

# Robin N. Kaler Interview

Associate Chancellor of Public Affairs at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign

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## **SPEAKERS**

Robin Kaler, Rebeca Escamilla

### **Rebeca Escamilla 00:00**

I will be starting and we will be recording the interview so it's recording. Um, so my name is Rebecca Escamilla. I am a graduate student representing the University of Illinois archives. I am here today with Robin Kaler. Did I pronounce that right? Associate Chancellor for Public Affairs at the University of Illinois Urbana Champaign. Today's day is Tuesday, December 6, we are here at the University Archives to discuss how the COVID 19 pandemic impacted Public Affairs at the University of Illinois Urbana Champaign. This interview will be used for inclusion in the University of Illinois COVID-19 documentation project. So I'll just go in ahead. I'll start with some general questions and then some departmental questions. And then some personal questions for you as a chancellor.

### **Rebeca Escamilla 00:50**

So for the-

### **Robin Kaler 00:51**

I should warn you the monthly sirens are going off.

### **Rebeca Escamilla 00:54**

Yes. Okay, so for the first question, can you tell us more about public affairs as a department at UIUC, so kind of like what are the functions its goals? responsibility towards students? We have general information, but we always like to hear it from the interviewee in their words.

### **Robin Kaler 01:16**

Sure, the Office of Public Affairs is actually doing an integration right now and changing to the Office of Strategic Communications and Marketing. So our name in the future will be that instead of Public Affairs, but the office started many years ago with a traditional news bureau. So journalists who cover the research and scholarship of faculty and share that with media across the nation. These days, though, we also have a department that does web tools to help communications professionals across campus. We have a video group, a photo group, social media group, group that handles the Freedom of Information Act requests the university receives, we handle all the speech writing for the chancellor and provost and any kind of other leader who might be filling in for one of them. We do special events for the university. We do the marketing for the university. And we handle crisis communications, which is a lot of how we how we engaged with the Coronavirus response.

### **Rebeca Escamilla 02:22**

Thank you. So do you remember the first time you heard about the emergence of COVID-19? In your professional setting? And what was that? Behind the scenes?

**Robin Kaler** 02:36

Yeah, yeah, it was it was sometime in mid-January of 2020. Because I'm looking right now at a statement we drafted and some message points. About initially, our concern was for our the students we have who are from Wuhan, China. And what we initially heard was that there was something that had happened in Wuhan, China. That was that was troubling. And we were worried about how we could safely get our students we had, I think we had about 135-140 students from Wuhan. How we could safely get them back to campus. And then obviously make sure that they were quarantined or whatever, treated if they were ill and then quarantined, to make sure that they could be ready to get back into the class, you know, as the semester started.

**Rebeca Escamilla** 03:29

Thank you, um, do you remember your last day of work before going into lockdown? So it would have been around March 2020? And can you describe how you felt surrounding that situation?

**Robin Kaler** 03:41

Sure, I actually, my most vivid memory is the last in-person Cabinet meeting that we had. Right before COVID. Because we, you know, obviously that the chancellor's leadership group, we were very focused on addressing COVID. And, and when we realized, you know, after in January, we were thinking this was something that was going to affect that small group of students who were returning from this area where there was a problem. And then what we found was obviously, the disease was much, much more widespread than people thought and much more much more invasive, I guess, if you will, and it was going to impact the university quite a bit. And so, we had a had an in-person Cabinet meeting. And I actually remember I've never done this in my career. I've been with the university for 33 years. And I've never done this before. But I talked to our university photographer, and I said, I think I need you to attend this meeting and take pictures of it. Because I think this is going to be the last time we're going to be in person for a long time. And I think this is something that having been a user of the archives for many years, this seemed like the kind of thing that you would find in the archives and say, oh, gosh, I'm glad somebody thought to get that, you're sure of that. So it would have been that week before spring break. We had that last meeting when the chancellor had made the difficult decision to tell people not to come back after spring break. And so, we were preparing that message. And, and we, we realized that, at the time that there were a lot more questions that even we had than answers. You know, normally we'll put together what we call an FAQ, where we'll say, "oh, here are the questions, we think people are going to ask us about this topic. And here are the answers that that we would all want to give so that everybody's got the correct information says the same thing." And we knew we weren't going to have a lot of answers for a very long time. And so, we said, let's take this time, and say, what are the values we're going to use to make the decisions we're going to need to make in the coming weeks and months, because we can at least tell people, "we don't know exactly what we're going to do. But we can tell you these are the values that are going to guide us." And those values were the safety and security of our students, faculty, staff, and greater Champaign-Urbana community would be our number one priority, that we would continue to deliver on our missions of teaching, research, and engagement. And that as a world class university, we would find a way to help a deal with this problem addressed this

