say, probably, we could probably stick to just two more questions if that's all right.

David Sinclair [52:14]

Okay.

Peter [52:16]

The first one would be, going back to higher ed: what are two or three organizational issues you've seen at UNLV that you're proud of and that you've done a good job of dealing with the pandemic?

David Sinclair [52:29]

Two or three organizational things that we were proud of dealing with the pandemic?

Peter [52:33]

Yeah, mm-hmm. If you were to take a look at maybe how UNLV responded to the pandemic, were two or three things that they positively used to deal with the pandemic.

David Sinclair [52:46]

I think – and this is a double-edged sword one, but I think when it worked well, it worked well. When leadership really allowed people to take the time that they needed, right. Now, the double-edged sword of that was, I felt like a lot of the self-care, take care of yourself was also

gaslighting. I'm going to come out and say it. I felt like, how can you even know what you need? Like who can do that? But just being able to say, look. There were certain days – again, you don't know this – but when I worked at Honors College, I would literally wear these suits every day. Every single day. Because when you're the "face" of the Honors College, you're never not the face. But there were one or two days, where I just woke up and I was like, you know what? The pandemic's winning today. I just can't. I just can't. I need to look out my window and drink coffee and whatever.

And I think overall, UNLV was good with that. I think UNLV was very good with distributing CARES Act funds to students, right. We could have done a lot of stuff with that money, but it needed to go to the – and I hate to say, "the kids" because they're young adults. But it needed to go to the kids. It really did. And I feel like that's something they were really good at, and I would just leave it at that.

Peter [54:07]

Thank you. Last question: Anybody else you would recommend us talking to?

David Sinclair [54:11]

Oh – (laughs) and again, this is mostly about the impact of COVID on working people, right, or just like the Valley in general?

Peter [54:25]

The Valley in general, yeah, or working people, mm-hmm.

David Sinclair [54:28]

Okay. You know what? I could give you contact information for the partner that I worked with, who starts the opioid recovery program. His name is Joseph Schmidt. I can give you his contact information. He's really, really good. Have you guys – have you talked to Chris Stream at all?

Kelliann [54:55]

Chris was my dissertation chair. I haven't thought about interviewing him, but that's a really good idea. There are so many contacts that are a little too-close to home for me to have thought of you know? That's a very good idea.

David Sinclair [55:06]

Yeah, he really has his finger on the pulse – especially in Henderson. Because – Henderson, right. Chris S. in Henderson. But he's really got his pulse on what's happening in the Valley. I couldn't recommend him enough. And if you talk to Tim Burch over – just as a way of getting into people to talk at the county governance level. And then they say, "Hey, there's this guy David Sinclair and the food desert idea." And Tim Burch, he will be like, "Oh, yeah, yeah, yeah." And I think he would be very interested in helping make those connections for you. So I would recommend those people off the bat.

You know what? There was someone who is getting her Ph.D. in Public Administration, in this area, that I'm friends with. And she just announced, like two days ago, that she's abandoning it. And I was hoping to be able to give you her name, but I don't think I can. Because there's a lot of

effort going on that I think is wasted effort, and we can talk about that in detail if you want. I know, Peter, if you need to go, I can stay with Dr. Beavers for-

Peter [56:15]

I'm okay as well. Yeah.

David Sinclair [56:17]

Okay.

Peter [56:19]

I don't need to leave necessarily.

David Sinclair [56:22]

I want to touch on, just for a second, on capitalist realism. That's an idea that's not mine. It actually comes from a British cultural critic who's sadly no longer is with us. So he was a philosopher, but unfortunately, he passed away a few years ago. And he wrote a book called, "Capitalist Realism." And he is elaborating on this idea, which you hear if you – I don't know about you, but when I have free time, I like to watch a lot of philosophy lectures and economics lectures on YouTube. But the idea is, you hear it echoed a lot. Why is it easier for us, in the 21st century, to imagine the end of the world, than it is for us to imagine necessary but modest changes to our economy. And you know what, that was an academic question people were asking during the Iraq War, which, as of a month ago, is no longer academic. It's easier for us to imagine, and even talk about, World War III than it is for us to say, "You know, municipalities need to work with food in the same way that they work with water," right?

