

# Vance Martin Interview

Executive Policy Advisor for Accessibility at the University of Illinois System

Tuesday, August 30, 2022

## **SPEAKERS**

Paul Gilbert II, Vance Martin

### **Paul Gilbert II**

All right. Hello, my name is Paul Gilbert. I'm a graduate student representing the University of Illinois Archives. We are joined today by Vance Martin, the executive policy advisor for accessibility at the University of Illinois system. Today's date is August 30, 2022. We're here to discuss the University of Illinois Board of Trustees responses to the COVID-19 pandemic for inclusion in the University of Illinois COVID-19 Documentation Project. This interview should take about an hour. Pretty much everything that we're going to ask is going to be outlined in the script. So we may go a little bit off schedule in terms of the order of questions depending on how you respond to the questions we have prepared today. So first question that I want to cover just as a preliminary for anyone who's listening in the future. You joined the University in October 2019. Correct?

### **Vance Martin**

As in the Board of Trustees' office? Yes.

### **Paul Gilbert II**

And the role in question was as the visiting Disability Resources Advisor, correct?

### **Vance Martin**

Yes.

### **Paul Gilbert II**

Could you briefly explain what the responsibilities of that position were?

### **Vance Martin**

Sure. So, at that time, I was actually at UIS [University of Illinois Springfield] as the ADA [Americans with Disabilities Act] Coordinator. And I over--I created a team of coworkers who did a document remediation. So over the summer of 2019, I had seen this position posted. I didn't know why at the time, but I can give the background. So I believe in February of March 2019, the governor had appointed Kareem Dale as a trustee to the Board of Trustees, and Kareem Dale is visually impaired. So the content that the Board of Trustees receive every two months for their meetings up until that time had been given PDFs, and PowerPoints, and probably several hundred--up to a thousand pages of content, none of which was accessible. Trustee Dale had worked in the White House on disability and accessibility efforts in the past, and he was not amused with the state of things, so they were scrambling to get it sorted. I came on board initially to just make the content accessible for him, but quickly discovered that there were a lot of spaces that needed work, for instance letting the system know that, hey, we needed accessibility policies across the board for system offices for each campus system wide. And so

it then kind of became a little bit more advising. So I kept my--I live in Mahamat, and I was commuting Springfield. So my workflow was that I can work in Springfield, four days a week, work in Champaign one day a week. And typically, the board cycle would be a few weeks before the Board of Trustees Meeting, you get all this material, and I'd have to make that content accessible. And then after the board of trustees meeting slows down for our office that I would do some of the advising. So that's what I initially did. And it was a dual appointment at that time in 2019.

**Paul Gilbert II**

And just for clarification's sake, when you say the governor, you're referring to Governor JB Pritzker, not Bruce Rauner.

**Vance Martin**

I believe would have been correct. Yes. Because we've got the governor, it's the government's job to appoint trustees. Yeah, I would have to look that up

**Paul Gilbert II**

Because around the time that you started this position was also around the time that we had the transition from Governor Brown or to the Pritzker administration. And so I just want to be clear, for the sake of the record.

**Vance Martin**

Yeah, I'd have to verify that. But yeah, that sounds about right. Yes. Okay.

**Paul Gilbert II**

About two or three months in is when the world first became aware of the emergence of COVID-19. Do you remember the first time that you personally learned about this illness? This plague has been in disrupting many events in the last three years?

**Vance Martin**

Yeah, it was probably over Christmas of 2019 or early January. I mean, you know, you heard about some illness. And I would say that in retrospect, we had kind of gallows humor about it, probably. And, yes, it's probably better than I can remember going back to work at Springfield and it was somewhat of a joke if someone happen to be coughing in the hallway, oh, "I don't have whatever it is that they say it's going around." So yeah, it would have been Christmas or January.

**Paul Gilbert II**

And you mentioned that before the pandemic you are already working, being at least partially at home or very close to home and then commuting every day to Springfield. How did COVID impacts your work or your workplace in the very beginning? Did you transition fully to working from home, or was there still a bit of a dance going on between Springfield and Champaign County?