problem. And I think if you look at how the university responded to COVID, you know, since then, you'll see that that that really did guide our approach, and you know, the whole COVID saliva test is kind of grounded in that sort of that sort of approach. So, and I, you asked me something else, and I totally forgot what the rest of the question was. I'm so sorry.

**Rebeca Escamilla** 06:28

It's all right.

**Robin Kaler** 06:29

That covered. Okay.

**Rebeca Escamilla** 06:30

Yes. And then, so, while the pandemic was going on, did you work from home at any time during 2020? I mean, it sounds kind of a redundant question. But we've had scientists and researchers who had to be 24/7 in the workplace. And if you did work remotely, how did this change your work responsibilities?

**Robin Kaler** 06:55

Yeah, so we all worked remotely. Well, we had our photographers and videographers came to campus to again to capture some of the things. And then later on, in in COVID, in July, when once the saliva test was launched, our special events team that normally plans, things like Convocation and Commencement and holiday parties and things. This was kind of a special event, right? So, they became the leaders of the COVID testing sites. And still, they still run the COVID testing sites or special events team does. So, so, they were they were in person. Those of us who had COVID related responsibilities. Other than the ones I've just mentioned, we all worked from home. But I can tell you we weren't, we were working 12-to-16-hour days, seven days a week, for it was at least six months before things slowed down. It was it was just nonstop. So, you I would get up and I would, I would try to get up very early, I like to run I would get up and I would go for a run. And then I would come home. And by seven o'clock I was on my computer, usually in a meeting by seven o'clock. And the meetings would go until sometimes seven to ten at night, just there were so many things to be done and decisions to be made and issues to be addressed and things to be written and shared. And so, yeah, it was it was pretty intense for our team. We also, our team also led the when we when school started, we realized we needed to have a group of peers to help students really understand and appreciate the importance of masking and hand washing whatnot. We created a group called the COVID Wellness Ambassadors. And so our unit ran that group as well. So, And obviously those students were on campus. And the person who ran that group, Jodi Silotto, she, she came to campus frequently that to help them with supplies and things. And then we had a couple of people in the office who came in to help with supplies and things too.

**Rebeca Escamilla** 09:02

Thank you. So I'll be okay. Yeah. Kinsey just informed me that we did get in touch with Jodi.

09:14

So Right. It's great. And yeah, she'll, she'll be a good interview. You'll Yeah, you'll enjoy speaking with her.

**Rebeca Escamilla** 09:21

So I'm going to start now with the Public Affairs questions, just questions surrounding the department. So when did the COVID-19 pandemic come into the radar of public Affairs? When did the department kind of officially start to plan in response?

**Robin Kaler** 09:39

So I'm sorry, that would that would have been the same as my previous answer. So it was, what, early mid-January, again, when we just thought that we were dealing with how to get those students from Wuhan back to campus safely. And then then it kind of morphed into all the Study Abroad kids who were around the world and what you know what to do to support them and help get them home safely. And you know, and then it just kept sort of snowballing. And as we realized, bigger and bigger and bigger and bigger until till we got to that, that week in March when we had that final Cabinet meeting, or I think it's called Chancellor's Executive Leadership Council, CELC, that last in-person meeting and then and then went home. But we we've been we've been dealing, I mean, I have already had a meeting that involved COVID this morning. So, we continue to have you know, we're trying to put together what, what are going to be the protocols for next semester. And how do we communicate those? And what do we do with the COVID website now? Is it time to maybe start dialing it back? But, so, COVID is still something that that we deal with on a daily basis in our office.

**Rebeca Escamilla** 10:45

So for my second question, How did COVID-19 affect Public Affairs at UIUC?

**Robin Kaler** 10:52

So for, you know, almost everyone, it meant having to set up your office at home and work from home so that people in the news bureau or in the marketing group, you know, they had to figure out how to how to set up little offices in their home and that sort of thing. And then for those of us who actually were dealing with the university's response to Coronavirus, you know, it just became all-consuming for months and months and months and months. And you know, what I said, maybe six months, we were working 12 to 16 hour days, and at the end of that six months, maybe it got down to 10 to 12 hour days, and maybe you had Sunday off at that point. It was a good, a good 18 months before we got to the point where we really could even think about anything other than our COVID management, and COVID response.