So I think if you just Google that, you can find the book. It's a very beautiful, quick read. That I think also, kind of speaks to our generation because he's a cultural critic. He'll talk about the 80s and 90s, a little bit in there. But I feel like it really touches the heart of our political realities, and not just in Britain, not just in America. But I feel like, through most of the western world, and I would say, a lot of parts of Asia as well.

Kelliann [58:04]

When you said there's a lot of wasted effort before you started talking about this.

David Sinclair [58:11]

Yes.

Kelliann [58:12]

I think that was what you were like, "I want to talk more about that," and then you shared with me what capitalist realism is, which I really appreciate that. It gives context. But do you want to circle back to that?

David Sinclair [58:20]

Yeah. So, in fact, I had some notes here, so let's go. Because I was doing a little bit more to see what else has been happening. Because again, my focus has now been a little bit more

generalized, because I want cities to start enacting in their own food production. But I went back and took a look, to see if anything is updated in Las Vegas that I could look at, right.

So here's some interesting stuff. First of all, in terms of data, I just noticed Three Square **haven't** updated their maps since 2018. So I'm saying that it's wasted effort, but I'm saying it's difficult to figure out what's going on. And they are lead researchers. Again, they are **the** boots on the ground, **the** finger on the pulse. They're right there. And they're not really updating that information, even since the last census, which I found interesting.

So some of the wasted efforts, I looked at the state, and they had a governor's task force and report back in 2020. In that report, that came out – and I remember, I went back and looked at it again. I remembered this when I was editing my work. It's like 40 pages long, and they don't provide any real answers, right. But what they do come to conclude is that, in the year 2020, because of the pandemic, Nevada was going to lead the nation, in the 8th position, right – we're a "top ten," in hunger and food insecurity nationwide. And you have to imagine, we only have about 3.3 million people or 3.2 million people, but we're leading, right, in terms of overall hunger and in ratio of hunger. Third overall in childhood hunger. I mean, that is shameful, right?

So they concluded this, and then they said, "Well, what's our next step?" And the next step was, "Well, we're going to continue to work with our partners to do more study." And when I saw that, I thought about Dr. Stream and something that he said to us on our first day of our master's program. He said, "If you are in a meeting, and at the beginning of the meeting or at the end of the meeting someone says, 'You know what we need to do is, we need to get more data,'" you were in the wrong meeting. And I just saw that and thought to myself, this was the wrong meeting and the wrong report. Because I feel like a lot of the efforts – and this happens sometimes in the nonprofit community – is wasted.

And I can speak to this because again, I've sat on the Board of a few nonprofits, and I see it from the inside. I've worked in my own nonprofits, and I've talked to other people. There are nonprofits, and then there are nonprofits. And then, there are nonprofits that "we exist because we want to end this problem." But the nonprofit's been around for 30 or 40 years, right, and maybe it's not an issue of funding anymore, you know. We're really institutionally, the nonprofit exists to perpetuate the nonprofit after a while. Because some of these issues cannot be solved by the private enterprise or private sphere, even through philanthropy.

I mean, if you look at just American public policy at the federal level, and even at the local level since the 1950s, we've had so many different types of intervention, whether it's public and private, or completely private, or privately-led public funds. And you know what? If it was profitable to solve these problems, the market would have already done it. And I mean 70 years of failure, right. So we're at a point now where we have to actually say, what is it going to take to have a healthy society, where people are not born into separate classes that they cannot leave? To have people say, well, it should be almost a moral imperative for us to say, nope. We're the richest country the world's ever seen. Why do we have kids who are starving at about 50% rate?

The only way to solve this – and that's not just for hunger. It's for all these other issues, you know. We have to look at making things an issue of public ownership. We have to take it out of

market control. Because if market controls it, it will just continue to profit because you can only serve one master in life. You either serve people or you serve profit. And when push comes to shove, so many people choose profit because that's our values, right. So we have to start thinking outside the box, which is – well, what if we valued people? What would that look like?

