

An Interview with Brian Sandoval

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 Brian Sandoval, former Governor and President of University of Nevada Reno, and was conducted on 10/10/22 by Magdalena Martinez and Elia Del Carmen Solano-Patricio. This interview covers topics including reflections on leadership, organizational challenges, and opportunities for collaboration.

Interview with Brian Sandoval (UNR)

Date: 10-10-2022

SPEAKERS: Magdalena Martinez, Brian Sandoval, Elia Del Carmen Solano-Patricio

Magdalena Martinez [00:05] All right. We are here today with Mr. Brian Sandoval, President of UNR, and along with Carmen and myself. And we'll be conducting an interview for the COVID recovery. And just to confirm, Mr. Sandoval, that you provide us consent to be a part of this study. That you are okay recording this conversation, and that any quotes can be attributed to you.

Brian Sandoval [00:27]
Yes to all three.

Magdalena Martinez [00:28]
Thank you so much. Thank you. So let's start off by talking about – if you could describe your role during the pandemic, and the role of UNR as a whole. And I realize that you came to be President of UNR, I think, right at the cusp of the pandemic. Is that correct?

Brian Sandoval [00:48]
That's correct. So a lot of things to peel back in your question. But in any event, I started my presidency – I just celebrated my second anniversary. So, obviously, that would have been in October of 2020. That fall was subsequent to the full closure of the campus in the spring of 2020. We were in a high-flex situation, where in terms of it was mostly online, but we did have social distancing on campus. So we separated our students and our faculty with six feet of spacing. We required masks in classrooms and made those available to everyone. We also had an on-campus clinic that provided free vaccinations to our students.

Magdalena Martinez [01:40]
And could you talk a little bit about your experience leading the university during this time? We find that a lot of folks that we're interviewing – and I forgot to mention – we're interviewing folks in five different domains: Elected officials, heads of government agencies, K-16 leaders, such as yourself, business and industry, and social service organizations. And what we're finding is that they've not really had some time to really reflect about just the whole course of the pandemic, in terms of the different challenges they faced as leaders. The ways that they had to come together, with different agencies and different organizations.

So, would you like to share with us just a reflection on what it was like for you as a leader during this time?

Brian Sandoval [02:35]
Of course. And I neglected to mention in my last response, we also provided free testing for students, faculty, and staff on our campus as well. So, here, personally, it was a shared responsibility. Obviously, I'm the President of the university, but we had an Issues Management

Team that was comprised of several leaders on campus, including our Provost, Legal Counsel, Physician, and Emergency Management. There was an academic representation as well, including the Chair of our Faculty Senate. So we met weekly at a minimum during the – I think we're still in the pandemic, albeit, toward the end of it. So I don't want to imply that it's over. But in any event, we met on a regular basis. We reviewed the situation that was on campus. I would receive recommendations in terms of the policy that we would adopt, and we would move from there.

So, obviously, it was a challenge. My biggest concern was our campus family, the "wolfpack families," as I like to refer to it; to ensure that the health, safety, and welfare of everybody that comes on our campus was accounted for first.

So I'm grateful that, in my prior positions, I've had a lot of experience with regard to dealing with different types of situations. So I was able to hit the ground running immediately upon my appointment as President of UNR. But I'm incredibly grateful for the leadership that exists on this campus that helped navigate us through the worst part of the pandemic.

Magdalena Martinez [04:20]

And since you mention your previous position, how did being a governor, you feel, uniquely qualify you to really lead UNR in a time of crisis?

Brian Sandoval [04:31]

Well, during my time as [Nevada] Governor, there were multiple crises, literally: fire, flood, train crash, plane crash, the worst mass murder in the history of the state, with regard to what occurred on October 1st. We actually – the Ebola crisis occurred during my time as Governor; so I had experience working with a leadership team composed of subject matter experts and in whatever discipline was necessary in order to be responsive immediately to whatever the crisis was at hand. So I took a similar approach when I came here to the campus at the University of Nevada.

Magdalena Martinez [05:19]

That's very helpful. And in thinking about your time at UNR and the timeline – and even before coming to UNR, were there any pivotal types of experiences that now, you look back and think, that was really meaningful, in terms of the pandemic trajectory and/or timeline, in terms of shaping your own thinking as a leader, and how you would respond.

Brian Sandoval [05:48]

I don't know if I can point to one, single item or incident that would prepare me. I think it was a combination of things because there are so many different variables, and no two are the same. But like I said, I dealt with health crises, both the Ebola crisis that I mentioned and a mental health crisis, which was focused in Las Vegas. And putting together a responsive team in that regard, a committee that ultimately made recommendations for funding and legislation, which we followed through on.

