

An Interview with Joyce Helens and Sonja Sibert

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

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Principal Researchers:

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

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Each interviewee had the opportunity to review their transcript. All measures have been taken to preserve the style and language of the interviewee. This interview features Joyce Helens, President of Great Basin Community College, and Sonja Siberta. The interview was conducted on 10/12/22 by Magdalena Martinez, Sonja Sibert, and Elia Del Carmen Solano-Patricio. This interview covers topics including reflections on leadership, organizational challenges, and opportunities for collaboration.

Interview with Joyce Helens and Sonja Sibert (GBC)

Date: 10-12-2022

SPEAKERS: Magdalena Martinez, Joyce Helens, Sonja Sibert, Elia Del Carmen Solano-Patricio

Magdalena Martinez [00:02] All right. We are here today with presenter Helens, from Great Basin College. Today is October 12th, 2022. And before we get started, I just want to confirm, Joyce, you're okay with participating in this conversation, and this interview.

Joyce Helens [00:19]
Yes.

Magdalena Martinez [00:21]
And you're okay with me recording this conversation?

Joyce Helens [00:23]
Yes.

Magdalena Martinez [00:24] And you're okay if I attribute – if we use any of your quotes, that we attribute them back to you.

Joyce Helens [00:28]
Yes.

Magdalena Martinez [00:29]
All right. Thank you so much. So let's get started. We wanted to meet with you. And we've been talking to other college and university presidents, as well as the elected officials, and heads of municipal agencies. And we're going to be speaking to business and industry leaders, as well as social service organizations. So really, it's a really broad group of individuals. And trying to gain a better understanding of how you saw your role during the pandemic, and the role of Great Basin as a whole during this whole crisis.

Joyce Helens [01:08]
Well, in a very abbreviated way, I would say, my role was to keep students, faculty, and staff safe.

Magdalena Martinez [01:16]
Mm-hmm. And tell me a little bit more about how that manifested itself for you, on-campus, or as the President of Great Basin College.

Joyce Helens [01:31]
So, perhaps, the experience in rural Nevada – or rural anywhere – might be a little bit different than in larger populated urban centers. So – and quite difficult, particularly with K-12, here in

rural Nevada, which was in tremendous upheaval because of just following mandates like wearing masks. And that did not spill over to our college, and it could have been we were just lucky because all of the heat was on K-12. But it was tremendously difficult with K-12, and we lost a brand-new, good superintendent, who had death threats and those things that you read about nationally were happening here, and I'll just talk about Elko was happening.

And so, we didn't have that. But perhaps because we didn't have a local board, you know. And we had our regents, and they took a lot of heat, of course. But also, the colleges in rural Nevada were embedded and were part of the community in, I think, actually, I'm going to say, a deeper way, than when you have multiple institutions and larger institutions.

So, I always say, our mission is really to support and create healthy communities. So the obvious one is, you know, I say "one of the legs of the stool" is economic health. Because we prepare people. We train people to get good jobs. And there are good jobs here in this part of the state and throughout rural, particularly with mining. But the other legs would be physical health. It's mental health. Because if you don't have those other things, you don't have a healthy community.

So that was the message from me, and from actually, the team over and over. We want to be safe. We want to keep our students safe. And we had a very – we had a low vaccination rate, and it was just difficult. But at the college, I think – and we have Sonja Sibert here. And she's on because she was also very much involved in our efforts.

We also were – and I want to call on Sonja in a minute – just to give us the actual kind of sum data here, data points. But we were in charge of also, contact tracing in rural Nevada. We were very involved, and our students were part of it – our nursing students, for example. So when I would meet with them via Zoom on the weekend, I would say, "How's everything going?" to the students and faculty who were doing the tracings – very difficult here. And one of our students said – and she's bilingual, which we needed. And we have a large Latinx population in the area. And she told us horrible stories, where she would be cursed out, and we had a protocol for that. When it got difficult, you'd say, "Oh, I guess maybe, it's not a good time to speak with you. Someone will contact you tomorrow," and then that would be a faculty.

Magdalena Martinez [04:37]

Mm-hmm.

Joyce Helens [04:38]

But she was a nursing student, and she's graduated now and has a great job. And I said to her, "Do you still want to be a nurse after this?"

Magdalena Martinez [04:46]

Mm-hmm.

Joyce Helens [04:47]

And her comment, sort of summed up why we were all in this and doing what we were doing to keep people safe. She said, "I actually want to be a nurse more, even more now." And I said, "Why?" because she was treated really badly by multiple people. They would accuse her of

microchipping, and following them, and crazy stuff. She said, "I realized that knowing the science wasn't enough. Because if I couldn't connect with someone, it wouldn't make any difference." She said, "So I started thinking, 'How can I connect with them, to talk about safety, and the safety of others and their families?'" She said, "And in a couple of instances, when I just – I call it – she didn't (gestures) 'brick up.'" She just said, "I opened myself to that," and maybe even a phrase like, "I understand this is really scary for you," or "You think I'm doing something to you." She said, "Then it would soften." And even when they'd say, "I'm not going to tell you who I was with," she'd say, "Okay. Can I call you tomorrow?" And when she would, she'd say, "How are you? Are you feeling okay?" That second call might make all the difference.

Magdalena Martinez [05:59]

Mm-hmm.

Joyce Helens [06:00]

And so that message is so important, and I thought, "Isn't this the nurse we all want?" Really. So she would know – "You know, I know the science. But somehow, I'm going to have to reach out and break through that."

And I think that's a good analogy for how we operated in the college. You can't just say, "This is the science, and this is the way it is," and then people hate you. I mean, that's going to happen anyway. But to try and break through that to say, "Can we talk about it?" And that's difficult, but it did happen.

And I just wanted to ask – Sonja, did you have anything you wanted to add in there?