**Rebeca Escamilla** 11:38

Thank you. For my next question. So Public Affairs offers Crisis Communications services. Was this service used during the pandemic? And who would be seeking this service? And how would they be helped? Concerning the pandemic response?

**Robin Kaler** 11:56

Yeah, so again, that the things I've been talking to you about, that's all that was all our crisis communications team. And we did everything from, you know, writing, all of the mass mails that went out, crafting the policies based on what people, you know, the leadership said, needed to be in a policy, for example, we created the COVID website, which we had up and running, you know, in time for that,

you know, telling people to go home and stay home, because that became the sort of the hub of of where people got information. We created a COVID inbox so that when people had questions, we could respond to them. Immediately, what we were able to do was kind of create a standard set of responses to those questions, we tended to get a lot, and then if there was something that was new, or different, whatever, then we would determine the answer to that and craft it and add it to our list of responses. And we really were able to respond to people's questions for the most part within one or two hours. And so that really helped the community a lot helped keep sort of the temperature and the anxiety down. We planned and produced all of the COVID online briefings that the Chancellor and other leaders had. I moderated all of those. So I mean, it was just it was kind of nonstop, everything all the time. Yeah, I might have missed some of the things you asked in that question. I'm so sorry.

**Rebeca Escamilla** 13:23

It's all right. You've got them.

**Robin Kaler** 13:24

Yeah. Okay. Oh, another thing we did, I should say, we connected with all of the chief communications officers across the university, because we, we have an organization of that group that normally would meet once a month and talk about different opportunities the university is facing or issues that might be coming up. And of course, this was a big one, we ended up after that, after that move to remote work, we started having that group meet every day, every day for it could be for five minutes, if there wasn't anything big to talk about, it could be an hour and a half, depending on, you know, what things there were so that all those communications people had real time information and knew what was going on. They often told us that they were able to go back to their dean or director and say, "Hey, this is going to happen," and they knew before their dean or director did. And what we found was, that was such a helpful thing in general that now our group, we've not gone back to meeting once a month, now we meet once a week, and again, still follow that same, that same process, and that's been really, really helpful. So again, then that way, when there was an issue, a college or unit specific issue related to COVID, we were able to then, you know, kind of become that sort of central repository and liaison to help them get the information they needed to respond to whatever challenges they had to. So, it really did for Public Affairs, or the Office of Strategic Communications and Marketing, it really did help us forge and strengthen a lot of relationships that we had already had built but it really helped solidify a lot of that and really helped people realize that we can help them whether it's an international pandemic, or you know, you have a controversial speaker coming to campus or something., So, that actually really did help a lot of people build that network and realize that we are community and we can all help each other.

**Rebeca Escamilla** 15:17

Thank you. So for UIUCs COVID-19 mass strategy is held in right, in high regard. So, um, so what, what was the role that Public Affairs took in this plan, and when I mean, the mass tragedy, I mean, because when I was looking through news articles, I remember that other universities also started to emulate the COVID-19 strategy that we did here at UIUC, and I can't remember, but I believe that you were also interviewed for, um, news media, just talking about the mass strategy. So how was that?

