

COVID-19 Hydrology Interview

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SPEAKERS

Helen Nguyen, Laura Keefer, Paul Gilbert II, Arthur Schmidt

Paul Gilbert II 00:05

Hi, my name is Paul Gilbert. I'm a graduate student representing the University of Illinois Archives, and I'm joined today on Zoom with:

Helen Nguyen 00:18

Oh, Hi, I'm Helen Nguyen, and I'm Ivan Racheff Professor of Civil Environmental Engineering. And I'm joined by my colleagues Art and Laura.

Arthur Schmidt 00:32

I'm Arthur Schmidt. I am a Clinical Associate Professor in the Department of Civil and Environmental Engineering.

Laura Keefer 00:41

And I'm Laura Keefer. I'm the Illinois State Hydrologist at the Illinois State Water Survey, Prairie Research Institute at the University of Illinois.

Paul Gilbert II 00:53

All right. Do any of you remember the first time you heard the words COVID-19? What were some of the thoughts going on in your mind around this time period?

Helen Nguyen 01:12

Yes, I do remember my research is on pathogen transmission and control. So when I heard the word COVID-19, and to me it's actually more of a sad Coronavirus. She was like, Oh, we're getting busy. That's just my thought.

Arthur Schmidt 01:38

I don't remember exactly when it was somewhere around the winter break time. Because what I do remember is the news was that this is something emerging in China. And I had some of my colleagues had traveled to China and just wondering hoping that they would be okay.

Laura Keefer 02:02

Yeah, I would say probably in the winter, I was hearing about it in China, and that it wasn't the first time over the years that we've heard things originating in China. But I really started to take notice of it, and I'm assuming it was January, about where it was emerging out of in the Northwest US, in Seattle, and the senior nursing home population. So that's when it really I start perking up.

Paul Gilbert II 02:35

In this roughly two months timeframe between December early January 2020. And when things start to shut down, what changes were either planned or enacted in your respective workplaces as in preparation for the pandemic.

Helen Nguyen 03:09

So I remember I think the most pressing issue at that time was teaching. Because we just started the semester in early January. And we were just wondering, you know, what we are going to do with student and everything. Yeah, so that was the most pressing issue to me at that point.

Arthur Schmidt 03:50

I hate to say this, but I had a student walk in right as you start to answer the- ask the question, and I missed your question, Paul.

Paul Gilbert II 04:01

Oh, I was asking between when you first heard about COVID and when everything shut down. What if any changes or planning did you or your colleagues begin to work on? Such as were there steps taken to switch to remote learning at some point in the spring? Or in case of emergency break this glass kind of thing?

Arthur Schmidt 04:28

No, I'm fortunate the class I was teaching is offered also as an online class. And so we had a handful of online students, but every lecture was recorded and presented a synchronously we already had arrangements, how we would do exams and homework and teamwork for the online students. And so really, we went forward right up to spring break without any change in anything we were doing.

Laura Keefer 05:05

For me, I mean, we're a non academic unit. So we're actually have a lot of professional scientists. And we weren't sure how things would affect us. Because we weren't really exposed to the student population, unless we had some students here. So we were kind of watching it, but I would say about a week, or almost two weeks before the actual shutdown, they were already encouraging staff to work from home. And some people were starting to do that. But we were still continuing with our data collection, and, you know, traveling around the state up to that point, but we were kind of starting to wonder, you know, how that was going to affect our work up to that point.

Paul Gilbert II 06:04

Speaking of your work, what are your respective job responsibilities in more normal times, and how has that changed in the time since the pandemic began. For example, we talked to an epidemiologist at the University, who spent about 5% of her time doing service work before the pandemic, but because of the pandemic, she changed her deployment to be about 30% on service.

Helen Nguyen 06:41

I guess I work longer hour. So I don't think I really changed the proportions of what I do, but I definitely work a longer hour. And so like before the pandemic, my research, you know, can take time to do things, you know, the student can take time and do everything, but there are certain projects that related to the pandemic, then we didn't have that luxury and certain thing has to be done, like right away. So that is the in- that is what changed for my research. A second type of teaching, it's- I don't know about Art how your class is, but like, it is more time consuming and more effort to teach class now, you know, like, even when we send the student home, and we have to do remotely, but engage students in a remote environment, it was very hard to do. And then when student come back to the campus, they didn't come back the same persons, you know, the engagement in class is definitely different. So that- it take more time and on so you know, more, we have to invent things, in terms of teaching for the students, you know, we don't want to redo the standard or the knowledge, we want the students, but it takes more work. So in terms of service, I was asked to do more definitely. Okay. So that definitely more work that needs to be done, you know, since the pandemic started.