**Vance Martin**

So I saw one of the questions said "around March 17," I looked it up on my calendar. I can kind of jump ahead to this to say that I can tell you the exact date that this dance began. The Board of Trustees met in March of 2020, on the 11th and 12th. And so I had the okay to be at the BOT [Board of Trustees] meetings in Champaign that day. I had my work laptop already with me, I was at the meeting. And that morning, we were apprised that there was some big news, some big announcement that was going to be made. And people were--the hubbub was, we're going

to be all sent home. And people would say "they can't be serious" and "this is unprecedented" and "No, they wouldn't do that." But that was what everyone was saying. So as the Board of Trustees meeting went through that day, at a certain point, I believe they adjourned and the president, the chairmen, and probably a few members from UI Health, and some other people went into another room, it was in the [Student] Union at the time. And I believe afterwards, they came back and decided, "hey, everyone's going to be--we're going to be doing this transition and people are going to start working from home." And then of course, "oh, see? That's what they said." So that coincided with--I believe I was going have that Friday off and go with my kids for spring break to a waterpark in Wisconsin. And my boss at Springfield had sent out this email as soon as she got it because I would have been by that afternoon that the chancellor in Springfield would have-- she would have been at here [In Champaign] and when my boss at Springfield said "if anybody wants to work from home for the next few days until we get this figured out, okay" and I thought: "I would!" and everybody else in my office at Springfield said that. And so you know, she was fine with that. So a few days, so that would have been the Friday and Monday probably that she's like, "okay, it's okay to work from home." And then probably by Tuesday or Wednesday, there's like, we're all [working] from home, it doesn't matter. So that was pretty much, you know, easy for us. We by the way, we did not go to the waterpark, my wife [laughter]. It was a big [no-no?]. But the unit that I worked in Springfield, worked with faculty support for accessibility and instructional design. And at least in my background in my area, I had taught, you know, for almost 20 years, and been one of the first people you know, teaching online courses. So from my background perspective, it didn't seem a big leap. I mean, we were all used to using, you know, WebEx or Zoom or things like that for meetings. We did online classes. So it's pretty normal for Springfield, and Springfield had actually done online stuff way, way back. It was different for the Board of Trustees office because they had to figure out "how do we do this?" And I'm not sure who it was but tech services or whomever jumped very quickly on getting that sitewide license for everybody for Zoom probably within that first week and that became you know, like, the new technology that we use and I had been having meetings with Microsoft on Zoom for years.

### **Paul Gilbert II**

So, to put it mildly, that was a hectic and confusing time. Would you say that was the moment it really hit you that this was no drill? This was the big one, so to speak. Or did that moment come any different point in the last couple years?

### **Vance Martin**

I think it was pretty early on, at least for me. Considering it came down, you know, from the President to the Chancellors, all the campuses closed sending people, I mean, you know, basically telling students that had to move out of their dorms, you know, trying to solve those issues with international students, you know, who could stay, who couldn't, you know, try to figure out workflows. I think that that was from very early on. And then, of course, I mean, you know, the level of understanding, I would say, I'm a parent, I currently have a, they're nine and eight. So if we went back in time they were, you know, five and six, something like that. Yeah. But, up until that time, being a parent in an office is weird. And I would say from a gender perspective, it's different for guys than women. It's often expected or I would say that I often saw that mothers, you know, support time off to, you know, take kids to baseball, and soccer games, doctor's office, whatever, but guys get a different, you know, "Why can't your wife do that?", or whatever. There was a much greater level understanding because my kids that were home, and their schooling was minimal, at that point in time, at best, because the teachers locally didn't know what to do. So they kind of sent home packets. And we kind of did pick up and we got, you know, weekly free food from the school because they were sitting on it. But there was a lot

more understanding from the bosses because I think they were experienced it too the first time because they're in dedicated roles and they had to deal with their kids too.

**Paul Gilbert II**

Speaking of the changes in expectations, in terms of home life balance, how did working from home impacts your responsibilities, both from a working standpoint as well as a parent's?

**Vance Martin**

I would say it was tough. So my wife is a faculty member at Parkland, she has taught online for many years. So the transition was not difficult for her, however, just having the ability to be you know, to have to have the focus and time to sit down at your computer and do what you need to do as well as, you know, the girls are five and six at that time. They were running around like crazy people before lunch. So it had to be then that somebody gets up, somebody has to deal with the kids and the other person, you know, goes and gets a few emails in or something, then flip based on the meetings you have that day. And then I think there was also this idea, I would say, that in order to manage and observe people you had to be in meetings. You had to be on a Zoom call to show that you were doing something. Because if you were you know, writing a lecture or you know, doing meeting notes or working on some project, that isn't something you can measure. We can measure that this person is in meetings from 9 to 10, 10 to 11 because we have the Zoom transcript, we have records that reference that. It also lengthened the day to--sometimes I would say that the days were from 6am to 10pm for parents as you're trying to fit everything in. You know, we may have still had a few naps, and I don't remember, but and they were the kids. But I mean, it was one of the things too because like you didn't lose the commute time and you didn't lose--I think that this was probably something that people began to notice was that you didn't have the transition time between meetings and I was in a meeting the other day and somebody it was a Zoom meeting. And one of the people said "sorry, I have to log off early, I had a physical meeting I have to walk to." And that was actually a little weird because most people most meetings still are all Zoom, but yeah that balance was difficult. My boss at Springfield was very understanding and my boss here was very understanding.