**Robin Kaler** 16:03

Yeah, so I think the most important thing was that the chancellor, Robert Jones, and the provost at the time, Andreas Cangelaris, they realized we had to find a way to get students back on campus for the fall semester. And that that could not be done safely, without a massive testing program. And that the testing options that were available at that time, you know, this was pre-vaccine, even remember, that involved a nasal swab, or as the chancellor calls it, jokingly, "the brain swab" just wasn't that wasn't gonna work for, you know, the, the processing of it, that approach was not going to work for this massive testing strategy. And so, the chancellor and provost, you know, went to some of the faculty and said, "We need you to come up with something better. And it was amazing to watch them just in a few weeks, you know, put together this phenomenal program that was, you know, way better than anything any of us had seen anywhere else in the world, and then to implement it. So, it was really exciting to be part of that, to be able to help roll that out to, you know, with our group, creating the testing sites, you know, connecting all the pieces together, creating all the communications to help people understand it. We created early on, I remember, before we had that testing program, we created a little COVID pledge. We were trying to think of ways to get people to, you know, to do what they needed to do, you know, the hand washing and the masking and avoiding people and all that sort of thing. So, you know, we initially tried creating this pledge, and we had a few 1000 people signed up for that, you know, by the time that, that we had better strategies. But it was, it was just like a constant puzzle. And, you know, every time you'd find a new tunnel to go down and say, oh, yeah, I think there's light at the end of this one, then some other thing would, you know, some obstacle would drop down, you'd have to go another direction. And so it really was like, it was almost like playing one of those, you know, those, the games that they have now where you can go down escape room or something and try to try to figure out how to get us through this pandemic. But having that testing strategy was really, really the main thing. And once we had that, and then we implemented it, and we created the dashboard that we could point people to, and we could monitor how things were going, that's when we were able to start telling the world about it. And then that really became a transformational thing for the University for people in the state of Illinois, for example, to understand, that's why you want to have a research university. That's the whole point of having all of these things in place. I mean, for us, one of my favorite stories was the Veterinary Diagnostic Lab. You know, we don't have a med school that's attached to a university hospital, right? Where you could normally do the sort of things some of our peers were doing. And when they when the faculty came up with this idea for this, this test, they said, "Well, where can we process all of these tests? Right? Where do we go to do that?" And, and somebody said, "How about the VDL, the Veterinary Diagnostic Lab?" which is something that for those of us who follow kind of inside baseball at the university, people fought over funding that every year: "Why do we need that? We don't need that thing. We should shut that down." And here having it saved a lot of lives on this campus alone, Right? And saved lives all around the world, across the nation around the world. So having that infrastructure in place that research infrastructure in place was just so exciting as a communications marketing person to be able to now have this amazing example of why a research university matters and why funding for research universities matters and how you don't even know how we're going to help you at some point, but just know when the stuff hits the fan, we will be there and we'll be ready to help you. So, so that was that was really, really exciting.

**Rebeca Escamilla** 20:17

Yeah, it does sound just like being, I guess, like, in a moment of history like that.

**Robin Kaler 20:24**

Yeah, yeah, it was, it was. It's really, it's really interesting. I mean, I didn't have anything to do with creating the test or anything like that. But, you know, but doing what I could to help, you know, help the group with the communications needs they had was really, really rewarding and exciting. It's fun.

**Rebeca Escamilla 20:44**

Thank you. So for the next question. Did Public Affairs have to partner with new organizations during the pandemic?

**Robin Kaler 20:52**

With what organizations?

**Rebeca Escamilla 20:54**

With new organizations that they previously hadn't?

**Robin Kaler 20:58**

Gosh, I'm trying to think, because I mean, we partner with pretty much everybody on campus all the time anyway. Because we were campus-wide service, so, maybe more closely with some people than we had before. You know, I had met for example, Paul Hergenrother and Tim [Timothy] Fan, when we were working on a story about the research that they had done with the blood brain barrier and dogs with cancer. So you know, talk to them a little bit on that. But it was, it was really exciting to get to work with them so closely on this project. So probably not anybody new, but a lot of people much more intensely and closely. And then, of course, we plugged in, one thing that was really nice was that, and what we found was, our peers told us that was not necessarily the case in their communities was that our community really pulled together. So, we had, you know, sometimes daily, sometimes weekly meetings with the, you know, the community, the Public Health District, the local hospitals, the local schools, the, you know, Convention and Visitor's Bureau, I mean, just all the community people saying how can we pull our resources together? How can we do this as a team to keep our community as safe as possible? And so that was that was really nice to get to work more closely with some people who, you know, you would have worked a little bit with them, but you know, it that's a pretty intense, so it was a pretty intense time, obviously.

**Rebeca Escamilla 22:26**

Thank you. So how did Public Affairs acquire its COVID-19 information? You mentioned? Like, writing articles with Paul. I can't remember. But I also think I, I saw some with Martin Burke.