Arthur Schmidt 08:55

My main roles are teaching and advising. And so, of course the pandemic had a tremendous impact on them. I am a huge fan of face to face meetings of getting students working in teams together and collaborating. I would always hold group office hours because I believe they learn from one another and trying to adapt those things to the pandemic environment. Yes, Zoom, you can have a group meeting but you lose a big part of that dynamic as Helen mentioned, trying to come up with ways to engage students. Now working on group projects, where my habit is to walk around from table to table and talk with each team. Learning how to do that in Zoom breakout rooms and get the students to engage has been very challenging. It also added to it a little bit as this project with wastewater sampling came up a big part of what I do is, is also I'm an expert in field measurements. And so all of a sudden there was this extra part of how are we going to do this that, although the challenge and thinking of what we could do with the benefits from it were great, it was some extra work to it.

Laura Keefer 10:22

We, both Helen and Art launched into a lot of different thoughts, I want to make sure I answer your original question. I mean, as far as the role, yeah it's hard to not talk about after COVID hit with before, but I mean our role is really applied science, you know, we do a lot of public work because we're doing contracts for municipalities, state agencies, you know, things of that nature, and we have a role with the public, where we answer a lot of questions and provide data, that's usually over the phone. But, you know, before COVID, it's a research environment with a lot of field work. And that service component, so you know, I would say, my role is probably almost 30-40% public service. And the rest is research and management of research programs. Post COVID, when that hit, we all thought we were gonna be

home for two weeks. So, and I, but I was tried to be prepared, and I loaded up what I thought I could work on in a month and brought a printer home and things like that. And post COVID When we were home, and it was dragging out that service component of mine, it dry up for a while. But then, you know, when we were starting to get requests again everything took so much longer, because all of the material that I needed was here. And it was very frustrating that I couldn't turn around and grab one of these file cabinet drawers that are right behind me, because they were here and not in my basement office at home. So everything just took longer. And especially, it took months before I could get permission to actually just come into the office and make sure I wasn't here when anybody else was, just so I could get at files. So things just took a lot longer. And that really affected my my service component quite a bit.

Paul Gilbert II 12:44

Helen Art, could you also talk about your experiences working from home during the pandemic?

Helen Nguyen 12:54

I actually didn't really work from home much I- because during the pandemic, I have certain I was requested to do some very quick research for pathogen control Virus Disease infections. So I still run my lab. So I actually went to my office mostly.

Arthur Schmidt 13:21

Mine was a mixed bag, because the classrooms here are set up for the recording. I continued to come into [department of] civil engineering almost every day of the week, where I'm teaching. And so I was coming into an empty building and teaching to an empty classroom, but was continuing to come in and work and that gave the opportunity to also come to my office and do things. But it did- especially as the weather gets nice, I set up a very nice office outside on my porch and learn some of the beauty of if there's an early morning meeting instead of getting up extra early and driving in. I could do some of that from home. So there were a lot of parts of the learning to telecommute as it were that as things went on, it became enjoyable to make those decisions. Today is a day I don't have to go in. Versus today is the day I'm going to teach and I have to go in.

Laura Keefer 14:29

I like to maybe expand on a mine too because I told you that we were home. I think there are different units on campus that operated differently. So the Prairie Research Institute, at least through all the way to May, banned closed all the labs and banned fieldwork. And so we were not collecting data, we were not allowed on the premises at all. So whatever you grabbed on, you know, March whatever, you know, we had like two or three days and then that was it. And then it was probably at least, we could start doing fieldwork again in June, it was under very tight control, we had to make sure that nobody was in the building at the same time that people were by themselves. And in vans, if you needed people, you need more than one person, you had to take two vehicles. And I had a special permission to come in once a week for two hours, so I can grab my material. So it was very rigid control on whether we could come in or not. And it was almost over a year before we could come in if we wanted. So that severely impacted and of course, it was March through May, which is spring, which means rain, and we collect stream water. So the time of the year when we really should have been out we were barred from that. And so it did significantly impact research. Because of the steps that our unit took.

Paul Gilbert II 16:02

Related to collecting data, how exactly do you determine prevalence of a pathogen in a community based off of the wastewater result?

Helen Nguyen 16:17

So wastewater monitoring is not new. This has been in practice actually for like, for decades, on and off for different things. However, when the COVID-19 pandemic started, then my research community, you know, really jump into it, and we deliver really quickly, but it's not like, you know, overnight things ever. Okay, so that is just it just that a lot of expertise and knowledge are pulled together at the same time. So for our team, we actually started later compared to other community, we will ask, I came by the office of- whatever that office of Susan Martinis office [inaudible]. When December I think, right, Laura? I think that's when we learn about it.