**Paul Gilbert II**

We touched on this has in a couple of your responses, but I want to make sure that we hit this one on the head. A variety of school districts across the country have provided technology and other resources to both students and staff in order to bridge the gaps that were introduced as part of this transition to a lockdown environment. What resources, if any, did the university provide to you and your office as part of this transition? And did you feel that this help was adequate for the challenges that you faced?

**Vance Martin**

Yeah, so I initially had my work laptop from Springfield, I had, you know, at the time I had a desktop with two monitors at home. I did have to replace my computer early on, just because it was at that point where it needed to be. And luckily, I did it quickly enough, before, you know, this--we heard about supply chain issues. And then, probably by May or June, the Board Trustees office supplied me with a laptop and a dock and two extra monitors, so I actually still have the same setup at home right now with a work laptop, two monitors connected to that and my home computer with two monitors. So five monitors on my desk. I would say that the. yeah, that I was sufficiently supported there. I mean, I know at Springfield, I don't remember what transpired in Champaign but I know that in Springfield, they made an effort and were able to get laptops in the hands of every student that needed them for all the work as well as figure out what the closest location for them would be with Wi Fi because that was a secondary issue for them.

**Paul Gilbert II**

And did your office take on new technology or try out new methods of communication during this pandemic? You talked about how you had some experience with Zoom prior to this, and how some of your work was already remote. But there's a difference between doing something occasionally versus having to rely on it every single day in order to get things done.

**Vance Martin**

Yeah, I think in that the first few months, I'm trying to remember—so, I remember some meetings being WebEx, and some meetings being in Zoom. I don't remember too many, early on in [Microsoft] Teams but I think there was one other that we use. So it really depended upon the district. And actually with my kids, they had stuff in Google Meet. So it was one of those things that it hadn't quite been hashed out what everybody was going to use, but I think Zoom pretty early on became the go to, because there are also those issues of if you're logging on, and there was some new update to WebEx, you know, you have to wait for that update. And you know, it was oh the meeting was supposed to start nine, and it took five extra minutes for that thing to come in. So I think at least in the office, the two, you know, Springfield and here [UIUC], initially, those were the technologies we tried out, and I think Zoom kind of came out on top.

**Paul Gilbert II**

Have you fully returned to campus as part of your work responsibilities? Or are you still working at least partially from home?

**Vance Martin**

I work partially from home, that's why I'm here today—this is usually my stay-home day. Yeah, so I, I became full time here for [University of Illinois] System Offices that October 2020. And, trying to remember, sometime in 2021, we were told we could come back to campus a little bit. And so what our office did was, we all have to be there on Wednesdays, because we have our department meeting. And then you have to pick one other day, not Friday. And then we're all home on Friday, and actually sorted by whatever, remote days. So I believe that we started that in fall 2021. And then of course, there was some uptick, so we went home. And then we were back for a week or two in January of this year. And then somebody had COVID So we were homing it. And I believe that lasted 'till July. And so yeah, really July and fall has been--of 2022--has been, and hopefully will be, the two days a week on campus.

**Paul Gilbert II**

So you were one of the first people to jump on the “Yes, please I'll work from home” bandwagon. And at least at present you still at least partially work from home. Would you say that your feelings towards working from home have shifted at all in the intervening time. In general, how do you feel about working from home now?

**Vance Martin**

I like it. So one, my kids are back in school [laughter]. So if I'm working from home, I can actually get work done. And I would say, in my position, it's nice on work-from-home days, because I typically get up, check my email, maybe answer a few, then you know, get breakfast, feed the kids. Once they're in school, check my email again, maybe I'll work out depending on meetings or something, then, you know, work on projects. But at a certain point, if there's nothing to do, then I can go upstairs and do the dishes, you know, and put them away. But quite honestly, I mean, I'm attached to my phone, because I mean my email and Slack and everything else is coming through on this [gestures to cell phone]. So if somebody needs

something, I'm on it and can run downstairs. I will say I think that there, at least also from what I do, there is sometimes the person-to-person meetings work well, probably better than zoom. But for others, Zoom is fine. There's also I think, something about being in the office because those downtimes we're at home, like, had nothing to do, I've caught up on everything, I'm gonna go do the dishes, I mean, it's you're still getting stuff done, you feel productive. However, when you're in the office, and you hit that same point, you then-- I don't know, search for things to do or go back through old emails or, you know, look on LinkedIn and come across some article or, you know, a listserv, something like that but it gives you a chance that I will admit, I probably don't do when I'm at home, because I'm like, "I don't want that right now." But if I'm at work, and you know, there's nothing to do for half hour, I'll pull out that article now. And maybe it'll be beneficial, maybe it won't. So I do think that there is a little bit of a difference there.