**Robin Kaler 22:47**

We submitted a paper to nature, Nature comms [Communications], and that was published. So that was, Marty did the lion's share of the work on that. We edited for him. But he did most of the work. And then we wrote the communication section. But other than that, we've not but yeah, I mean, you know, we were obviously I was in all of those meetings with the chancellor, the president, the provost, the doctors, you know, all of that. So, so I kind of got my information the way I do, you know, with anything else, I get it from the leadership, and then it's my job to then translate it, you know, format it, you know, and then disseminate it to the university. So, we sent over the course of that summer, or that, you

know, from that spring through summer, it was like, 60 mass mails? Yeah, it was a lot. We, I mean, we had to use mass mail a lot, right, because people weren't here. And then the town halls and those sorts of things. But, you know, we leaned into every single tool we have we use, you know, Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, LinkedIn, everything. We used everything, we had to try to reach people. The Chancellor's, you know, his normal Welcome Back video, his holiday video, we would try to infuse each one of those with, you know, that message that we care about you we're here, we're trying to help you. We're trying to support you. Yeah.

**Rebeca Escamilla** 24:09

Thank you. So during the COVID, 19 pandemic, there was a spike in misinformation. Did misinformation affect or challenge the community? The communications released by public affairs?

**Robin Kaler** 24:23

Oh, sure. I mean, that's, we dealt with that the whole time, right. I mean, there was misinformation, not just necessarily from this, you know, being generated by somebody in this community. But, you know, nationally, there was a lot of misinformation and so we had to deal with that a lot. And we did it by you know, leaning into what we do as a research university, right, the science and, you know, did everything that we did, we kept sharing the science. That's part of the reason we created the dashboard was so that people could see visually, you know, where we were and how things were going, and they could see if there was a spike that we could say, "look, there's a spike. You need to, you need to stay home." And we started seeing those patterns, and we were able to anticipate them. You know, we just had the one at Thanksgiving this year. So yeah, so we just we just really leaned into the facts and the science.

**Rebeca Escamilla** 25:16

Thank you. So while the pandemic was ongoing, or I guess still is ongoing, did Public Affairs have to cancel or postpone any major projects or initiatives?

**Robin Kaler** 25:28

Sure. I think everybody did. Right. We I mean, we, that first six months, we didn't do anything. Anything, I think we might have gotten our I guess we'd already gotten our budget. And but we didn't do anything but COVID It was all you woke up and you dealt with it all day long. And all evening long. And then you finally dragged yourself to bed and you did it again the next day.

**Rebeca Escamilla** 25:49

Yeah, I think I remember seeing a mass mail that the, during the pandemic that the university lost, like millions in revenue. So that was, it was a little shocking to see.

**Robin Kaler** 26:03

Yeah, well, and you know, that a lot of that was housing, right that, you know, when you're not getting that the money from students being in housing, we had to refund their money. And there were a lot of financial ramifications. But I have to tell you, I was always really proud. Being in those conversations, to see that no matter what, the safety and security of our students, faculty, staff, and greater community was always the number one priority, always, and then continuing to deliver on our mission. And then



how can we get this test out? To as many people as needed? So, they did not let money stop them at all. Yeah.

**Rebeca Escamilla** 26:46

Nice to know.

**Robin Kaler** 26:47

Yeah, it made me very, very, very proud to be part of the university. I've always been proud to be part of it. I have three degrees from here. I've worked here for a very long time. You know, I've gotten to know. You know, people like Nick Holonyak, who invented the first visible LED, I mean, really amazing superstar people. And I was always proud, but I've never been more proud than I was through this.

**Rebeca Escamilla** 27:10

Yeah, I think for me, the first moment of realization was when I read the mass mail that students were refunded, which, as a college student, I do remember that other universities hadn't refunded anything. So that was a pretty nice thing.

**Robin Kaler** 27:26

Yeah, Yeah. You know, that's something I've worked for seven chancellors here at the University and, and most of them lovely, wonderful people. All of them, I think, trying to do the right thing. But I've never seen a leadership team as committed to the values of this, the core values of this institution, as I did through that. It was just, it made me cry sometimes. It was, it was really cool. Yeah.

**Rebeca Escamilla** 27:55

Thank you. So for the next question, how did the pandemic affect the workforce for Public Affairs? We've had previous interviews with other departments that they've had a lot of turnovers. So it was just-

**Robin Kaler** 28:13

Oh, interesting. Yeah, we didn't. I don't think we had any turnover during it, I think. Yeah, I'm not I'm trying to think of anybody. Yeah, no, I think, you know, part of the deal was that we were all, you know, we were on that team in which it's kind of like, you know, you're in the World Series or something. Right. And so, nobody's going to quit right, then. So, I think, you know, for those of us who had that role, in the our news bureau writers were trying to write the stories of what we were doing. And the social media, people were posting that, the web people were, you know, maintaining the website for us. And so. I think everybody really understood their mission and their value and their purpose. It was it, it's been a really, really nice time. And to see some of our young folks in our office who just stepped up and contributed in ways that we would never have expected somebody of that skill level and seniority to be able to do it, it was really, it was really amazing. So yeah, no, we had a, we might be an anomaly in that simply because we had such a high level purpose all throughout it.