So I looked at that, and that's why I have this critique of food recovery, which I think a lot of people have a hard time hearing, you know. If you look at the cycle of how food deserts and food insecurity is created, you have to ask yourself like, to what degree are we okay with having other people eat other people's scraps? Because that literally is what food recovery is, in a sense. And that leaves people with no choice and it leaves people with no dignity. And I think that's something in public policy we really need to start thinking about, like what does it mean to produce fully-realized human beings?

So, I look at that at Three Square, I look at that with the Nevada State Report. And also too, one of the greatest efforts that I wrote about too is, the State Assembly bill, where they wanted to fund, or give loans to groceries that would open up in food deserts. Now, thankfully, that was not funded because COVID hit, and then you know, the state budgets went haywire, and money had to be moved around, and all that.

But again, that is just adding more fuel to the fire. Because if you understand why food deserts are created – because sometimes they are created because of the way the roads and neighborhoods were laid out. Because they were laid out in a blatantly racist way in American history. Where, even if you look at funds that came from the federal government from the 1950s, they said, "Racially segregated neighborhoods will be built in these fashions." And you think about certain things about – even in Las Vegas on the west side, you know. Not every house in the west side in the 1950s had running water. Can you imagine living in the desert, and being black, and being – and the only place in town you're allowed to own land, and you can't get running water to your house in the desert, right.

And these are matters of public policy, and we need to think about it in terms of infrastructure. And just giving a company money to start up a grocery is – maybe that works in the short term. If you gentrify the area, you've just pushed those people to a different area. You've just moved the problem. Or, like Walmart, that company's going to stay there until it's no longer profitable. They're going to shut down, and then you've got a food desert again, with the added knock-on effect of you've lost those jobs. You've lost the people who are driving the trucks, who come in to stay overnight at that Walmart. And you know, you've lost an entire – a huge part of your sector of your economy when those stores close. It's a huge influence.

So giving them an incentive to show up, and then leave again – whether they leave again in five years, or 20 years, it's just the same problem. So we need more permanent solutions. And I find anything that is short term like that, well-meaning and well-intentioned but it's short term. And all it does again is perpetuate the same issue because people can't imagine food not being a commodity. So that's a very long-winded answer to your question about wasted efforts.

Kelliann [1:06:17]

Fascinating. Thank you so much. And thank you so much for everything you shared. It's a really

meaningful interview, and I'm really grateful for you in the world and for your time. So it's nice to meet you and hear your perspective.

David Sinclair [1:06:28]

Thank you for the opportunity. Peter, I'll see you next week.

Peter [1:06:35]

Sure.

Kelliann [1:06:37]

And I'll reach out to share a link to the file, as well as the transcript when we have it ready.

David Sinclair [1:06:44]

Well, thank you so much. And I will send you Joseph – you can just call him "Joe," by the way. I'll send you Joe's contact information.

Kelliann [1:06:54]

Okay.

David Sinclair [1:06:55]

And Tim Burch, you can – trust me. Just Google "Tim Burch" at Clark County. He's now the Executive Director of Human Services. So obviously, he's a connected person. But he also knows what's going on, and he actually was – I think he was in charge of HR during the first recession – it wasn't the first one, right – but the one in 2007. So he's been-

Kelliann [1:07:22]

Oh, the Great Recession, yeah. This is someone we should definitely talk to. Thanks for suggesting that.

Peter [1:07:26]

Yeah.

David Sinclair [1:07:28]

He'll have a lot of insight for you.

Peter [1:07:30]

Thank you.

David Sinclair [1:07:32]

And just make sure you have the mute button ready because sometimes he uses *words*.

Kelliann [1:07:37]

I will keep that in mind.

David Sinclair [1:07:39]

I appreciate that.

Peter [1:07:40]

Thank you.

Kelliann [1:07:42]

Take care. Have a good afternoon.

Peter [1:07:43]

Have a great day.

David Sinclair [1:07:44]

Okay.

[End of Audio @ 1:07:50]