### **Paul Gilbert II**

In previous communication, switching gears a bit, you mentioned that you helped develop a fully accessible video player for use in the University of Illinois Board of Trustee meetings, as part of efforts to stream the meetings for those who couldn't physically attend. Can you talk more about this technology and the process that it took in order to create this thing?

### **Vance Martin**

Sure. So prior to COVID, the Board of Trustees meetings were streamed. A team from Springfield comes over, it's their media services, and they run the cameras and they stream it to UIS and it plays on Kaltura, the video player. There were no captions, they would later caption imported video. So legally, there are four federal and one state laws governing accessibility. And those laws really refer to what it's called currently with WCAG 2.0, which is Web Content Accessibility Guidelines. And those tell you what you have to meet at a level--and double-A level of accessibility. And in recorded video you need to have captions, 99% accurate captions, plus audio descriptions. So audio descriptions are verbal or oral coverage of what is being done on screen that would not be relayed if you could not see or hear. Currently, there is no video player in the world that does it for recorded video. Well, that's not entirely fair, there are some companies who will do it if you pay for it at a rate of 12 bucks per minute video and only use their player, you can do it. But there's no readily available system. And then of course, it comes down to easy entry for the instructional designer and people like that. So probably once I was full time that October 2020, one my coworkers and I were having we had a lot of tech meetings; we were testing out things. And at that time, we had the I think they had just been transitioning to Otter AI, as you know, doing the captions on Zoom. And they came out pretty accurate. And we were using it in the BOT meetings and we're using lots of meetings and people are like "Isn't this amazing technology [for us to use?]?" And I think people were getting to a point where they were accustomed to it and kind of demand it, right? So I was you know kind of riffing with my colleague, and I said, "We need a player that will do this." And so I have these monthly meetings with people from around the system—just, it's really a chat. And I mentioned this in the chat and someone's like, "Hey, there's a professor at CS [Computer Science] at Champaign that has a product that might be able to do this." So Michael, one of my colleagues, met with Dr. Lawrence Angrave and, you know, talked about this with him and said "Hey, what do you think, can we do this? Can we make what you've got work for our [meetings?]?" And he said, "Sure, let's try it." So we began working on that winter of 2020, spring of 2021. And then we were only getting some funding over spring '21. And it was a whole lot of moving parts. So I don't want to say, well [inaudible]. But probably programming, it wasn't too bad, but figuring out all the bugs, and all of the inner workings in this process. So we had a Zoom meeting. We had most Board of Trustees meetings during the period COVID were online on Zoom. So that feed then was fed to Springfield and broadcast there. We then brought in a captioner, Tina, who we pay, she monitors the Zoom meetings and she types pretty much 99% live captions accurately, those

then were fed into an encoder, which is about a \$20,000 box that's at Springfield, that will put the captions on and they can be closed captions so that's when they can be turned on or off, toggleable. The next step then was figuring out how do we have audio descriptions? So it's actual description of typically the board trustees' office, it's a lot of graphs like undergraduate enrollment 2015-2020, something like that. How do we do that? So Lawrence [Angrave, Computer Sciences] had to work through, "How do you send the code from a computer to this encoder box?" And I mean, it was one of the things that when I say it's pretty simple, I remember being on a Zoom call with him one day, and we--it was a Zoom call with Michael, myself, Lawrence, and then people over at Springfield. And they had the encoder on and Lawrence was like, "I'm just wondering," wrote the Python code real quick, I mean, while we're on the Zoom call, and he sends something through, and Cody at Springfield said, you know, hey something just popped up on the encoder. And Lawrence is like, "Ah, now I know how to do it." So I mean, that's why I say--that's how his mind works. He's great. So he came up with a very short program that could do that. So then it was a matter of, how do we get it in the encoder? How do we do it live, as we then come back to live meetings, we then have the video crew that's feeding video feeds in there, we have to worry about sound and there's so many moving parts, sometimes the encoder works, sometimes it doesn't, initially. And quite honestly, it's the old, you turn off encoder, turn it back on [laughter] that's what does it. But it's a lot of testing. And so since March, openly, we've been testing before that, since March of 2022 we have had on the UIS website, a link that you can watch the Board of Trustees meeting in a live video player that is fully accessible. So we have the only fully accessible live video player in the world that has closed captions. It had, we actually, we got a jump on this one, we went straight to verbal audio descriptions. And currently, it would send through but I have a student worker who has to sit there and send me the code for you know, an image of alt go. What it will do when it's playing live is the video will pause, a voice-a computerized voice will come on and say "image of alt go" and then we'll unpause and continue. It then has a running transcript on the side that is searchable. So the board trustees meeting this last from on a Thursday from eight to noon, the committee meetings in the afternoons, they may go from noon to five. So five hours of transcript, you could search for 'claim,' for, you know, 'football team,' and it'll give you a count. And when we jump to all of the things in the live transcript. There's also the functionality. We haven't done it yet. But the functionality is there going to translate unfortunately, which is one thing on the fly, just for fun. So there's nothing else like out there. And then I just met with Lawrence yesterday. The last kind of thing that we need to do is this interface that currently my grad student uses. Is this more of a command line currently and we've made it a more user-friendly interface, so that almost anybody can use it by, you know, having a Word doc here with the content they want to send through, you copy it, paste it in here, and it'll send it. And once that's done, we should probably a few more weeks. It's the only player we're going to use report trustees meaning we will present this to the President by hope is slash assumption that it'll probably be used for each of the Chancellors at the campuses when they do like a live speech, which is probably like two or three times a year. But my guess is that, and my hope for Lawrence is that the technology will be adopted and the way lawsuits go on accessibility lawsuits is this has been in law for a while this required for recorded video, there was no big player there. Now, when we have it for live video, places can say, Wait, you bypass this, it can be done. You know, [University of] Wisconsin, you don't have this, some student can put in a lawsuit to say you need us and then Wisconsin will say, hey, [University of Illinois Urbana] Champaign, we need to pay to get this. So it would be very lucrative for Lawrence to spin off a company.