Sonja Sibert [06:40]

It's just a couple of things along this line. One thing that President Helens did on a regular basis during the pandemic was to have all-college meetings. And one of the first things she asked was, "How is everybody doing?" And it was very – it brought us, as a community of faculty and staff, even though a lot of us were working remotely, it brought us all together. And I think one thing may be, Joyce, to expand a little bit on, or maybe it will come up later in the interview, our transition to the online education platform was much easier, I think than many other institutions, since we already had an online presence, and many of our instructors are very proficient in doing that.

Joyce Helens [07:33]

Two really important points. Thanks for reminding me. I actually forgot about that, Sonja. I had an all-college meeting every week, every week when we first shut down. And because you know, people are like "Is this the end of the world?" "Is this the end of us?" "Is this what's happening?" So, number one, we had a Zoom, and we would have like 130 people on those Zooms all the time, which is a good number for us.

And so, the first thing I did do is say, "How is everyone?" And then waited. And then sometimes, people would just give a thumbs up. Sometimes they would just do a little text. And then sometimes she would say, "You know, we're okay." One of our faculty had just had a baby, and he said, "My baby's okay." And so we wanted to make sure we remembered who were [the]

people having babies, so we could say, "Are you doing okay?" And that really did mean a lot. But I didn't want to do any other business until I asked that. And then sometimes people would just email me, and tell me, "I'm not doing great," and that was really important to stay together in that way. (coughs) Excuse me. I've got allergies this morning.

And then I do think it was important to – what was the second thing you mentioned, Sonja?

Sonja Sibert [08:55]

It was our transition to 100% online.

Joyce Helens [08:57]

Oh, yeah. So, you know, we're mostly an online college, actually. I think we were pre-pandemic, probably close to 70% now, or 80%. We know how to do it. We do it really well.

So the fact that we went online like we were already there. (coughs) I'm going to have to grab something to drink. But others have felt they were forced to be online. That wasn't the situation with us. We actually increased enrollment.

Let me go grab something to drink.

Magdalena Martinez [09:28]

Yes, of course.

[Break: 09:31 - 09:43]

Joyce Helens [09:44]

Anyway. We'll just stop there and see what your next question is.

Magdalena Martinez [09:46]

Well, I just wanted to make an observation and see if you had any additional thoughts.

Joyce Helens [09:50]

Sure.

Magdalena Martinez [09:52]

And thinking about leadership, communication, and relationships. What do you see as the key pillars for leaders during a moment of crisis?

Joyce Helens [10:06]

Well, one is to be there. Be present. And then to show that. It's never enough, I understand that. That's this job. So, you could do as much as you can, and people will say, you know, "It's not enough."

Magdalena Martinez [10:22]

Mm-hmm.

Joyce Helens [10:23]

So, one important thing when people do that – and that's just, generally speaking, I think, in terms of leadership – the number one thing is, there's not enough communication. And then, following that, transparency, etc.

So what I'd like to do is say, "Tell me what more looks like, or what better looks like, and I'll do it." Because it's just been my experience because I've been around for a while, that it's just nebulous. It's not enough – it's too vague. So, "Great. Just tell me how we can be – just give me an example." Now, unfortunately, we never get that. (laughs) And that just says people want to be just complaining. Because usually, my experience is everywhere, including Great Basin College; the people who had thoughts about how to make it better always already told me.

Magdalena Martinez [11:18]

Mm-hmm.

Joyce Helens [11:19]

They would have no compunction about just emailing and saying, "Can we do this?" "That'd be a great idea. Yeah, let's do that." It would be very few instances where we couldn't do that, whatever that is. So I just wanted people to define that. And so, others then picked up on that. For instance, our Faculty Senate Chair. He used to say, "I used to feel like I had all this burden because people would say, well, it's not enough. He said, and then when I started talking back, he said – and then when I started talking back, and saying, "Great. Just tell me what you think would work" he said, "and I never really had an answer."

Magdalena Martinez [11:53]

Mm-hmm.

Joyce Helens [11:54]

And I guess that's human nature. But just to be cognizant of that always in these all-college meetings, to say, "If you have any idea of how we could do this better, we could make you feel better, let us know. We could do it."

Magdalena Martinez [12:10]

Mm-hmm.

Joyce Helens [12:13]

So, it seems simple, but it's always out there. I also noticed that just because – of course, everyone doesn't know all the facets of, let's say, my job, or Sonja's job. And Sonja – like multiple jobs at the college for a long time. But if they don't know something, then they say, "Oh, you're not being transparent." It's like they just didn't know that was a function of the job.

So it was at least important for us to continue to say, and really emphasize, if you feel you have a question, just contact us. Don't assume because there are so many rumors. And our community was really quite explosive for a long time.

Magdalena Martinez [12:53]

Mm-hmm.

Joyce Helens [12:55]

And City Council – I mean – so I feel that situational leadership is really important, and size doesn't fit all.

Magdalena Martinez [13:07]

Mm-hmm.

Joyce Helens [13:09]

And I've also personally always believed, you can't be part of the problem. You have to be a part of the solution. But the way that happens is different. So in the City Council, for example, where I mean, they were like no masks. Don't worry about vaccinations. I chose instead of, you know, some people would go and testify. I didn't do that. I wrote them all a personal letter.

Magdalena Martinez [13:31]

Mm-hmm.

Joyce Helens [13:32]

Not that I think it would really make a tremendous decision, but they needed to know. And it was based on the safety of people, and then, particularly, of our children. Because we have a childcare center on campus, I was really concerned about the children.

Magdalena Martinez[13:49]

Mm-hmm.

Joyce Helens [13:50]

And, you know, we had a City Council member who died then the next day from COVID. They had a big, you know, nice funeral, and they never changed their stance. So my letter, probably, didn't make any difference, but it made a difference to me. I was on the record.

Magdalena Martinez [14:07]

Mm-hmm.

Joyce Helens [14:08]

And in fact, in some instances, it might have been, you know, I was on the record. But I think it's important.

So in different situations, we became more verbal. I became verbal in Rotary; in fact, I was President of Rotary. And I stopped having the meetings in-person, which some people didn't like. But we had a very high COVID rate. It was *very* high.