Laura Keefer 17:23

Yes, somewhere like November, December-

Helen Nguyen 17:25

November, December, something November, I think its like November. And actually, my dean, one of my Associate Dean, Harley Johnson was asked to figure this thing out. So he organized a meeting of myself, I think, Laura, and then a colleague Lance Schideman in ISTC [Illinois Sustainable Technology Center], together, and try to figure out whether we can do it, so they are not even sure that it have any value. So we and then I said, like, yeah, this can be done. And, but like, someone has to pay for it. So at the beginning, there was like, no money, like zero money whatsoever. Okay, and so I, Laura, I think you somehow pulled a little bit of money from [POI] to support Kip and Hayden. And then my dean here, Rashid Bashir said, okay, here is, I don't know, \$20,000 or something, something around that. Okay, and try for like, to try to capture what happened at the beginning of the semesters. So basically, that's it, that's all we had at the beginning. And so we, you know, our group came together and just like, Okay, we can try to do that. So, Art said that we have to have Kip. So Laura call Kip from the Peoria office together, and then I think we contacted the utility, so Sanitary District and you know, whoever like around and city of Urbana, city of Champaign, we look at all of the sewer network and then Art and Bill [William] Brown actually from Vet Med [College of Veterinary Medicine] who knows GIS [Geographic Information Systems] decide on, you know, where to samples and then we [concern] also with Awais [Vaid] who was epidemiologist at Champaign Public Health District. So we like we got together within like two weeks or something, and then Laura as people went to scout for sampling together with Art. So that's how it started. And we I think we took the first samples right after new year. It was really cold. Art [right] you remember that it was so cold.

Arthur Schmidt 20:19

It was nice to get back in the truck.

Helen Nguyen 20:21

Yeah, it was very nice to get back in the truck. Yes, so that's started like that for I think we show right away within a few weeks that that can be done. Yeah. And I think I have a little bit money of research

money that we extend the project to ran toward. Yeah. So that's how it's done. And then after that, I apply for two- all the type of fundings on so internal, but research funding, internal funding, and we receive seven- \$150,000. So that allows us to carry the whole the project for another year. So we yeah, I mean, like, for a year, not another year, for a year, of 2021. Yeah. And then after that, we, you know, our team here, we wrote a proposal to EPA, a research proposal to EPA, and we just received the grant of \$1 million to do this for another two years.

Arthur Schmidt 21:37

And maybe add a little bit, Helen can correct me if I'm wrong, but you asked how we determine the prevalence. And Helen, I'm not sure if it's prevalence or more, it's the occurrence correct. They really don't say here is how many people have it, but we can say we've detected it. But Helen mentioned working with public health district, with GIS specialists, and they help they had ideas where were their communities, where are their locations, and Champaign Urbana Rantoul where testing was not as common as the university community, everybody was required to test. And so by looking and there was comparison between sampling sites in locations on campus, so your population is going to be campus. But then there were other testing locations that were neighborhoods where there were much lower incidence of the public health testing or the university testing. And so that gives some are, do we have the presence of COVID in these communities where it's not being detected by the public testing that was going on.

Laura Keefer 23:00

I don't have anything more to add to what they did what they said. So.

Paul Gilbert II 23:04

Thanks for the clarification. My understanding of it was that you can't necessarily be like, okay, based off of the results, we know that 20% of the population is potentially infected with COVID-19 because of this concentration of COVID and the runoff, but I thought there were certain fears that could be determined based off of the concentration like comparatively speaking, this area has a high rate of transmission compared to this area, which doesn't have testing.

Helen Nguyen 23:49

So what you look at it is not an absolute number, what you look at it is the trend. So the trend is very important. Okay. So like, for example, you know, like the trend is going up. That is not good. Okay. Yeah. So I think we actually, you know, all of us, we published a paper very recently to show that you can set a [inaudible] when, based on the trend, and then when you have to worry about the transmissions.

Laura Keefer 24:28

I think at the beginning we were on weren't we testing like, sampling twice a week?

Helen Nguyen 24:34

Yeah. At the beginning we sampled twice a week. Yeah.

Laura Keefer 24:40

So it helped immediately with the trend. Yeah.

Helen Nguyen 24:44

The trend is very important. So usually, I think at the beginning, we try to do it on Monday and Wednesday. And then we compare, if we see that between Monday and Wednesday, it increase. Okay, so that means that you know the transmission is high in the given community.

Paul Gilbert II 25:16

Okay, following up on that, did you or anyone that you work with directly help create or modify COVID safety protocols based off of your results?

Helen Nguyen 25:30

I was asked, I was asked mainly actually not by the university, but for the by the public health districts, because like all of the data that we've collected it, we communicate with that. And they it's not really the safety. But when but it's more like interventions, for example, like vaccination for examples. So like we our work started in like January 2021, right? So you remember that is the time when we started to have vaccine, right? Yeah. And because of our resolve, identify, where are the active transmissions, locations, they were able to have like targeted vaccine compared to certain locations in tap.

Arthur Schmidt 26:37

Yeah, I mean, any of those safety protocol things is not really my area of expertise.

Laura Keefer 26:50

I guess it depends on what you mean by safety though, you know, the there's safety for the data collectors or just safety and transmission among the community. And we definitely took all precautions, you know, in the data collection, with PPE [personal protective equipment] and things of that nature, not like in the hospital, of course, because we're actually working open air type of thing, but anything contributing to transmission and stuff that wasn't our role.