## **Paul Gilbert II**

I was just about to ask. One thing that we have definitely learned over the course of this project is the various pains members of the university community have undergone in order to create

new technologies in order to fill in the gaps where they existed, probably the most famous instance of this being the saliva testing being developed here on campus. And we're going to ask, are there any plans to expand the usage of this technology outside the Board of Trustees? At present, do you know there's any plans from a more commercial standpoint? Or is this more wishful thinking for the sake of the event that this is able to become its own thing outside of university, especially if it helps other people?

**Vance Martin**

My guess is, so, in conversations with Lawrence, I think at this time when he would probably say if Wisconsin called, he'd say: "Here's the code. This is the encoder box we're using, go buy the encoder box, steal our code, you can use it." But I think that the research he has done on this, he has some other projects that he's hoping to spin off, that would be even easier to use: for instance, he's come up with a Chrome extension that will basically on any web page, figure out that there's a video on this page, it doesn't have a lot of descriptions, it needs audio descriptions, it will put them in. So I mean, yes, he is he is thinking about that. We do want to expand that, because we've actually kind of hit a point right now, too. We've been working on using this for recorded video in Canvas in classes. And we were going to test this at Springfield. We had to stop because there been a lot of failed searches for programmers. So the programmer that we were using from AITS (Administrative Information Technology Services) had to be pulled from the project for some more, you know, important projects that needed to get done quickly. And our hope is that if that other search is, you know, successful, we can get him back because we were very close to having this exact same technology be embedded in Canvas so that all of the courses could have the same videos. And then to be done. If it can be done in Springfield, Champaign uses Canvas as well. Kaltura. It could be easily done over here. Chicago is using different technologies up there, Blackboard, so we cannot do. But yeah, our hope was to have this be an Illinois product that you know, all of the students across the System, 100,000 students, to be using. And I don't totally understand all the ownership of what Lawrence has done. But yeah, I mean, if he can send this off, I hope I get a t-shirt [laughter].

**Paul Gilbert II**

Has a pandemic affected your career goals in any tangible way?

**Vance Martin**

I don't think so. I mean, I was I was in accessibility before. I think that the--I think the Trustee Dale becoming part of the U of I committee, he's since left because he took a I believe a promotion with Discover and had to move out of state and you can't be a Trustee from out of state. [PG: Makes sense.] So he's in Georgia now. But I believe that that allowed me to be able to have a more centralized position to work with all three campuses. So no, I mean, I got my PhD here. We've lived in the area over 20 years. I mean, I hope that, you know, there's a few extra promotions over the next few years, but not really, no, I mean, I do like living in the area. I'm from Illinois originally.

**Paul Gilbert II**

Let me think of one example where before the pandemic, this technology that you helped developed, simply did not exist, and then in an affordable manner. And now, not only does it exist, and you've ironed out most of the kinks involved, but you least hope that it's going to be something that in the next couple of years would be accessible to hundreds of thousands of students, if not across the country at the very least across the system.

**Vance Martin**

Yeah, I would say that had there not been the pandemic, potentially that technology would not have been created. I mean, I think that that was like I said, it was one of those conversations where we'd seen the Otter AI technologies, they were able to do this. And I think we had, you know, some stir-craziness too. Like, let's scratch this itch and just do it. But I do think that it did, I think that COVID did change priorities in the office. We had this one project we were going to try to do that really didn't come to fruition it was the Asana [software] to kind of map out what people do and how their stuff interacts so that you know, if people leave the office, and we have a kind of a graphical, you know, picture, that sort of thing, without people being in the office to really meet with them and say, "Okay, tell me what you do" and that didn't really mature. See, I think it was more case critical mission critical stuff that got the focus.