There was also the opioid crisis that, again, required putting together an expert team to make recommendations, which led to more funding and legislation, to better address that crisis. And you know, the horrible other tragic ones, like I said, that included wildland fires throughout the

state, Southern Nevada, rural Nevada, Northern Nevada. There was a plane crash at the Reno Airway. There was a truck that hit an Amtrak Train in Fallon at about 80 miles an hour, which caused a lot of deaths and issues in that regard. There was October 1st, as I mentioned, there were multiple floods in Washoe County and Carson City as a result of snowmelt. I probably could go on, and I hope I'm being responsive. But you learn something, obviously, from all of those things. And I'm grateful that, as President of the University, I have the benefit of that experience, to be able – and relationships – to better serve and better provide leadership in the time of the pandemic.

Magdalena Martinez [07:46]

And that is one of the common themes we're hearing across many of the interviews. That the relationships, right, and how individuals, whether good, bad, or ugly, right? If you worked well with someone, you continued to work with them. If you didn't work well with someone, this was an opportunity to work in a different way with them. Could you talk a little bit more about those relationships?

Brian Sandoval [08:13]

Yes. And I don't have any negative relationships. So I was able to work with local government, both county, and city, with state government, with the Nevada National Guard, with Health and Human Services, with the state. So my prior experience as Governor was very beneficial in this regard. I also coordinated with the Board of Regents, as well as the other campus presidents.

Magdalena Martinez [08:39]

Mm-hmm.

Brian Sandoval [08:40]

And we all worked together, and we all had our unique challenges in terms of what – you know, not everything is the same, obviously, in Las Vegas, or Elko, or Reno, or Winnemucca, and what have you. But really, working together to try to put together a policy that applies to everyone. So I am, again, grateful for those relationships that I had, that really helped expedite the response on campus. Again, with the final point of protecting the health, safety, and welfare of everyone who visits here and the community.

Magdalena Martinez [09:15]

Right, right. And so, along those lines, could you talk a little bit about, from your perspective, who were the hardest hit groups, whether on-campus or off-campus? And how did the university, and how did other organizations, from your perspective, work to respond to the needs of those groups?

Brian Sandoval [09:35]

Yeah. And I guess it's all subjective. Because I think any group would tell you they were hit the hardest. So, you know, we had faculty, staff, and students, as well as visitors on the campus, those that work here, and what have you. So, as much as we could, for example, the faculty wanted to have access to the student health clinic up there. And that the student health clinic is funded by the students, not the faculty. So we were able to supplement the budget there to allow for faculty and staff to be able to have free testing, and for them to have access to vaccinations,

versus having to go to the clinics that were provided by the county off-campus, to make it more convenient for them.

The tracing that was done – we really put a premium on being as responsive as we could. I mean there were some issues with individuals – for example, students who had tested off-campus, perhaps at a CVS or a Walgreens, versus being tested on campus. Because if you were tested off-campus, that test would go to the county first, and then come back to us. So we might have had an individual or student who may have tested positive, but we wouldn't have been aware of it until a week after the test had been conducted. And then, obviously, immediately, we would notify the faculty. And that created some issues as to why they didn't know sooner, and there just was a practical response to that. So we really encouraged our students to do their testing on campus so that we could have a quicker review.

There was also the issue associated with Northshore. I'm sure that's come up with you, with regard to the testing. I'm very grateful that we had Dr. Cheryl Hug-English. She noticed, almost immediately, that there were some discrepancies in the testing, and began doing a dual, I guess, review of those tests at the state health lab. So that way, we would know, for sure, the validity of those tests. And we were essentially the first place that said we're no longer doing testing with Northshore because it is not reliable.

So there was that issue as well. We bought 20,000 N-95 masks and made them available to everyone on campus, obviously, for free, to make sure that we ensured that prior to the move-in, that in any of our residence halls, the students had to show that they were either vaccinated or had a negative test before they were moved in. So it was a massive effort obviously, in terms of making sure that we covered all the bases for the constituencies on our campus.

Magdalena Martinez [12:39]

Right, right. And did you observe any new challenges among, for instance, the student population or the faculty population, that perhaps the pandemic really amplified?