Magdalena Martinez [14:35]

Mm-hmm.

Joyce Helens [14:36]

So the fact that we kept our college really safe – all of our campuses – Sonja, do you remember how many, generally, cases we did have?

Sonja Sibert [14:49]

I think we ended up with, through the first two years, about 100 to 150 cases. It was very minimal. We've actually, of course, see more now that we've returned to more in-person classes. And already, again, we're seeing an uptick in the last two weeks of cases per week, as I think – but the whole country is seeing that coming around again.

Joyce Helens [15:19]

Most of our cases also were people who, when we traced it, were actually not from the college. It was from their own – their families or their – other places. So we felt as though we were doing pretty well, considering the community was not.

Sonja Sibert [15:38]

Right. And those numbers include all of our locations, not just the Elko campus – that's Ely, Winnemucca, Battle Mountain, and Pahrump.

Magdalena Martinez [15:47]

Mm-hmm. Very helpful. Thank you. And we interviewed Superintendent Anderson last week. And so, he also shared some of what you shared, in terms of the very contentions Board of Education – School Board meetings, and so on, and so forth.

Joyce Helens [16:10]

Yeah.

Magdalena Martinez [16:13]

So it's very helpful and very valuable to hear from the folks that were on the front lines, right?

Joyce Helens [16:21]

Yeah.

Magdalena Martinez [16:23]

There was no good choice. Just the decision that needed to be made.

Joyce Helens [16:28]

You know, at one point, I had a threat assessment done and a camera placed. I live out in Spring Creek, more rurally, and a camera was placed on my gate and all that kind of stuff, which is unfortunate. I really did not have any threats the way the former superintendent, who – I mean, people would go up to her door and – on her Ring doorbell – I mean, say terrible things. They were obviously being videoed. They didn't care. So, I mean, she left. And even now – our superintendent just had an editorial in the paper, where he said some things are continuing because now, they have school board elections, and you have some of the people who had caused all of the ruckuses, want to be school board members.

Magdalena Martinez [17:18]

Mm-hmm.

Joyce Helens [17:19]

So that hasn't ended for him.

Magdalena Martinez [17:22]

Mm-hmm. In thinking about the pandemic timeline, can you walk us through, as you remember it, were there key pivotal points during this time, that shaped your experience, and that shaped your thinking around what it means to lead during a crisis moment?

Joyce Helens [17:45]

Well, there's – if I gave some thought to it – I might be able to actually make – and I might just do that now that you've asked me that. But just off the top of my head; of course, there was the initial closedown, which was huge. Because I remember sitting here at home, and saying like, you know, you wondered about the bigger picture. What will happen to all of us? And then that isolation, and I was thinking – so, if I'm thinking that, our faculty and staff are thinking that. They're at home. They're scared. So then I was thinking, how can I help that? And that was that initial thing.

Then there was the huge case growth here, which I mean was killing people. And then we had a student pass, a young man, who had just come back to school. Wanted to be a teacher. Had small children. No one in his family had a degree. And he passed. And then this disappointment of, how can my community – like not care about this? Because really it was like, let's just stay out there. We don't need masks. This is all – it was all that crazy politics was happening. And how do I, as part of that community – and people, I mean, maybe my voice made a little difference. So, how can I help shape that? Again, sort of like our nursing student – not confront, not say, "You're crazy." I mean really, we had people yelling at each other, "You have a tin foil hat," blah-blah-blah. And I had to approach it – I mean I was President of the Rotary Club – and talk about data. And our Dean of Health, she was in the state, part of the COVID taskforce, Dr. Donnelly, and also leading contact tracing.

So there was figuring out, along the way, as things got worse, how we had to communicate more. So then figuring, okay. If we have these weekly meetings with all-college, I need to tell them everything I know. And early on, I mean, we didn't know anything. All we knew is, we kind of had to wait and see. But right now, safety's important.

And then, as it grows on, I mean we had an increase in enrollment. Everyone else was in the tank. But I knew that would level off. Because, once we got back, if we got back – I mean really, we didn't know what would happen – people would be tired of that isolation. They would want face-to-face. And, of course, we are hugely online. And that did happen.

So we're down now like 7% or something. Because I think that when the trend went, people were desperate to get back together. And then also, to plan that second year – and I'd have these meetings – I said, "Do we still need to meet once a week?" and people would say, "Well, we

could probably go every other week." "Okay." So then we waited for two weeks. So that meant people were more comfortable. We were kind of getting in – we were handling it.

And then when we had the mandate for vaccines, that was the next chaos. And we had a pretty high vaccination rate, don't you think, Sonja? I mean, I think, I think, early on?

Sonja Sibert [21:20]

We did. It was interesting. Some of our departments had a 90% vaccination rate, way before the policy went into effect, and then, other departments were about like 10%. But we lost very few people with the implementation of the mandated vaccinations, so that-

Joyce Helens [21:41]

I think it was like a handful or less, really.

Sonja Sibert [21:43]

Yeah.

Joyce Helens [21:47]

And it was interesting because people during this time were struggling with themselves and their own issues, and families and they didn't want to have to be confrontational with colleagues. And so, I realized, yeah. That's just like too much, you know? So then we thought, we really have to be intermediaries there. Because we did have some people on campus who were walking around and really, "We don't need vaccinations." "I'm not going..." and just adding to it.

So we would have peer kind of conversations with them like, "You could feel the way you want to, but doing this kind of activity is not helping." And so it was a lot of one-on-one. And also, always at the college meetings, saying not just, "How are you doing?" but – Sonja – I would turn it over to Sonja or Jake Rivera. He's our Vice President of Academic and Student Affairs. And they would say, "You know, we do have this ability for counseling. And so, you can call this number, or you could do this, and it's all paid for." And so we repeated, "There's help for you if you want to talk to somebody."

Magdalena Martinez [22:58]

Mm-hmm.