**Paul Gilbert II**

Looking at the system as a whole. What do you think about the responses to the evolution of the pandemic? Do you mostly agree with the changes and the timing of them that the university system was forced to implement? Were there areas that you think the university could have done a better job?

**Vance Martin**

I think it's safe to say this. So with my position, my boss, Greg, is Secretary to the Board of Trustees. And as such, he really only has two bosses. One is--and it's a it's kind of a dual role. His boss is Tim Killean. And Don Edwards, Chairman of the Board.

**Paul Gilbert II**

We're talking about Gregory Knott correct?

**Vance Martin**

Yes, correct. So that means that every Monday, typically he is sitting on the President's cabinet. And during the early months of the pandemic, much of what the President's Cabinet talked about was COVID. And he was informed, I feel, by some very knowledgeable, skilled people at UI Health. And so a lot of what Greg said in the first months was probably not common knowledge to most people. But it was shared in our departments with us confidentially. So I would say that the modeling that was done at UI Health only seemed to be off by a few days, on, you know, predicted spikes and things like that. So I think that I can say that we were well informed. We were also well poised with a lot of the early trials for vaccines. We knew a lot of stuff that was coming. So I think at least the higher admin knew all of this and the decisions that they made, I can't say whether, you know, the rest of the community thought that there were good decisions or bad decisions, but based on what I heard from the President's Council notes, they seem very wise. Because of what I did, but I don't know that that is what the rest of community felt, but yeah. There could have been, I don't know, I don't remember now, but as we got closer and just because, well, we're going to have students in class and masks, shot. By that point, I don't think that it was top priority in the President's Council, those kinds of things. That was really down to the Chancellors. But I mean, I think that based on other schools that had, you know, tried to go forward and had surgeons and things like that, and things that we saw on the news, I think that we did a great job here.

**Paul Gilbert II**

The important reason I bring it up is because it was something that was made fun of, or in internet parlance means seemed, I'm not sure if you're a reader of the webcomic xkcd. [VM: Sometimes] It's where the creator of xkcd made a comic lampooning the university, specifically the Champaign-Urbana campus. This reaction to a spike in cases is when we first returned to in person classes due to people that were actively undermining the ability of the system to track

cases by either not using things or trying to falsify testing results in order to continue about their lives as uninhibited. And in light of that, especially considering how some of the scientists involved with the development of the testing protocols do not have the best response to someone criticizing the work from a place that wasn't necessarily fair I wanted to do ask someone who had more privy knowledge what they felt about out the policy development, especially when it came to reopening.

### **Vance Martin**

I would say, okay, now that you say that I do remember the students faking their, you know, what we call the screen that you have entered going on-- [PG: Their access permission.] Yeah, the access permissions by doing basically a screenshot and editing it. I do remember that. I mean, having been an undergrad at one point, I remember thinking, "Wow, that was pretty smart." I also remember thinking as an adult, that's a little silly and dangerous all to go to Cam's or whatever bar people go to these days. But it was, I do--I will say this is that you have to basically saying that I had to use that going into buildings. I will say at a certain point, it was a game of cat and mouse almost because Henry Admin I think we had one person who was sitting there checking the app to get in. And it was always a minute or two to go on. And the person is going to be mad. Because quite honestly, at that point, I've had all my vaccines, and I had a booster. And now I've had two boosters. I'm about to have a fifth booster, I guess third booster, whatever they're doing, fifth shot, fifth shot. Yes. So it was just kind of funny. And it was like, you can wear your masks. This is for Henry Admin, I think because there's classes on the first floor. So you walk in with no masks on, but then you walk by a classroom wearing masks. But my office is on the third floor, no masks up there. It's all the same HVAC system. I am not-- my PhD is not in you know, things like that, but I have to say it was a little confusing, I thought. Posterity will say "Wow, he thought that was funny." But yeah, I mean, I do have a lot of colleagues at other universities, and I get it. I mean, I know a lot of scientists as well, and scientists are always the best at dealing with people who are making fun of some of their stuff for understanding that, you know, "why would somebody fake a screen just to go into a building or go to a party" because oftentimes some of the scientists never did that at all.

### **Paul Gilbert II**

Well, I don't have the ongoing question in front of me, but from what I remembered, the thing that the scientists were upset about wasn't necessarily the fact that's had people were breaking the protocols here, it was the idea that they were so far removed from how "normal people" behaved, that they wouldn't have figured such a thing would have happened. It's almost in a sense attacking their ability as scientists to, to predict and understand human behavior, it almost makes them feel like they're, and at this point, I'm worried that I'm putting words in their mouths, that they don't understand how people act, because they're not normal, like the rest of us. I think that was the bigger issue for them.