**Rebeca Escamilla** 29:34

Thank you. Um, so for my next question, does Public Affairs still consider COVID-19 a high priority?

**Robin Kaler** 29:41

Oh, sure. Yeah, it will be it will continue to be until, you know, until it just becomes, you know, like a flu or whatever, right where it's just not as big of a threat because even though it those of us who are old enough to be, you know, I think I've had five COVID vaccines now. You know, I feel pretty safe. And I think a lot of us feel like we can now live with it. We still have a lot of, you know, older faculty and staff, we have people who are immunocompromised, I mean, we're not going to get away from that, right? This thing is going to be here forever. And, and we're gonna need to always be able to address it. But can we dial some things back? I sure hope so. I think we're, I think we've been doing that. And we'll continue to you know. We were looking at the testing the other day, and, you know, we had way back when, you know, you'd have 7000 people test a day, some days, and then maybe a year ago, it was like 1200 a day, and now we're down to 300 a day or so. So, you can kind of see things dialing back as we learn to live in this new time. Yeah.

**Rebeca Escamilla 30:49**

I think the changes are also reflected in the mass mail. I can't remember the specific number, but I think like 80, something mass mails were released regarding COVID-19 during the 2020. And then I can't remember for 2021. And then for this year, it's been considerably a lower amount.

**Robin Kaler 31:10**

Yeah. Yeah. It's gotten it's gotten a lot better it has. We the first time someone asked us it was, yeah, either that summer or that fall, we counted them up, and it was 60 whatever. At the time, we thought, "Oh, my heavens!" Yeah, we might send, I know, it seems like a lot of people will receive mass mail from the Chancellor. But we might send, you know, 10 or 12 a year before that. And, and then it was just, you know, boom, boom, boom you know, because there was a sub-information was changing so fast, there was just so much that we needed to share. And we needed things documented where people could go look at the archive and see it. And so, we leaned in pretty heavily when people were remote. So yes, yeah. But what we found was the readership really went up because people always said, "Oh, nobody reads mass mail." And what we found was that of faculty, staff and students, students click mass mail more than anybody else. And people always say students don't read it. We said, "no, no, actually, it's you who is not reading it. Our students are reading it." So we're really proud students throughout.

**Rebeca Escamilla 32:11**

Yes. So for the next question, this pandemic has been a roller coaster of waves and variants, and then we had phases during the pandemic. Um, what do you think about the university's response? So guidelines requirements to the evolution of the pandemic? And does this differ from the response issued by Public Affairs?

**Robin Kaler 32:36**

No, no, I mean, we were the official arm of the of the university. So, we said exactly what the university wanted to say. And what I would tell you is that we throughout, you know, worked closely with the Champaign-Urbana Public Health Department. In fact, Awais Vaid, the epidemiologist there. He said, in every single meeting, we had virtually, I was in many of those, the programs that we had to broadcast information to the university, or webcast, I should say, and ended up becoming the head of our McKinley Health Center. So yeah, we always teased he had the longest job interview anybody's ever

had in the world. But, you know, the, the goal was to stay in very close contact with the state of Illinois Public Health, with CU Public Health and CDC. And throughout, we have worked really hard to follow those guidelines and go with the information that they share. So, or even a little more, if, for whatever reason, we felt like we needed to do more in some certain area. You know, and then it's like anything else, you know, that some people thought it was great. Some people thought that there should be more, some people thought there should be less than, I mean, we're a very large and complex organization, you're never going to make everyone perfectly happy. But again, if you have, you know, good policies and practices in place, and you follow those, then you're in a pretty good space.

**Rebeca Escamilla** 34:09

Thank you. Um, so I'll start asking some more personal questions that as your role as Chancellor. So what challenges have you encountered as a Chancellor for Public Affairs?