Joyce Helens [22:59]

And then I remember, it was last – right around the holidays. And we had always planned to "Light up the Campus" and bring people on, and now we were saying like, "Stay away." But in Elko, our campus is really very beautiful, and people loved to walk and walk their dogs through campus. So, around Christmastime, I said, "Let's do something outside. It's cold. I think people are really not going to be – not inside the building." So we strung lights all over, and we put – we just made it super-festive. We got some investment from the business, and we had hot chocolate and cookies. And then we had the high school choral group that came out and sang holiday songs, and then we had the bell-ringers, which is a big thing over here, and they did holiday songs. And the place was mobbed – everybody came out. And it was cold, and they didn't care, and they just drank the hot chocolate and said, you know, they were desperate for this human

contact. And I remember, we had these long conversations – "Did we do this?" and I was like, "I think we just need to do it." Because it was safest, and it was outside. And it wasn't going to be for a long duration because it was pretty cold. But that meant something, like "Oh, it's so wonderful to see you again." That kind of thing.

Magdalena Martinez [24:27]

Mm-hmm.

Joyce Helens [24:28]

And now, of course, we're upping that. So we hope to do that even more now, and of course, people are back, and there is an uptick as – but I also used to publicize when I got my vaccination, my vaccine, and usually, it was from our student nurses. So there was one young man, and he actually gave me my first shot, and then I think he gave me my second shot. So he took a picture of it with me and – (gestures a thumbs-up) you know.

And then I went to the – I go to the pinnings. And I went to his pinning and gave him a big hug, and then gave him his diploma. So – and he was scooped up like instantly. But it was important we put it on social media, that there I was – the student was giving me a shot, and I wasn't dead, you know. (laughs) So with the social media campaign, we really pushed that too. And then put interesting signs around campus that said, "We still mask." And then we had, you know, a happy face or something. "Because we want to keep you safe."

Magdalena Martinez [25:34]

Mm-hmm.

Joyce Helens [25:36]

So I think cumulatively, people knew we cared, and we really just wanted to be safe. And we stayed out of the politics, and some of it, I just think, is luck. But I think that's why – because it was always based on your safety. We care about you. And also, I think it's because we were so much online already.

Magdalena Martinez [25:57]

Mm-hmm, very helpful. In thinking about your different-

Sonja Sibert [26:02]

Excuse me. Could I add a couple of more things that I thought were pivotal?

Magdalena Martinez [26:08]

Yes, please.

Sonja Sibert [26:09]

So, I think one of the things – we had that shut down. Ours happened right after spring break. But then I think one of the things that were key for us, and our students are, we worked with the governor's office, and the NSHE system office, in being able to bring back our students in a limited capacity, so that they all graduated – they finished a little bit late, but they were all able to complete their hands-on lab experiences in 2020. So I think that was a key point.

And the other thing that I saw that was great for our community and things is, we opened our gym as a monoclonal antibody site clinic here in Elko County. And over, I think it was almost 200 people who received the antibody treatments here on campus in the fight of COVID.

Joyce Helens [27:10]

That's a really good memory there. Thanks for bringing it up. Because during the time when monoclonal antibodies were available, you could not bring anything with you. Like you couldn't – you still had to do super-sanitizing. So they couldn't bring a book with them or anything. They just had to come and sit in a chair. And we thought, "Oh, some of these people have never stepped foot on campus." So we did a big screen, and we started advertising all the things that we do. And so, while they sat there, they watched all the stuff about the college. So we sort of doubly-advertised during that time too.

Magdalena Martinez [27:47]

Mm-hmm. Thank you, yes. And that somewhat leads to my next question because – thinking about vulnerable populations. From your recollection and your experience, who were the hardest hit populations, and what was the role of your college and your leadership?

Joyce Helens [28:09]

Do you mean within the communities that we served?

Magdalena Martinez [28:13]

Well, within the community and on campus, right? Because, as you mentioned, Craig Basin is so seamlessly integrated into the community.

Joyce Helens [28:24]

Well, all of our campuses are – and we had such a high rate in the community. I mean it was sort of this overarching one thing – that people were very ill.

Magdalena Martinez [28:40]

Mm-hmm.

Joyce Helens [28:41]

And, at one point, the hospital put out a plea to say, "We can't do anything anymore. We're overwhelmed."

Magdalena Martinez [28:52]

Mm-hmm.

Joyce Helens [28:56]

So I remember, I was part of another community group. They wanted an in-person potluck, (laughs) and it was like, gosh. And really, it was a very high rate of infection, and the hospital was full. And they were trying to fly people out, which is not unusual, to Utah, which a lot of our healthcare's in Utah. And Utah said, "We can't take any more." And they tried to fly them to Idaho, and they said, "We can't take in any more."

Now, we don't have a morgue, so they brought in a refrigerated truck. So what I chose to do in these groups that I was in, I would just say – I would report that out. I would talk about – "We have a refrigerated truck now in the lower level by the hospital for bodies." And then I did that in Rotary, and I did that in another community group. I said, "So, I really can't be part of an in-person. Because one, I don't want to get it. I don't want to transmit it to all these people I'm always in contact with, and I don't want your family to suffer or die." But it was the refrigerated truck thing, that many people said, "Well, you know? I think we're going to listen to Joyce, and I think, maybe, we're just not going to have that potluck." And I thought, whoa!

So I was dissecting it later, and I thought it was the refrigerated truck comment. It was true. But people have to be confronted sometimes with that kind of reality.

Magdalena Martinez [30:33]

Mm-hmm.

Joyce Helens [30:35]

Like, "Okay, maybe we'll just wait a little bit." And I wasn't making it political. I wasn't saying anything about Fauci – which we had that whole thing here, you know. I was just saying, "I don't want you to die, and I don't want us to die."

Magdalena Martinez [30:47]

Mm-hmm.