Paul Gilbert II 27:20

I mean, the question was in both sides, both from a more university specific protocol, as well as how to safely conduct your work, especially if you had been sent home for two months [long] as because it was just seen as too risky.

Helen Nguyen 27:48

We didn't work on this project during that two month though, we started after everything was mostly over.

Laura Keefer 27:58

Yeah, at least initial so yeah, I was, we started like, November 2020. On this and things were, things were still tight, you know, but it was loosening up a little bit. And we could get out, although a lot of the not riding in the same vehicle, things like that lasted for quite some time. But yeah, so it was in the real hard lockdown point, you know, hard part with that two or three months after the closing and stuff didn't really affect how we started up.

Paul Gilbert II 28:31

That was more so a comment in reference to that hard lockdown period, at the very beginning that you experienced Laura, that wasn't a question directed towards everyone. But moving forward as both individuals as well as people who research and track prevalence and using the wrong word again, the presence of COVID-19 in wastewater, what are your thoughts about the timing of the reopening of campus?

Helen Nguyen 29:18

I think we did the right thing to open the campus, you know, because students need to get back to, you know, for education, there's no question about it. I think we are the only university that, you know, implement like massive testing. Of course, we have some outbreaks at the beginning because of- and it's happened every year anyway. You know, when people go from all over the place to, you know, everywhere from everywhere and get back the same time and also young people and, you know, they party and stuff like that. So it happens but I think the university handled it. So I don't think there is any issue with that.

Arthur Schmidt 30:14

I would agree, I'm actually very proud of the university's response and what they put together in terms of testing, and protocols, and getting students back into the classes. And not only from my perspective, having them back, but the students were thrilled to get back. In that Fall semester, when we started back I teach a class on field methods in water, so it's an outdoor class, we could be a little bit more comfortable being outdoors. And I had about 50-50 enrollment between in person and online. But I would have nearly 100% attendance, so even all of the online students started coming to join in those field exercises. And to me, that just indicates how valuable it was to them to be able to get back. And so I think the timing was done very well, when there was the great uncertainty in the Spring, they put the tighter restrictions on but with some time to research to think and plan and get students back, I think it benefited everybody.

Laura Keefer 31:31

And I think, again, I think it's probably good to have the juxtaposition between, you know, Helen and Art being in academic units, and I not being in an academic unit, you know, and we're on the we're in the south Research Park, you know, we're not, we're campus, but not really campus, you know, where all the students are. And so, campus opening up only just allowed us to be in the offices more. And it's, it was probably not as consequential as for, you know, the students coming in. So, you know, we were already operating and doing what we could and that level and I'll, you know, second Arts comment, and that I am just exceedingly proud of the university, especially the testing, because really, both my husband and my son have preexisting conditions, you know, and so I was the one that was always going out to the grocery stores and things like that, and because I could test all the time, I could keep them safe. And that is a gift on a personal level that the university gave to all of us.

Paul Gilbert II 32:43

Does that appreciation also extend for the more recent relaxation of masking requirements? I've heard very strong opinions in both directions when it comes to that.

Helen Nguyen 33:02

When I teach I still wear mask. And I Yeah, because you know, like when I teach, right, so the person who when could be the dangers for everyone else is the professor, whoever talking. So I still do that.

Arthur Schmidt 33:23

I appreciate the relaxation of the masking requirements. I also appreciate though, it's I think the university community that we have a spectrum from those that never wear masks to those that will always wear a mask or still work at home. And yet there is a respect we look at the national media and the I hate to call it dialogue because it's not but the reactions people have had in yet- I will go to a lunch with colleagues and if somebody is wearing a mask, others will put on their masks out of a respect for that person. And so I think the university community has handled it well. And again, proud to be part of this community.

Laura Keefer 34:18

I think the relaxation you know, allowing people to do what they feel is safe and comfortable for them. And this community, you know, of Champaign-Urbana University, being respectful of those choices. You know, for the longest time I was still wearing my mask in the grocery store and stuff. While I'm in the office, I you know, I don't wear my mask, but I supply a box of masks at my door. If people want them if somebody comes to my office wearing a mask. I ask if they want me to wear a mask and if they want me to I will. So I think the way the University conducted themselves, bred what was already, you know, a level of respect that people had even before COVID. But it really empowered people to really exercise, you know, an abundance of respect for people and their choices and being willing to accommodate people and understanding that they want to wear a mask or not. And I've never received any pushback since the reopening in the early days, you know, there are people in the grocery stores not wearing masks and, you know, before vaccine and stuff, and, you know, or people keep giving looks and things of that nature, but that was the beginning. But I think, in the meantime, things have progressed a lot better. And I think the reopening and the relaxation, were timed right because it came at the right time, I think people were ready to be accommodating.

Paul Gilbert II 36:05

How much of an impact did COVID have on research projects and initiatives on your respective offices and irrespective of interests? Has COVID, it caused you to reevaluate your, your personal priorities going forward?