Brian Sandoval [12:56]

Well, there was a bit of a disparity. I mean the students wanted to be in person. And as I mentioned, in the spring of 2020, it was completely remote. And then in the fall of 2020, we were in the hyflex, and then in the spring, we were that way. And then in the fall of '21 was when we were fully in-person. And there was still a concern, and valid concern, with regard to the faculty, particularly those that either were fragile themselves or may have had fragile individuals at home. And we made sure that we accommodated all of those needs. And even then there was a concern, and a request to require masks on campus, regardless of what the policy of the CDC, or the state, or the county was. And we had to follow those requirements, including adopting one of our own. So there was always a balance going on with regard to some, I guess, potential tension between students, faculty, and staff.

Magdalena Martinez [14:08]

Right, okay. Very helpful. And this next question gets a little bit more into what you've introduced in terms of the different levels of government, and different organizations intersecting during this unprecedented time.

From your perspective, is there anything you wish the government, at any level, could have done differently – could do differently in a future crisis? And I realize you have an insight that none of our other interviewees have, in terms of intimately understanding the multiple levels of government. So, really interested in hearing, from your perspective, you know, what worked at the different levels of government? What could we do differently?

Brian Sandoval [14:47]

Yeah. I guess I'll speak first to the local government in the county. And we worked very closely with – and I'm not sure of his title – but the county health officer, and essentially, the individual that was making the policy for the county. Because one thing that was really important to me, and important to campus, is not causing confusion and conflict between policies on-campus, and policies that were off-campus. So we had to work really hard, that we were aligned with – and I think his name is Kevin Dick. And having constant conversations with him and his staff. The Washoe County School District, and ensuring that as much as we could – and again, they're not identical. But that we were conferring and talking with them and having – aligning our policies as much as we could. There were some differing policies between the two. And then with the state and maintaining constant conversation with the governor's office. And fortunately, as you say, I had special experience and access that maybe others did not have. So we had conversations with them, again, to see what we needed to anticipate. If we needed to get ahead of anything, we were doing that.

But overall, I'm not going to be judgmental of decisions that were made. Because a lot of those decisions had to be made in real-time. And with the benefit of hindsight, some individuals may have made different decisions, having knowledge later that they didn't have at the time. So I wouldn't disagree with any of the decisions that were made in real-time. Because I think everyone knew that the fail-safe was to err on the side of health and safety, versus something otherwise.

Nevada, as you can appreciate, has three distinct areas that may have different beliefs, and you have Southern Nevada, you have Northern Nevada and rural Nevada. So what may have been something – a purpose on a southern campus would be very different than one that was in a rural campus, that would be different from here. There were different infection rates in different parts of the state that you have to keep in mind.

So these are all different variables, as I mentioned before, that you have to take into consideration to balance all those things. And all of them were imperfect. I mean there was no – as I would tell my staff, "Let's not let 'perfect' get in the way of 'amazing,'" and I think they did an amazing job in the moment that they were in.

Magdalena Martinez [17:38]

Yeah, I really like that. That makes a lot of sense.

Brian Sandoval [17:42]

Mm-hmm.

Magdalena Martinez [17:43]

And we actually interviewed the Superintendent of Elko last week. And yes, absolutely right. Very different context. Very different responses. Very different expectations of the constituents and the residents.

Brian Sandoval [17:56]

Mm-hmm.

Magdalena Martinez [17:57]

And so, that's why this work is so important to us. Because we want to make sure that when we talk about Nevada, people understand the different sides of Nevada, and we're able to capture this moment in history, right?

Brian Sandoval [18:11]

Right.

Magdalena Martinez [18:12]

Because that is one common theme across some of the other interviews. People are very thoughtful about not being, as you said, judgmental or critical because they all understood that it was difficult for everyone. But nonetheless, there is sometimes an opportunity to reflect on what are some lessons learned, and how do I move forward?

And Carmen, I'm sorry. I'm starting to get in front of your questions. So I'll hand it over to Carmen, and she's going to take the rest of the next four questions. Thank you.

Brian Sandoval [18:41]

Thank you.

Elia Del Carmen Solano-Patricio [18:42]

Hi. I love listening to you both. That works for me.

President Sandoval. Shifting the conversation a little bit. I'm studying Urban Studies. That's my major. And we're looking at resilience right now, the difference between resilience and sustainability. So, a lot of environmentalists would say sustainability, and of course, nodding to what today is. And then a lot of economists would refer to this same concept as resilience.

So, you talked a little bit about your experience with other types of crises, and that was everything from health, mental, wildlife, and climate security crisis, right? We're focusing on healthcare. But how can the COVID crisis, and all of those other types of crises help us learn lessons for the future? Because I'm the future, right? What do I need to know to implement resilience in my community for the future?