Joyce Helens [30:48]

And people are dying, and they're in the truck. And it was like, "Okay, we'll wait." So sometimes, again, it was that situational thing, and you know the different people. Like our mayor, who is still not vaccinated. So he came to a meeting, and it was right that – almost the second year, where, if you were vaccinated and in a larger area, maybe you could take your mask off. And we were all vaccinated. And when he came in, I said, "I think we could remove our masks," and he said, "Well, you know, I'm not vaccinated." And I said, "Okay. Well, we'll just keep our masks on then," and we did. So it was each individual circumstance – we just had to scope it out and say, "What are we going to do in this case?"

Magdalena Martinez [31:34]

Mm-hmm.

Joyce Helens [31:35]

But as far as like – so I saw the population as a whole – everyone – if you're not vaccinated, you are at risk. And it was a huge group; not just the elderly and people who had other conditions, like our student that I mentioned who passed. He had an underlying condition that should never have killed him. But, because of COVID, it did.

Magdalena Martinez [31:57]

Mm-hmm.

Joyce Helens [31:58]

And so, a very young family did not have their dad.

Magdalena Martinez [32:00]

Joyce Helens [32:01]

And I talked about that too. And for some, that made a difference.

Magdalena Martinez [32:06]

Mm-hmm. And in thinking about – I was thinking about mining because that's big in Elko. Was that halted too, or did that continue?

Joyce Helens [32:16]

No. And that's actually a really – thank you for bringing that up. Because as the CEO said, he wanted to be more – I mean he's a very – he just says it like it is. So he wanted to come out, and he was shaming. (laughs) He would say, "I went to this restaurant," and he'd name it, "and nobody had a mask and so, I left." And "What's the matter with you people?" you know that kind of thing.

But the bottom line for industry is they wanted to keep operating. And I remember, he said, "If we could operate in Africa with Ebola, and stay safe," he said, "why the hell couldn't we do that in Nevada?" So they started – they did a multi-approach and depending on their general manager, who wanted to be a little softer than that. But they did say, "You have to be vaccinated. You have to wear a mask." And they said if you didn't – I mean you could be fired. And they had a couple of people where they thought, "Nah, nah, it'll never happen," and they did it.

And once that happened – it was just like a couple, I remember. It was like, "Oh, we could lose these jobs." These are very – they're all high-paying jobs.

Magdalena Martinez [33:26]

Right.

Joyce Helens [33:27]

And so they said, it was important. And every day, the workers would come in. They were (gestures) – they did the scan – "Do you have a fever?" And they said, "You have to tell us." But they didn't – they did it anyway. I mean they came – people were lined up, and they were – and then they sent them home if they had a fever.

Magdalena Martinez [33:47]

Mm-hmm.

Joyce Helens [33:48]

So they were actually very helpful because they went to the City Council. They talked to the county commissioners. They were saying, "If you want our industries to stay here, we have to be safe." And then when they thought "When the community's not doing enough, we will."

Magdalena Martinez [34:02]

Mm-hmm.

Joyce Helens [34:04]

And I think that made a difference; because I think a lot of people got vaccinated because they thought, "Okay. We can't stop production," and gold mining did not want to stop production.

Magdalena Martinez [34:15]

Right. And they didn't want to lose their jobs.

Joyce Helens [34:19]

Right.

Magdalena Martinez [34:22]

Okay. In thinking about the different levels of government; we talked about NSHE, we talked about the city, county, and federal levels, of course, played an important role. In your opinion, looking back now, was there anything that any of these levels could have, or could do differently in future crises?

Joyce Helens [34:48]

Well, I realize that hindsight's always 100% clear. (laughs) And this was so new, that I really don't fault anybody. You know, I think, when you try and keep huge populations safe, you've got to do something. And we did something – federal level – and it trickled down to – but fast – to state. I think what the state did, they did the best they could. And I'm not intimately involved in how they make decisions. But when it came through, okay. This is what the Feds say. We're going to do this; we're going to do – you know. I know people didn't want to shut down. But I can't imagine that we could have done anything differently.

Magdalena Martinez [35:30]

Mm-hmm.

Joyce Helens [35:32]

It was just a matter of, use your head. Wear a mask. Distance. Wash. Wash your hands. I thought none of this is really a big deal. But for some, it was a huge deal. And then when our system adopted it, and, of course, they got slammed like everybody else. I don't think they did anything wrong. I think they followed guidelines, and for the most part, we really kept people safe. So it might not have been popular. And then, as things go on, you know, "Oh, you didn't have to shut us down. We didn't have to do this." I mean people just didn't know.

And when you look at our – particularly like where you are, in Las Vegas – where you have a lot of people that are used to coming together very closely, and then you have people who are in the service industry. I think it was really prudent to be concerned about them and their families. So it was tough being shut down. We lost a lot of money. People went on furloughs. And that, in itself, for rural colleges – for small institutions – just like small businesses, very, very difficult.

Magdalena Martinez [36:42]

Mm-hmm.

Joyce Helens [36:44]

So we are sustainable. We're stable. We're growing in our trend over the last 15 years, it's increased. And then BOOM, this happens. You shut down. People are out on furloughs. And you think – and then, of course, the system loses what, \$12,000,000, which has not been restored. It's difficult. It's not as difficult when you're in a big – I call it, the "urban corridor." There's always something that people can do. But when you're in these communities – and we're like a population of one per office. I always laugh when I say, "Send some of your people." It's like, "yeah." It's like Sonja and I, we're the people.

So that was difficult; that reaction of having to close down and having the state – and every state was in that situation. That can be very damaging to a small institution. So we were hyper-focused on that. And that's how – now, we were always working very well with our colleague institution, UNR, and that saved us time and money. We were efficient. We had MoUs with them. And I think during that time is when we said we need to really, kind of increase that.

So, for example, we had a really antiquated phone system. And it's never a good time from a system, but we were able to go in, with UNR, in theirs. And I remember Sonja saying, "Shall we do it now? Let's do it now." And that was really kind of during that time. But it's never a good time for a big change, but ultimately, it saved us a lot of money. So we were looking for things like that. What else can help save us money, so we could have the funding we need for actual instruction?

Magdalena Martinez [38:41]

Mm-hmm.

Joyce Helens [38:42]

And that still remains, always, a challenge for a small institution.