Helen Nguyen 36:36

I guess it's definitely significantly influenced my research, but it pulled my research into a direction that I never thought about, you know, like with that COVID Art and Laura and I may never may not work together, a lot of work that I did related to pathogens was based in another country. Because that was like, okay, you know, infectious disease is probably not a problem for America. So the work that funded for like, you know, for the US was mainly on food safety, for my visa, for example, food safety, because, you know, that is honestly very relevant on premise plumbing in building system, you know, that are still going on. However with this thing in here, we say, oh, yeah, we are not safe for infectious disease. So there's certain work that I only did it in another country, then now I do it, we do it in the US. But like, last

summer that I traveled again, so I work with another team in Vietnam, and try to implement something very similar in Vietnam. So that is, this is something different.

Arthur Schmidt 38:19

In my role as a clinical professor, there's a much smaller research component. And the couple other projects I had going on, really were not badly affected, we were in a literature review and a modeling stage and students could continue to do the work on their own, we could meet via Zoom, but as Helen mentioned, it opened up the collaboration among the three of us and so that new door, I had never worked anything with infectious diseases, anything like this before.

Laura Keefer 38:55

As far as affecting my research, because we had so many other projects with the data collection components and some of the, the COVID restrictions, you know, on the vehicles and things like that. That it made it- It cost more to do our projects, because then we had to, you know, higher hourly rates and students and things that we could. I think what it also did too, is just because we had to conduct all of our business via Zoom, even if we were like in the same building, you know, we weren't really allowed to kind of be in the same room with each other and stuff again, there was some really rigid requirements from our unit. But so I was what would take, you know, just me walking down the hall and him on a five minute conversation required an email to decide what time I could set up a Zoom call and we get it in there my calendar was just stuffed. And so I spent more time managing and talking with people, and trying to work around the restrictions and stuff than I was doing research. And so that was very particularly frustrating. And then everything just took so much longer. But I think, you know, when we got the call about that, you know, is could we collect samples, you know, in sewers and collect wastewater, we were used to working out in streams, open areas, and stuff. And yeah, we assume there's a certain amount of animal husbandry upstream. And there's things that are there that you want to make sure you wash your hands, but directly from the from sewage, from manhole covers, and stuff was kind of a ew kind of reaction at first. And while we could do this, so it did open things up, you know, for us to do something different. And really, on one extent, you know, I've worked with many people on campus, but it allowed other people to have a better experience, actually collaborating with with professors, and I've known Art actually I used to work for Art, almost 40 years ago. It's been that long Art. But oh [inaudible]. But meeting Helen, and the whole team of people at the beginning that we were having Zoom calls and stuff, and working with the Public Health Department was really fun. And, didn't realize that I was kind of in a autopilot, in my own work until I started with this. And, so that I think that really helped me get kind of excited about my work again. So but the what we do with with Helen and Art is actually almost a minor component of what we are doing, but it is been nice. And I think everybody in our place who's worked on it, has been has brought some, you know, just something different. So it's kind of nice.

Paul Gilbert II 42:18

Do you engage with the public more often now than you did before the pandemic? And if not, has the way that you've gone about communicating with the public changed, such as an increased use of social media.

Helen Nguyen 42:33

So I was contacted by like, you know, everywhere from TV to radio, you know, newspapers or something, I think actually one of the ones that we did earlier, end up in Washington Post, the front page of science sections. This was something new. I never thought about that. It was a learning experience, I would say that I am not active in social media. So I did not communicate with people until that. So usually, sometimes I received email from like some people who live in town or something, you know, and then I was like, okay, so I set up a meeting and then just talk to it phone. You know, so I'm still using the, I guess, the traditional way of communication with the public.

Arthur Schmidt 43:42

Yeah, I do not use social media. And actually, I don't have much interaction with the public. So in terms of that, there's been no discernible change from the pandemic.

Laura Keefer 43:58

Yeah, we haven't had any change, you know, we like I said before, we have our, we get a lot of requests and for information and usually developing, you know, about watershed hydrology and stuff. We I don't think we've ever gotten any requests from the public that pertained to the pandemic at all. So that didn't really change either. And I do have a Twitter account I've had for years, and I've probably posted five times. And I did get over. Instead of calling it Twitter, I did a, I suppose to be a tweet and I would call it a twit. But I like Facebook and stuff, but Twitter escapes me, but yeah, my social media on that level didn't change at all. You can tell we're older, Paul.

Paul Gilbert II 44:51

I mean, you say that but my eight year old grandmother is very, very active on Facebook. and my mom is trying to become tick tock famous, like She's not in her 60s. So it's not. Not necessarily-

Laura Keefer 45:13

I'm pretty active on Facebook, but I've worked very hard to keeping my group, my friends and stuff to family, friends, and high school friends and things like that. And so I keep it pretty locked down. But I'm pretty active, because that's kind of my social circle that I've- my village I've created. So, but yeah, Twitter. Yeah, that's, I always have to ask somebody how I post something again, so.