Brian Sandoval [19:43]

I think some good things are happening. And I could only speak to our campus, but I'm grateful to the [Nevada] Governor and the Legislature. They recently approved an appropriation of \$75,000,000 to build a new state health lab on the campus of UNR. If you've ever had a chance

to visit the current state health lab, it's led by Dr. Pandori. It was built in the 70s. And it was woefully undersized, and they did amazing things, and literally led the country, and were the first to detect a reinfection of COVID in that site. But if you look in there, it is outdated. And in order to be prepared for the future, and, as you said, for sustainability and in resilience, this investment is going to be made in public health, an unprecedented one. And that state health lab doesn't just serve Washoe County. It serves Southern Nevada as well. And it's not just about pandemic testing. They do newborn testing there. They test for terrorism, sexually-transmitted diseases, what have you. They test the gamut there. So, I'm really pleased about that, and I thought it was very visionary for them to make that investment in public health as we move forward.

Elia Del Carmen Solano-Patricio [21:11]

I wrote down "research and development." It definitely seems like you would consider it a catch-all answer to – because you've mentioned a lot of different things: health, bioterrorism, right, and investing in facilities. So that's the physical, the infrastructure. To my next question – in terms of the physical, what about people and relationships? Can you give me examples of collaboration or programs, or just somebody that you remember, that had an idea that you thought was really innovative, to deal with the pandemic, that we could use in the future?

Brian Sandoval [21:48]

Well, one person that I would strongly recommend that you speak with – and perhaps, you already have, is Dr. Cheryl Hug-English, on our campus. And she is the individual, again, who detected the discrepancy in the testing – that was really my go-to person and a subject matter expert with regard to the pandemic and the efficacy of all the different variables in terms of protecting health, safety, and welfare. She truly is a marvel. I mean, again, I'm really grateful. And you mentioned buildings, and buildings are great. But you have to have the right people in place.

And so, we also have our School of Public Health, that worked very closely with State Health and Human Services. As I mentioned, Dr. Pandori is the individual researcher who is in charge of the state public health lab. And he was front-and-center with regard to testing in the State of Nevada. And so, between those two, we really had the "A-Team," the kind of a "Dream Team," in terms of responding to the pandemic.

You talked about relationships. So, one of the things with regard to this \$75,000,000 building, there was another \$3,000,000 behind it to rehab the old state health lab. And that building is going to be co-occupied by the School of Public Health and representatives from Health and Human Services of the state, as well as county health officers for the county. So they're all going to be working together in one place, which, you would assume, is going to create some incredible efficiencies with regard to responding and these conversations. So, you're going to be having county, state, and university people working side-by-side when this is completed.

So those things that historically, have not happened in the past. I'm not saying that it was broken before. But I think it is going to be much improved in terms of the collaboration between the three. And then you have all the grant money that is following behind. And now, we can start writing grants between the three of those, which will be beneficial not just on this campus, but in Northern Nevada and throughout the state.

Elia Del Carmen Solano-Patricio [24:18]

Collaboration, yes. And I'm glad what you said about everybody being in the same space. Because I've been talking to a lot of people about having a university presence in as many places as we can. Like the people who do the work need to talk to the people who come up with the ideas, and then, the people who have the skills.

So I'm glad you mentioned grants. Were there any specific fiscal policies that the state or the federal government implemented that you noticed impacted people the most? Whether that's negatively or positively?

Brian Sandoval [24:53]

All positively, so, our collaboration with both state and federal officials – so I'm very grateful to Senator Rosen and Senator Cortez Masto. They were able to get us some appropriations to purchase the latest and best equipment for that state health lab, which not only expedited but accelerated the number of tests that they can do in a short amount of time. So they were able to process thousands of those tests with that new equipment, which they wouldn't have been able to do otherwise. We also worked very closely with the state, in terms of appropriations and grants to purchase the necessary equipment for the individuals within the state health lab to use in order to benefit everybody, and I think that was everybody in the state.

If there was a negative thing, it's been cured. Because if you had toured that facility, there literally were boxes in the hallways, just stacked on one another. I mean it was a 1970s building trying to address a 21st century problem. And there was this beautiful equipment that literally was just on counters and things next to printers. I mean there just wasn't sufficient space.