Magdalena Martinez [38:47]

And when you say, you created an MoU with UNR for the telephone system, what does that mean? Does that mean you go under their contract to get their rates? Or what exactly is that?

Joyce Helens [39:02]

Yeah. Sonja?

Sonja Sibert [39:03]

Yeah. So we have an MoU attachment for the telephone system. And what that is, UNR supplies the backbone of the system's phone lines, the services. It's all through their network, and then we pay a per-line fee to them. And we are saving about \$5,000 a month or 50% a month, from what we were paying, being on a local carrier.

Magdalena Martinez [39:37]

Okay.

Joyce Helens [39:40]

So we looked for all of those things. Now, we had started that four or five years ago with some things. And that was actually in reaction to, when you look, really, in hindsight, during the Great Recession. The Great Recession negatively affected our system and colleges, and, of course, a smaller place, definitely. So when I came, and I said to Sonja, "How did we fare through that recession?" it was pretty bad. Well, what does that mean? Well, we lost a third of our workforce in the Great Recession. That's like 80 positions, and we only got back like a dozen.

So initially, that tells anyone who's running a business, which a college or a university is. Okay, that means we're still doing business. So that means people are carrying two and three jobs. Because we didn't get (clears throat) – as 80 people did stuff. And so then you realize – I always say, you can't be a long-distance runner and a sprinter at the same time for very long. So, how do you relieve that, so you don't kill people?

So for example, we have these P-cards, which are the system credit cards. We have just a few, but UNR has, probably, hundreds. So they said, you know, "We'll just process them for you, no charge." Well, so, did it save us money? No. But it saved somebody. (laughs) So instead of doing two jobs, maybe now, someone's only doing one and a half.

Magdalena Martinez [41:08]

Mm-hmm.

Joyce Helens [41:09]

So we were in that mode of looking, how can we be more efficient? Are there other things? And there were. And I always say, for instance, when you really drill down and look at an operation in a business, and for instance, you say, "Okay, 2,500 students said they were interested in coming to us, but we only enrolled 200. So, what's wrong?"

Magdalena Martinez [41:28]

Mm-hmm.

Joyce Helens [41:32]

Is it that people aren't doing their jobs? No. It's that people were doing too many jobs, and they didn't have time. So can we relieve the burden from people, so that we *can* look, and we can mitigate? And we were doing that. So we scan now – it's eliminated the hand transfer of paperwork. And we were doing those kinds of things, which is what a business should be doing for efficiency. But then when we realized that we had an opportunity with UNR, for them to help us in other ways that were no problem for them. We started looking. And we picked the low-hanging fruit, so P-cards, phone system. That was actually low-hanging fruit.

And then we were in the midst of building, or trying to build, an addition to our Winnemucca campus. And we had millions of dollars but not enough millions. And so, after raising it, after foundations, we were still short. And then, working with UNR and with the real estate people, we were able to then finish – we did groundbreaking. We just opened it up back in May, I think it was. Beautiful – it's small. I mean, but, for us, it's big. A beautiful addition. Millions of dollars,

we saved by going with UNR. So that would be an MoU, you know? You write out – it's like a little contract.

Magdalena Martinez [42:47]

Right.

Joyce Helens [42:49]

And some of them are short-term. Some of them continue on, like a telephone system, or legal services. We said, "Can we take a portion of what we were paying – give it to you?" And the answer has always been, so far, "yes."

Magdalena Martinez [43:02]

Mm-hmm.

Joyce Helens [43:03]

And that then helped us be able to continue to even develop new programs. So we were able to expand our nursing program across all of our campus centers. For the communities, that is huge. Because each one is a little hospital, and they're desperate for nurses. And so those nurses are hired instantly, and then we maintain a 100% pass rate on those national exams. And actually, we're a leader in the state in our nursing program. And a lot of this is hybrid teaching because you know, you can have you – "beam it out." But then we built the labs in each of these areas.

So for us to continue doing that during a pandemic, when – then we had these cuts, you know, and furloughs – decide, okay. You could only do that so long. (laughs) And so, how can we be more flexible, and how can we be sustainable? But mostly, how do we protect that legacy of higher education in rural and frontier Nevada?

Magdalena Martinez [44:04]

Yeah.

Joyce Helens [44:05]

And that's what's critical. And I say that a lot because it's so important. And sometimes legislators say, "That's so interesting. What's that word, 'frontier?'" I said, "It's more rural than rural. Because it has that designation of how many people per square mile, and also, how long does it take for an emergency to get to you."

Magdalena Martinez [44:23]

Mm-hmm.

Joyce Helens [44:25]

And we have people out there and they're suffering. And if we're not there for them, I think the communities suffer. So those MoUs were really important. We have how many now, Sonja? "A" through –

Sonja Sibert [44:45]

So we have the Master MoU. And then we are – each kind of area or section has its own specific

attachment, like telephone services, back office accounting services like the P-cards. The Winnemucca Building Project Management. So we started at "A," and our last one currently is the letter "O."

Joyce Helens [45:08]

Yeah. So for instance, for disability services, we only have one person, and she went on maternity leave. She's such a sweet person – instead of just being super-happy about this baby coming, she was worried, "What's going to happen to my students?" because she's a one-person shop.

So we have an MoU with UNR, and they have, just like UNLV would have, disability services as a group. And so I remember, when she left, she said, "Oh, I could just focus on my baby." We thought, "Yes, that's what we want." "Because my students will be taken care of."

Magdalena Martinez [45:41]

Mm-hmm.

Joyce Helens [45:44]

And we have our special populations that we do really well with because we have such close communication and caring. But if one person leaves – like, what? So then those MoUs enabled us, during a time of crisis, really, with the pandemic, to continue on and stay stable and healthy.

Magdalena Martinez [46:06]

Mm-hmm. Very helpful, thank you. I'm going to turn it over to Carmen now, to finish up the questions.