### **Vance Martin**

Well, I mean, I see--so my wife was mathematician. And I mean, it's one of those things that, you know, thinking about--mathematicians think about statistics and probability and things like this in a much different way than the general populace. And I think that's the same thing with scientists. And there's kind of the common understanding of how diseases and things like that work, and then there's scientists who really understand it. And with hypotheses and how the stuff is changing on the fly. Then, of course, there's also the scientists to understand how that's paired with the public health specialists, like, you know, Julie Pryde locally who, I mean, her background she has the science, but it's also she had the communication that the integration, which is required to be able to, you know, kind of cross those two worlds. And there's also, I think there's burnout. I mean, we're at your screen. And I don't know on a daily basis where I

stand on some of these things anymore. I mean, I do, obviously, I'm going to be getting the fifth vaccine and shot. And my kids have all been vaccinated, you know, they have their boosters. But yeah, it does get overwhelming and tiresome, not tiresome--you just become weary. I mean, how does it work with the grocery store? And you know, my church, we have actually been back to church. I mean, we're still watching online. Granted, in my, in my own case, my wife came down with cancer this year. So we have a few other things going on. But it's just, yeah, at a certain point. Good, we can work from home.

### **Paul Gilbert II**

A relevant, albeit, important connection given that most recent bit of news, unfortunate transition. Do you ever think we're going to get back to business as usual or a truly pre-COVID world or we, we're going to look back on this moment in the same way that we look at, say, a 9/11 or, especially from a political standpoint, the 1968 as a delineation between a new world and a past that is very different from the present that we currently live in.

### **Vance Martin**

Let me put it this way. So I taught history for almost 20 years. Up until 2016, I would say I used to be able to look at history and predict future events. After 2016, I'm not sure about that. But [laughter] I do hope and think that there will be a change. And I see it slowly occurring. And I think it is in, I think the university has not--we haven't as a whole made a decision on it. I hope we make the right decision and so here is the gist of it so I work with the three campuses. The three people I worked with most are the ADA coordinators at each campus. So the University of Illinois Chicago's ADA coordinator lives in Champaign. She doesn't go to Chicago, the Champaign person lives in Minneapolis. And he lived there before COVID. The only ADA coordinator for a campus that lives in the town is Springfield and I think that for certain jobs, and they do great work. I mean, they do unending work. It's great work. And I think that as we begin to say, "Hey, certain jobs can be done remotely, like tech services." Tech Services is almost still currently all remote much of AITS is. IT jobs can be, my understanding from check services is that they haven't had as many failed [job] searches, but they're also getting, you know, their new employees don't live in Champaign, they live in Kansas, or Florida, or you know, and I think that it gives us the opportunity to potentially get people who wouldn't normally be in our talent pool. And from like a disability standpoint, maybe wouldn't have even been able to apply or have the position and be able to have this position. But we're also not currently doing that across the board, so I'm also aware of certain positions, like grant writers, I think it was a specific office on campus that had four grant writers before COVID and entering COVID. And they were able to write grants for faculty remotely for two years. At a certain point, David designated they had to be back on campus, so two of the people in one of these offices found other departments that allow them to still be remote, because if they were able to do it remotely, I mean, it's one of those jobs that I'm semi familiar with the gist of it, it can be done remotely. And so we're going to lose talent in certain areas as those people transition. And I'm also aware of people that have left the system because they've been told they had to come back to campus. And so they found positions, you know, I have a friend who worked here for 14 years in cybersecurity. He now works for Amazon, I mean, last week, because he can fully work remote. So I think that we're in this transition that we haven't yet decided as a system that it's okay or it's not okay. It's being done in a piecemeal manner right now. And until we say, it is okay, I think that those businesses that do [allow remote work] that universities, those are going to be the ones that succeed and I hope that we make that decision. So I do you think it will be a change.

### **Paul Gilbert II**

Do you necessarily see that change as inherently positive or negative or a bit of a mixed bag?