So we got through it. As I used to tell them, "The people at the State Health Lab, they won the Indy 500 with a 1960 Ford truck." I mean they did such an incredible job. And now, with this appropriation to build this new building, it will be as fine as anything in the country. And so, at the end of the day, that's really going to help health and safety research; all of the things that we are going to need when the next pandemic hits. And I don't know what that is, and I'm not trying to sound apocalyptic, but we need to be prepared for whatever can come.

Elia Del Carmen Solano-Patricio [27:02]

I have a question as a student. And I was wondering if you had heard from students, any kind of feedback about how having the CARES money, or the HEERF money, or ARPA money benefit them? And have you heard any stories of students and how they used that money, and how that money impacted their lives?

Brian Sandoval [27:22]

A hundred percent. And I haven't heard – I mean, I've heard from some of them directly. A lot – most of it is anecdotal. But you know, I don't have the number off the top of my head, but I think it was like \$19 million that was distributed to our students. They used that to pay rent, to make car payments, to pay tuition, to buy food, what have you. So that was incredibly beneficial to helping our students get through a very, very difficult time.

We also have a food pantry on campus called Pack Provisions, and that was something that we added – funded. And the students were really critical, in terms of getting out and getting even more donations to purchase more food for our students. And the utilization of it increased by three or four hundred percent. So, yes. That HEERF money and that CARES money were incredibly beneficial to our students. And we were able to disperse all of it in a very short amount of time. And the credit goes to Dr. Shannon Ellis, again, somebody you may want to talk to who oversees our student services. But we were able to disseminate it or distribute it more on a need basis because some students needed more than others. And so, I didn't hear any complaints because all of that money was dispersed almost immediately upon receipt, and the system worked extremely well.

Elia Del Carmen Solano-Patricio [28:58]

It sounds like you were able to get past some of those processes, or, at least, be able to expedite them. So, hopefully, that's good for the future.

Brian Sandoval [29:05]

Yeah.

Elia Del Carmen Solano-Patricio [29:07]

And now, this question is a little bit more about you at an individual level. And you talked about mental health crises of the past. And, of course, there's one that runs parallel to this crisis. Are you hopeful? And if yes, what are you hopeful about?

Brian Sandoval [29:24]

I'm an eternal optimist, so, yes. I'm absolutely hopeful. I'm really proud of everyone on our campus because they went through – and I told them this – perhaps the most challenging time in the history of higher education. And, at least, since that pandemic in 1918-1917, when the Spanish Flu came through. And I actually read up on some history in that regard. But you mentioned mental health – I think, if there are some good things that come out of this, from a mental health perspective, it accelerated the acceptance and the adoption of telehealth on our campus. And now, we have actually more utilization of telehealth than individuals coming in person on campus. It just makes it much more comfortable for our students. So we will continue to provide on-campus but have expanded our telehealth.

And it also has accelerated, from an academic standpoint, our development of online opportunities for our students. Because there are students – not just in Northern Nevada – but throughout the state, that don't have access to our campus. And we need to go where the students are. And I think that because we had to go remote almost, literally, within a week's time. And then with the hyflex, there's an expectation that there be some offerings online. And that's something that we're working on. We now have a vice provost of online learning, who's working in an interim capacity, and we are doing a national search for a permanent vice provost of online education, so that we can make sure that we are available to all students regardless of where they are.

Elia Del Carmen Solano-Patricio [31:20]

As a student, I'm very excited about that notion, especially with the development of those tools. Because I took online courses myself. So I'm glad there's an investment in that.

Is there anything else that you would like to share with us.

Brian Sandoval [31:42]

No. I mean this was very thorough, and I appreciate the opportunity. And if there are other individuals that you would like to speak with – another person, at least on our campus, that was in the middle of everything, her name is Dr. Amanda Windes. And she's the head of our Emergency Management. And she was the one who was working very closely with the state. Working very closely with the county. And I just, again, am so grateful to have an individual with her skillset and leadership skills. So she was one. And then, our Provost, Jeff Thompson, was the one that worked very closely with our faculty and did the tracing to make sure that faculty were notified if they had an individual that had tested positive, a student in a specific class communicated directly with faculty.

As I mentioned before, that was one of the challenges as there were some frustrations on the part of our faculty. That they weren't being notified quickly enough of a student with a positive test. Again, if there's something we can do to improve the system in terms of if somebody tests outside of the university, and they take the test at a private provider, and then that test goes to the state or the county, and then it comes to us, that week delay was an issue.

Magdalena Martinez [33:20]

Thank you so much, President Sandoval. I really appreciate you taking the time.

End of audio: 33:23