Elia Del Carmen Solano-Patricio [46:17]

Thank you, Dr. Martinez. And President Helens, I just want to thank you for being such a human through all of this. I'm not a student of yours, but if I were, I think that I'd feel very safe and taken care of.

Joyce Helens [46:28]

Thank you.

Elia Del Carmen Solano-Patricio [46:30]

I was looking at your website. I'm an Urban Studies major here at UNLV. And one of the major concepts that we study is resilience, urban resilience, and sustainability to some folks. So I was looking at your website, and I noticed that you have a protocol for a lot of different types of crises, not just health crises. So everything from security issues, like bomb threats, to chemical spills, to earthquakes. How do you think the COVID crisis specifically can help us learn lessons for the future and other types of crises?

Joyce Helens [47:09]

That's a really good and complex question. It seems simple but it's actually quite complex. So every time we personally go through crises, I think if we can reflect, it makes us better, right? So I'm just going to give you a personal example – and I want to make it short. (laughs)

So, early in my career, when I was moving up, you know – I had two little kids – and I was finishing a doctorate, or trying to, and a new job. I found out I had later-stage metastatic breast cancer. And so, I wasn't given a very good prognosis, and that was like over 30 years ago. So, yeah (laughs). And so, you know, I pulled away from the doctoral work, because I was in a new job, and I focused on my family, and my job, actually.

And so, a little bit of time passed, and I was given a good bill of health. My president at the time said, you know, "It's time for you to go for a presidency," because that had been interrupted. And I was quite young. I was not yet 40. And so I did. And I was a finalist for a presidency, and my own president and mentor said, "This is your job. You're number one. They called me."

And when I got there, a vice chancellor met me and said – he kind of looked away from me and said, "Oh, you look really good," and I did. (laughs) And I thought, "Why would that surprise you?" And he colored (gestures), you know, and got really red. When I met with the chancellor, who I thought we were going to be discussing the contract, he told me, "You know, you had such a great video interview. You should consider a broadcast journalism career." And I remember saying to him, "I thought I was here to negotiate a contract." And he said, "You know, I'm going to end this now. And I want you to just rent a car, and see the sights, and – yeah. Nice to meet you," and he left.

And then the other guy comes to take me back to the hotel, and I said, "What happened?" Well, what I found out was, somebody who was actually supposed to be a reference said, "Did you know she has cancer?" And so, I didn't get the job. Now, my president – and I confronted this guy, and I guess, scared him to death. Because like, every time he saw us at a conference, he'd run the other way.

So, why did I tell this story? What it did for me, one, it was a huge disappointment because I was – I had a clear – I mean, I was supposedly – I didn't have cancer. But it made me think: if I could, at my age, you know – then I was a lot thinner (laughs). But I thought if something that you can't see could lose me a job like this, what happened if I limped? What happened if I had another physical "something" you could see? Or what happened if I was a person of color and with that?

And so that made me extremely sensitive to ADA issues and even more sensitive to those things that are used, but not said out loud, of why people don't get jobs. And I mean, I threw myself into that then, and I still do, of trying to assist people and break through those things. So I think when things happen to us if we reflect – I mean I guess I just could have been bitter and said, "Well, what the hell," and then you go on, and eventually, you get a presidency. But I didn't. That's a tiny thing, but that's a personal thing.

So when something like a big crisis happens, or a shooting – and where I was previously in Minnesota, we had a stabbing, and we had come together. But I think, if you have your own personal values first, it enables you to jump into that one, and then help others through, and then they now have that experience of "Oh, one, she doesn't get crazy on it. She doesn't freak out. There's a systematic approach. You can have a plan, and you could still stay in touch with people." And those things are really important. But right now, in our world, it's very wonky and it doesn't happen. But it has to happen. Otherwise, we'll fall apart.

Elia Del Carmen Solano-Patricio [51:57]

Thank you so much, President Helens. [Carmen's audio is dropping out??52:00] with the plan there. And I think that is a really great response. We've asked that question before, and it's been about the collective, right? We communicate and those are all great things. But I think they skipped a part, which was – starts with us.

So I have two final questions for you. One is about the policies – the fiscal policies that trickled down to the community, and if you wanted to identify any of those? For example, CARES or ARPA money that really impacted the community, whether negatively or positively?

Joyce Helens [52:38]

Well, I'm going to ask Sonja too. Because I know when we were going through this, these things were important. And we worked as a very tight team. I think Sonja would agree, also, with – I don't know if you've ever met Vice President Rivera. And so together, it was just like, really, the three of us, although there are a couple of deans, and we certainly worked with them. But particularly, what would assist us to move forward financially – Sonja, did you have anything you'd like to add?

Sonja Sibert [53:10]

Yes. So I think that the key part of – the most important part that we saw with the CARES money – though, yes, it was instrumental in keeping the institution able to provide the same level of services to our students that we were doing pre-pandemic. And also, increase the level of technology available. We bought laptops and things like that, that were issued out to students and staff who didn't have them. We increased Wi-Fi access so that students could come to our parking lots and get Wi-Fi access. Because the Wi-Fi access in our communities is not the greatest. It is on campus. But once you leave campus, it breaks down.

But the other thing that I think was the most important was the money that was given to us to provide directly to the students. And we did it very simplistically. We got the money out to our students as quickly as possible. We didn't have them fill out a lot of forms. We just based it on their enrollment. There were some other criteria in the first round, they had to fill out the FAFSA and things like that. And in reflecting on that and talking to our external auditors, [Brant Borton??54:29] even they mentioned that we did one of the most easiest and simplistic methods of distributing that money and getting it out to our students quickly.

Joyce Helens [54:41]

Yeah. Thanks – that was very important to us. And Sonja mentioned about connectivity. So thanks for that also, Sonja. Because when we had to initially shut down, we were very concerned. Connectivity is a big issue, always, in rural. It's bad. I mean, at one point, a couple of years ago, our 911 system used to go down in Elko. And it was the mine that sort of pushed some – and of course, our delegation, our state, and federal delegation, who understood connectivity are so important, especially because we're online.