Paul Gilbert II 45:41

Do you think things are ever going to return back to normal? And if the answer is no, do you think that's necessarily a bad thing?

Helen Nguyen 45:54

I think [inaudible] become you have a new equilibrium. I think that is the better way to say it, then a normal okay. Yeah. So it's like in chaotic in, you know, environment, you want an equilibrium. But there's all kinds of different equilibrium. And, and it could be dynamics, right. So I can see that our equilibrium now is different from the equilibrium a year ago.

Arthur Schmidt 46:30

I would agree, things are always changing. And that's good. We just had our talk about social media. And that was a word we didn't know when I was not that much younger. And so what is normal-

Laura Keefer 46:44

We didn't have cell phones, when we were younger Art.

Arthur Schmidt 46:47

We did not, no internet, no cell phones, dial rotary phone. But I think that's a good thing that we individually as society we adapt. And I see some very good things that have come from this, we learned the power of a Zoom meeting. And in our area now, we regularly will have seminars where we can bring in distinguished speakers from all over the world because we don't have to fly them here in person. And our students are used to sitting there and watching on a screen and asking questions. And so there's some of those things that it's gonna to change it forever. But it's a very good thing. At the same time, I think we are getting back to some of the social circles where we're more comfortable and able to have those interactions. And it's becoming more like it was before the pandemic that probably all of us developed our little bubble of a few people we were very comfortable with and in in that safe environment, we would have a meal together. And those bubbles have expanded to the point where we are comfortable and sitting down and in a restaurant or a social event or a football game. And so we're returning to some of those things. But we're also reaping benefits from the pandemic, I heard a talk just last week about how much energy use decreased from the pandemic, because of we didn't travel as much. And so there's some good from learning that we don't have to travel for every business meeting.

Laura Keefer 48:42

Yeah, I would definitely, I could repeat exactly what Helen and Art are saying. I think the change has been good. We do have a new equilibrium. Yeah, I'm on a lot of, you know, regional and state committees where we would have to drive to Springfield. And there's supposed to be 40 people on the committee and 12 people show up and maybe somebody might be on the phone or something like that, where now you get, you know, great attendance and you can really get a lot done. At the same time. A lot of people are talking about well, can we meet four times a year but maybe could at least one of those meetings be in person because there's so much more that gets done when you're in person that you just cannot do on in Zooms because your sidebar in or you're talking or you're going to lunch and things so I think we were like, Oh, we could just conduct everything at home to realizing it, you know, humans don't work that way all the time. So, and again, the seminars you know, being able to have connections with people that you never would have thought of, and I would like to put in then it's maintain a better work life balance because. I can wake up the morning knowing that I have a nine o'clock meeting, but I need an errand to get done right after. So I will sit at my home office, get answer emails and stuff, do my Zoom meeting at nine o'clock and then come into the office, I don't have to race so at all, after that meeting, I can go ahead and do my little errand and then get to the office. So it's, I can conduct business almost anywhere, and I can just my life is more fluid. And but I've also tried to maintain a little more boundaries, I think you're probably talking to three people who don't limit themselves to 40 hours a week working, you know, but I think you know, we do put in the extra, but you can actually seam it together very nicely. So it doesn't interfere with either one. And, a lot of my staff do that. And I encourage it, and I think they're happier. But we do want to have more in person meetings, and people wear masks or not. I think one of the things that is that we are going on, that people are talking about, is we're all getting ready for winter. And, you know, we may retreat back to our smaller bubbles, not go eat at restaurants as much because it's cold out and things. So we're all kind of ready

for, you know, the next round, and I'm gonna be wearing my mask again, in the grocery store. So I think that's part of a new normal to is, it's really just gonna be time in the year, where we're just going to have to be more careful and more reserved, and that's the new equilibrium, in that aspect. So those some points I wanted to make.

Paul Gilbert II 51:38

There anything that you would do differently, looking back from where we are today, whether it's personally or professionally related to the pandemic?

Laura Keefer 51:56

On a personal level, for me, I'll jump in is that my daughter was at the university. At the time she was in spring, she was in her spring semester of her junior year. And she was in the theater program and stage management. So you can imagine, you know, Krannert [Center for the Performing Arts] shut down all their opportunities, and their junior and senior years, when they get their opportunities to do stage management that they, you know, this is the stuff where they're, you know, really cutting their teeth, and resume builds for when they leave. And she was on an apartment on campus. And so they're all practically like, relegated even to their own rooms, and things and we had to obviously leave her alone, and she was here in town. And one thing I would do different is she fell into a depression. And I wish that- she hid it very well. And I wish as a parent that I had assumed that that could happen and just brought her home or was a little more involved. And I you know, I think the university was being very conscientious about the young people. And there was only so much that we could do, but I think finding ways to anticipate that better, and equipping the parents. Even though I was part of this university community as a parent, I probably could have been 500 miles away and reacted the same way. So but I think our young people who went through this in their college years, suffered the most. And I don't know what we could have done differently, but it seems like there's some things we could have done and maybe rolled out. Maybe some better transitions for them as they graduated, she still ended up being a fifth year senior because it just it fell apart for her so but I think anything else on how I conducted myself how it my safety precautions and how we conducted stuff, I wouldn't change I wouldn't I think we did. Well, we did exactly what we needed to do.