**Robin Kaler** 34:23

Well, again, you know, it was it was just having this you know, biggest possible longest crisis you could possibly ever have, you know. I mean, I've, I was leading this unit when we went through the admissions scandal, many years ago. I was leading this unit when we had a visiting scholar Yingying Zhang murdered. I've been through some really awful, awful things in this role. And aside from that, from that murder, this was by far the worst. It's uh, you know, it's hard to hear. You're a human being and it gets really hard to, to, you know, that one was just physically draining, because we just went for so many months where we just worked constantly. And you know, this work is sitting at a desk being in a Zoom meeting, typing, typing, typing, hunched over a typewriter, I, you know, I had, I had days where I would have 15 or 16 Zoom meetings. And at some point, I would just have to do the little "BRB" and, you know, put my picture up and run to the restroom because I hadn't, you know, had been hours, I hadn't even had a chance to just go to the restroom, I would, you know, you wouldn't get to lunch, you wouldn't be able to have a drink of water, because you were just constantly in these, these meetings, and then you had these deadlines to write things. And so it was, it was really draining on my team. At one point, just to perk them all up, we had our designer make shirts for them that said, "I-L-L..." then said "six feet of social distance", and then "...I-N-I," and I mailed them to everybody's houses. And, you know, just to do something, I just bought those myself, just, you know, just to try to let people know, we're thinking of you, we know, this is really hard. And because it was tough. So and then we actually had a had a staff meeting one day, and everybody wore their shirts, and we took a picture. It was very cute, but you know, just a little stuff like that just, you get lonely. And we have, we have several people in our units who live alone. And, and that's, it was a tough time for everybody, as you know, and, and so you know, you, you feel like as an employee, you want to get your work done well, but then you also, you know, you could see like, we'd have days where somebody on our team would just be having a really awful, horrible day, and we'd have to, you know, kind of take whatever work they had and try to, you know, help them feel good. And, and we all had those days where we were the one who was just saying, "I can't do this anymore." It was hard.

**Rebeca Escamilla** 36:55

Um, so for my next question, you are listed as an author for the "Mitigation of SARS, COVID to transmission at a large public university". What role did you play in this research?

**Robin Kaler 37:13**

Yeah, so again, I wrote the section on the communications, and then we edited the document for Marty, but he did the lion's share of the work on that paper.

**Rebeca Escamilla 37:23**

Thank you. If you could have done anything throughout the pandemic, what would it have been?

**Robin Kaler 37:33**

Done anything differently? Yes. Oh, boy, I don't need I don't think there. I don't think there really was opportunity to do anything differently. Yeah, I Yeah. I think we all did what we could with what we had, where we were, as they say, you know, you, it was a, it was like playing 3D chess and whack a mole blindfolded and with a hand tied behind your back, it was it was hard for everybody. But there were some amazing people on our team. And that was really, really helpful. And so I think, yeah, just maybe, maybe trying to take a breath every once in a while and just think about what we're accomplishing. Because that was hard to do for a long time. Because you just, you know, you're just so focused on getting through the day. Yeah.

**Rebeca Escamilla 38:36**

Thank you. So for the workplace in Public Affairs, do you think that there might be a return back to the pre pandemic time?

**Robin Kaler 38:49**

Yeah, I don't. Yeah, I don't think so. I mean, first of all, we learned some things that were helpful, like, you know, having these weekly meetings with, with some of our, our, with our communications professionals, we have a daily meeting. Now, several of us in our unit, we started during COVID. And we've just continued and we found that was, that was actually kind of a helpful thing. We have a lot of units that have just decided they're going to stay remote. Our news bureau is completely remote. So our, you know our office is a little, you know, a little vacant. And in some areas, sometimes. We, you know, I think we think more about do I do we actually need to travel somewhere for this meeting or that meeting? Or could we just do it on Zoom? You know, I think we've tried to take all of those good lessons that you could take from something like this, and incorporate them and then and then try to really use our time and resources even more efficiently than we then I hope we did before.

**Rebeca Escamilla 39:49**

So I guess for my last question, Did you learn anything from this pandemic? Just sort of a reflection?