But we had students in our parking lot, in their cars, working on their classes because they had no connectivity other than on campus. So we realized that even though we were shut down – I mean many of us were still in the office, with the door closed, but the doors were locked, you

know. So we realized those students were sitting out there, and we really had to work to make sure that connectivity would continue. And then, once we had the funding, we said, how can we make this as easy as possible for our students to get that? So I feel like we did a really good job there.

Elia Del Carmen Solano-Patricio [55:54]

Thank you so much, and Sonja, for answering that question so succinctly about skipping over the processes, right, that makes things happen a little faster. It seems like that was a common theme throughout.

So I have one final question for you, more at an individualistic level. And you seem pretty hopeful to me; but the question is, do you feel hopeful? Are you hopeful, and do you think your students are?

Joyce Helens [56:24]

And what was the end part of that? About students-

Elia Del Carmen Solano-Patricio [56:25]

Do you think your students also feel hopeful for the future?

Joyce Helens [56:29]

I'm going to take the last part first. We have an amazing student group, and they're international. So the students are used to being online, and they're used to running their student meetings online. Because we have people in Brooklyn, the Netherlands, and Ghana, and they're ambassadors and a part of student government. Also, we have an Honor Society, Phi Theta Kappa, and many of the same students are on that. But they're just leaders.

So we continued to meet with them, and of course, they were all over the world. And our student president, even now, and before – Zach – was he in the Bronx or Brooklyn, Sonja?

Sonja Sibert [57:24]

You know, I'm not really sure exactly what part of New York City he is in.

Joyce Helens [57:28]

I'm thinking maybe Brooklyn.

Sonja Sibert [57:29]

Yeah.

Joyce Helens [57:31]

But he was like an EMT, he was working at a hospital. And so when we would have our student meetings, you know, he would take – because [it was] a three-hours difference – and you'd see all of the equipment behind him. Like he'd be in a storage closet. But they were helping their communities. And even during this time, they were doing things – like those people who were food-insecure, and they were raised – I mean, anywhere – and then they would share these stories together. And I was sitting and listening – I mean, I was on Zoom – and I thought, These

are really leaders. These are students who stepped up, no matter where they were and said, "We're going to care. We're going to make a difference. And then we're going to come back and talk about it, and how can we do it better."

So I remember saying to our faculty person who was advising that – long-term – also, just a wonderful, caring individual. So she took the lead in that. And we used to have a one-star chapter, and now it's a five-star chapter. And then we suddenly won international and regional awards because, during this time, they went out there and said, "We're going to make a difference." And they knew they were successful. And then when they shared the stories, it was extremely meaningful.

And you could have a student – a rural student – in, I'll say, Ely, who's pretty remote in terms of they're in Ely and they're staying in Ely. And then all of a sudden, we hear about our other student in Ghana, who said that she and her mother were going to make meals for the street children, and the student in Ely says, "What is that?" And she said, "We have women who are – she said, "it's like slavery and they're indentured. And their children become the property of these businesses, and they have no education, and they're on the street."

And I remember sitting and listening. And I had students in other places start to cry and say, "I didn't know this existed." And I thought that connection – and we weren't in person, of course – was amazing. And so, the student in Ghana said she and her mom then made meals for – but she said, "We can't just do this for one time. So now, Mom and I are going to be doing this every month."

And then another guy – oh, that guy was in the Bronx – who told his personal story, and why he was at GBC, and how he was going to help now. And there wasn't a dry eye in the house.

And then we had a lady who was sitting in her car, I think, in Missouri. Somewhere around there. And I don't know actually if she might have not just lived in that car. But she was there. She was middle-aged. And she said, "This means everything to me. And I need help myself, but I'm going to help others." So it was like, *wow*. So our students are amazing, and they continue to be amazing.

Magdalena Martinez [1:00:36]

Thank you so much for that.

Joyce Helens [1:00:37]

Yeah.

Magdalena Martinez [1:00:38]

Oh, I'm sorry.

Joyce Helens [1:00:40]

So – no. Well, the first part was like, do I feel helpful?" I don't worry about that. I'm going to do the best I can. Because I know in this job, the hardest part is, if you wait to be acknowledged or

appreciated, you're going to be disappointed. Because [there's] always somebody who doesn't like you – for whatever reason – you're not doing enough. You cannot focus on that.

So internally, I'm going to do the best I can, and that's all any of us can do. But the best I can – if I could make it a plan, you know what I mean? When Sonja is talking about these very important, succinct things. I'm just sort of doing the general stuff. But when we get together, we say, we have to make a plan, and we have to advertise the plan. Let people know about the plan. We could do it 100,000 times and somebody will say, "You didn't tell me."

Magdalena Martinez [1:01:34]

Mm-hmm.

Joyce Helens [1:01:35]

That's just going to happen, so we don't worry about it. But we're also looking at the bigger, I call "the weather pattern." Because sometimes you do have people who just want to cause chaos. They just want to cause confusion to stop your movement forward. I don't even worry about why that happens anymore because you know, you'd go crazy, right? Because look at the world now, you think –

So, in our sphere, we're going to try and influence it positively and make a difference, even though it might not have the absolute outcome we hope.

Magdalena Martinez [1:02:08]

Right. Thank you so much for that. It's been a pleasure speaking to you and Sonja and learning more about Great Basin, and your – just meeting both of you.

We will transcribe this interview and send that your way, probably within a month or two months. But should we have any questions, we will follow up, if that's all right.

Joyce Helens [1:02:32]

Oh, yes. Anytime. Thank you so much.

Magdalena Martinez [1:02:36]

Thank you both.

Joyce Helens [1:02:35]

Yeah, I appreciate talking with you this morning.

Elia Del Carmen Solano-Patricio [1:02:38]

Thank you.

Magdalena Martinez [1:02:40]

Thanks, Sonja.

Sonja Sibert [1:02:41]

Thank you. Have a good day.

Elia Del Carmen Solano-Patricio [1:02:42]
Thank you so much. You too.

End of audio: 1:02:42