**Vance Martin**

I think it's a mixed bag. I would say having taught for almost 20 years online classes. There were people who said no, you can't learn 'x' in an online class, whatever. We've shown that's not true. I was at least I taught history. Most of the students who took online history majors, they got what they needed out of the history course. I do think, you know, having been a graduate student of history, that's where the great conversations occur is in those person-to-person classes. So if it's your major, I think you need that, that contact with your coworkers, or your colleagues or grad students or-- [PG: Your cohort!] your cohort. [PG: A lot of co- words, yeah.] But for other things, I think it's beneficial because I think it does give you a work life balance that I mean, if you're happy--for people who are happy doing 40 hours of work a week in weird schedules however they want at home, they can get up and go mow the yard or garden, wash the dishes, pick up the kids. That means a lot and the business that allows them to do that they will say that. I mean, if they say "the U of I allowed me to, you know, be done at three o'clock. So when my kids come home, I watch them once they're in bed at 7:30 I can, you know, answer a few emails until 10 at night, watch an hour of TV and go to bed." That makes them happy. And that allows them instead of you know, being like, "I have to work this extra job and work at Lowe's on the weekends in order to you know, afford childcare for this that." I mean, there's so many life circumstances that I am hopeful that this will solve some of the complications. But we have to, I mean, I hope we intelligently think it through and do it the right way, and decide that way. But I also think that there's opportunities for the buildings, right. I'm in my office two days a week. Do we need--do I need that office? Do we need to build new buildings?

**Paul Gilbert II**

Or at the very least, do we need to build more office buildings in place of other facilities on campus?

**Vance Martin**

Right, exactly. Yeah. And I mean from classrooms. I mean, this has been a discussion in education for a long time. I mean, there's certain institutions across the country have done this, Boston had one where they didn't build new buildings, but they decided to do classes, you know, all throughout the, they were doing like, I think five AM and midnight classes, so they could cut down on, you know, having new buildings. But people with day jobs could have night classes and fit in with their schedule, and they had daycare at the school throughout that same time so that, you know, parents were coming. So, figuring things that out so you can maximize space usage, because I mean, I'm sure you've been through, you know, buildings with classes. I don't think anybody's ever in that classroom, we could, you know, go down to one building, you know, less air conditioning, less heat, do we even need that building? Or a library or a library?

**Paul Gilbert II**

Looking specifically at you, as an individual, is there anything that you would do differently about how your work or just general vibes since the pandemic began? Or are you pretty satisfied with the actions you have taken in since you first learned about this disease? I realized this is a bit of a philosophical--

**Vance Martin**

No, it is, and I will say that, so from a work standpoint, I would say I figured--I would say everything was fine, I would do pretty much everything I was doing. And I think that we had several friends die of COVID during last fall, really during the first year. And I think that if we'd had the foreknowledge of that I wished that there were a few things I could have said to a few people. Because it was like, you know, everything stopped. And you'd see people on a Sunday School Zoom meeting or like, a YouTube live thing. And then it's like, wow, Jim died. And

there's an internet funeral with his family there, and the pastor and coffin and you're like—so many thoughts. It reminded me of during the Civil War when there were so many people that never came home and were buried other places and then it led to, you know, mysticism becoming something big because people were trying to cope with things. So I think about that sometimes, are we going to have some sort of seances and mysticism coming out in the next few years based on the lack of access we had to certain people that may have died that we didn't get resolution for. [PG: Wow.] Seeing history.

### **Paul Gilbert II**

Great point, though, is very much a big thing of so because of the pandemic, it greatly impacted. One thing that I don't think is talked about enough, and I'm glad you brought it up, is the ritual of mourning and how for many of us, especially in the hardest hit areas by COVID, you weren't left or you were left with a lot of unresolved emotions and feelings that I think as we get further and further removed from COVID patient zero, is going to be much more pronounced in terms of how much of a sense of loss and in the unresolved feelings there are in our society in ways that people come up with to cope with them whether it's substance abuse, whether it's in a rise of mysticism in just trying to find answers in places that we otherwise wouldn't have been looking. And one last question. What have you taken away from this pandemic? Think about yourself as a person in the roles that you play in your life, especially from the work standpoint or as a member of a family.

### **Vance Martin**

So, I would say from work standpoint I was able to pull on a lot of stuff I had done in the past to help in the two offices I was at. At the one office I was asked, you know, to think about how to interact remotely, so I think that that was good. And I think that when I began my position Springfield, I knew I had to commute and there were a lot of things that I was unable to do like to pick up kids at daycare, I have to leave an hour and a half earlier from work. So I think that gave me the opportunity to be with my family, although that was also the opportunity with my family all the time [laughter]. I hope, someday I will look back and say, "Oh, that was great. Or it wasn't horrible." But I think that that was good. It, I think it gave me the opportunity because people say, "Oh, if you could do --if I can always be at home for this, then today, I would do this. Well, it gave me the opportunity. And it gave all of us the opportunity to see if we really did do that. And yeah.

### **Paul Gilbert II**

I think that's the end of all of our questions. And thank you so much for coming in. And to speak with us. Um, is there anything you would like to add?

### **Vance Martin**

No, I mean, I think these were great questions you guys came up with so—you did a great job. I think. I have difficulty sometimes on the fly, you know, formulating and obviously, this is your project. So are we still recording? Were all done – let's end for now.