**Robin Kaler 39:58**

Sure. Yeah. Yeah, learn, learn lots of stuff, learned that, you know, the whole Black Swan thing, right, the thing that you're not looking for is the thing that's going to come and get you. We do a lot of, in good times anyway, we do a lot of trying to plan for what crises might happen. For example, you know, at a university, you would always think an active shooter would be the worst thing that could happen. And we've done so many drills and things on active shooter planning. This wasn't an active shooter, but boy, it sure did disrupt us, you know, as much or more than something like that would have. So yeah, so thinking about one of those unlikely things that might happen, I think we're all a little more attuned to

that, than we would have been before. I think just being so grateful every day, for the people I work with directly. And people across campus, it's so interesting. Now, when you go to a meeting, and you're dealing with somebody who's actually doing the, the regular job, instead of, you know, what they did, we became very close with Student Affairs, because we did a lot of stuff, you know, in conjunction with Student Affairs over the, over the pandemic, and, and now when I'm in a meeting with Student Affairs, people, and it's about some fun little thing, I just think, "oh, my gosh, we've, we made it, we got here." And so that's been kind of nice to see that, you know that there's life after it. But now you have this new respect and admiration and fondness for all the people who are kind of down there in the trenches with you, during this really, really difficult and stressful time. So, so it's made me more grateful for, for my health, it's made me more grateful for my, my colleagues, it's made me more grateful and proud of my university. It's been, it's been a really, really interesting ride. But I'm glad we're kind of close to the end of that.

**Rebeca Escamilla** 41:53

Thank you. So is there anything that you would like to share?

**Robin Kaler** 41:58

No, I think you covered everything. Yeah. Sounds good. Got a little PTSD now.

**Rebeca Escamilla** 42:11

Yeah, sorry to bring.

**Robin Kaler** 42:12

It's all good. All good. And I know, we're trying to work with legal counsel to figure out what, you know, we have a lot of documents in our, if we just sent you files of things. We've got a lot of documents that were, you know, drafts and protected for whatever reason. So they're trying to figure out how we can get documents to you that that would be helpful, too.

**Rebeca Escamilla** 42:32

So thank you, we really appreciate it.

**Robin Kaler** 42:35

Yeah. And I know, we did try to send some things over during with to Bill [Maher]. I know, I know, like our Wellness folks sent over, you know, test the test tubes that you spit into, and maybe a wellness t-shirt and some signs and things like that. So I know, we've tried to send some things over, you know, maybe to Ellen [Swain], and then some documents and imagery over to build but, but we do have lots of images. So I don't know if whomever does photo that that stuff we could we could give you. It's all in the image database, you could just go in and take whatever you want from there. But the documents, I think some of that stuff has got to be vetted. And somehow it's got to go through some process the system. So yeah, yeah.

**Rebeca Escamilla** 43:20

Yeah, thank you. And no worries. Don't feel that you have to send everything we've had donations where people just donate one email. And we greatly appreciate all the materials we get. Yeah. But

yeah, thank you for going the extra step and trying to work that out with the legal people. And also for doing this interview. We greatly appreciate your input.

**Robin Kaler** 43:46

Yeah. Happy to happy to. Yeah, like I say anybody here would be happy to talk Jodi, and Laura Wilhelm-Barr, who runs the testing sites would be too you'd probably for sure want to get individually.

**Rebeca Escamilla** 43:59

Yeah, thank you. Yeah. Yeah, I think probably getting into touch with Laura since we've done, Jodi.

**Robin Kaler** 44:07

Great. Sounds. I don't think you've talked to Jodi yet. I don't think because I just talked to her yesterday, and she had not. I asked her if she'd been interviewed. Yeah, I don't think so.

**Rebeca Escamilla** 44:18

Hopefully. I can double check today. Yeah,

**Rebeca Escamilla** 44:24

Yeah, they're in our radar.

**Robin Kaler** 44:26

Yep. Perfect. Yeah. You know, another thing we dealt with too, was the whole mental health in Jodi, Jodi led a lot of that for us too. You know, when Danita Brown Young, the Vice Chancellor for Student Affairs and I, you know, we kept seeing on that on the inbox and on all on social and things, you know, students saying, "I'm stressed out, I'm, I can't do this, I can't do this." And we said, "we've got to do something more with mental health." And so Danita and I lead a group, and then Jodi actually ended up doing 99% of the day-to-day work on that to build up some mental health resources. So, so she could talk about that too in addition to the Wellness Ambassadors. She's great.

**Rebeca Escamilla** 45:05

Thank you

**Robin Kaler** 45:06

You're quite welcome.

**Rebeca Escamilla** 45:08

so I guess we can end the recording

**Robin Kaler** 45:10

Okay