Helen Nguyen 54:20

I wouldn't do anything different with my research. However, I agree with Laura too. I have my son's in high school, and he was in at uni here. So first semester was fine. Second semester, he got sent home. And then so he did fine for like two semesters remotely. But the third semester he really fell apart. And so, like I and I also saw that with my, through the student that I'm teaching to, so I wish that I knew about that, and you adapt my teaching better for students, because I did not have any experience of teaching remotely or hybrid or anything like that, for like 100 and something students. So I think that was something that we learn and like now, I think we all seen, you know, there is then consequences of send of students, you know, taking remote classes, your student, you know, I mean, it's still not the same. I mean, like remote instructions, doesn't replace, I can see that for my student learning doesn't replace in class learning. So of course, now I still have a hybrid because certain students have, you know, immunocompromised health condition or something, they couldn't come to the class. So I had to adapt my teaching for that, you know, for- yeah, but I mean, like, I wish I don't think I could do anything better at that point, because with the lack of experience, but I guess we can, you know, we can learn

from this thing. And hopefully, we don't have to do it all over again. But we can help the students who, you know, for whatever the condition cannot be in the classroom, to, you know, to they have the same education level.

Paul Gilbert II 56:38

Well, I want to ask you this question specifically, before you head out?

Helen Nguyen 56:42

Yeah.

Paul Gilbert II 56:42

Would you say that transition was the hardest part about working during the pandemic? And do you feel like you had enough support from the university in terms of making this transition?

Helen Nguyen 56:56

I think I have enough support for some of the university, you know, and I talked to my colleague from other university, I think we have the best. I wouldn't come back.

Paul Gilbert II 57:14

All right. I know you said you had to leave at two o'clock.

Helen Nguyen 57:16

I have to go for teaching. Okay. Thank you. So just send me an email if there's anything you would like to help me to write or to talk. Okay. Thank you.

Paul Gilbert II 57:28

Thanks, again. Okay, I have a couple more questions. And then and I'll leave time for y'all to make final thoughts or ask me any the following questions. What have you learned about yourself? As a results of the amount of adversity that we all had to go through as a society in terms of surviving this pandemic.

Arthur Schmidt 58:01

I had to learn to be more compassionate that there were some of the things early on, I was one of those that was skeptical of this. And I had to learn more compassion, conversations with people that were immunocompromised or had loved ones that were in. It took that whole vision on going from saying, Who is Governor Pritzker to say I have to wear a mask or can't do this or that, to seeing what other people are seeing and really develop more compassion, more empathy. So that, to me, was one of the biggest lessons of the pandemic is that- yeah, helped me to see there's perspectives that I'm not seeing, and I need to learn to do that.

Laura Keefer 59:09

You know, I think I probably take, you know, the be similar in learning some compassion, because, you know, I was kind of on the opposite side, and that I didn't know I mean, where I got the perspective, probably from my father and stuff was just, you know, it's, you know, the needs the many out, you know, out outweigh me, and so we, I, we were very, very compliant and I think what I needed to learn

was some compassion towards the people who were not of that thought. So, because in my heart, you know, I mean, there were some people that were I know Art I, you know, he's, he's not belligerent.

Laura Keefer 59:56

But there were, you know, deniers that were very belligerent, and I had to, in my heart, I was not very compassionate. In my heart, I can be belligerent. Although, and Art knows me and my demeanor, I'm not belligerent. But I really had to find some compassion and try to understand their perspective and realizing that at least for some of those people, and not all, people were skeptical at the beginning, you know, are cut from the same cloth, but that's that, you know, realizing that there was a lot of fear already. And, and God knows, a toxic political undertone of everything that was going on, that made you question everything that was going on, but it was really just trying so hard to put myself in their shoes, and see where they were coming from. Probably with the objective of trying to change their minds, and I probably shouldn't have gone that far and just been the compassionate, and trying to be understand, and because I didn't affect anybody, but it probably personally affected me and my own health and disposition by carrying the that- it was disrespectful and not understanding. And so I think I would hurt myself and I, what I had to learn was to get rid of that because it wasn't helping anybody, including myself. And, you know, we all have to deal with what our choices were at the time and what we made later then. But I learned that I could be very adaptable, and then I also learned that I can survive anything. And I've actually had COVID now post booster vaccines and things like that. And, gosh, you know, if I was boosted I and I had kind of, I wouldn't say mild case, maybe mild, moderate? Oh, my God, I can't imagine having it without actually having a vaccine to to cut back some of those symptoms, but it's, but I think we all kind of learned a lot about where we stood on things and and hopefully learn better of it. And I agree with Art, I think on all chance the compassion is what I needed to learn.

Arthur Schmidt 59:56

No.

Arthur Schmidt 1:00:24

Yeah. Listening to one another.

Laura Keefer 1:02:43

Yeah.

Paul Gilbert II 1:02:46

And final question as much as I want to end on such a positive note. A previous interview subjects mentioned how they're worried that public health is arguably in a worse position, in part because of that toxic political discourse over what should have been a public safety concern. Do you agree with that sentiments? And would you say, hey, that's, or would you say that you and your field as a whole is stronger as a result of this pandemic than it was going in?

Arthur Schmidt 1:03:32

What was the last me and my what is a whole?

Paul Gilbert II 1:03:37

The field.

Arthur Schmidt 1:03:38

Oh the field as a whole?

Laura Keefer 1:03:41

The public health field?

Paul Gilbert II 1:03:44

Yes.

Laura Keefer 1:03:44

Okay.

Arthur Schmidt 1:03:49

I think there was a period because of that toxic discourse that it was very bad. I think if a public official said something there were instantaneously others that would disagree, just because but I think in hindsight that I've seen a lot of people that were very adamant in their positions that now look back and they can see how things played out and they see the just the benefit of the different policies, the there's now studies that shows benefits to masking that we see the benefits of the vaccinations and boosters and I think there's some realization that yes, there was good to this and so I don't think it's worse off I think the general population you'll always have a very vocal minority. But I almost feel like that's taken the general population to say there is a level of trust we can have. And, and there's other political hot button issues. And I think the same is true that hindsight on this is helping to give a little bit more moderation and reasoning to some of the other issues too.

Laura Keefer 1:05:29

I guess I would like to believe what Art said.

Arthur Schmidt 1:05:31

I can always hope, right?

Laura Keefer 1:05:35

I really do. But I guess, you know, and public health is cut is lumped in with the rest of us in science and, you know, people in the science fields, science itself was already being attacked. And there's a distrust and, you know, we were dealing with a pandemic, that we weren't sure how contagious it was, and not so you know, it was a hair on fire type of approach, but to not do it and have something that was going to be, you know, so contagious to lay waste to the populations. You're damned if you do and damned if you didn't, and but people not understanding the scientific process and the testing and how we could figure out what was going on. I mean, eventually, it turned out that, you know, you didn't need to wash your hands. But we didn't know that. But then that was used as a crutch, saying, Oh, you guys don't know what you're doing. Because you didn't know what you were doing, because you didn't have to wash your hands. So, you know, I think it's not so much that there's distrust just with public health,

there's a distrust in science, and its approach. And I'm not sure how that's going to get prepared, because I think there's people that are going to avoid some of these fields in particularly medical and public health. So I think we're gonna see a fallout from this for quite some time, you know, I haven't even tried to see my doctor about anything, or even schedule a physical at this point. Because I've heard so many stories of people that they can't get into a doctor unless you're dying. So I think, I guess I'm reframing your question is not just public health, but just there's the, at least the medical fields in science that have been forever altered. And there's people who are scared to be in it from now on, because they, you know, people were threatened and stuff, so I do fear for the future on that level.

Paul Gilbert II 1:08:09

Sorry, again, to add on the bumper.

Laura Keefer 1:08:11

No, that's okay. I mean I really hope I think we- I tried to recognize that I live in a college town. And I'm surrounded by people who are more like minded on on most issues. But when I get out to other communities and things it's not and that's where my my faith in humanity wanes.

Paul Gilbert II 1:08:40

So that covers all the questions I have, is there anything else that either you wanted to add, before I end, the recording?

Arthur Schmidt 1:08:51

I just didn't really might not have come up. Or I guess one lesson learned. I mentioned I teach a field class. And a lesson learned was right at that fall semester, what was that 2020. And I did try to teach it and but the university said, whatever you do, has to be online as well. And maybe this is why I had 100% attendance in the field because I spent an entire semester out there trying to teach how to do field measurements with my phone in one hand on Zoom. And for the students that couldn't attend that had to be the most painful, awful experience, I could imagine. And so it- one big lesson learned is there's some things that translate well to a remote online format, but there's some things that absolutely you cannot do without the hands on doing it yourself and that was a lesson learned I was over ambitious and saying, yes, we can do this despite the pandemic.

Laura Keefer 1:10:11

Yeah, I think one thought I had a, you know, when I, you know, my calendar was full of Zoom meetings, just to have a few minute conversation with people and I was talking with some people. And of course, you spend the first 10 minutes just talking about the pandemic and how everybody's doing, because you're trying to visit, you know, you're trying to connect with people. So I think a lot of those phone calls, there's very little business that was done, because you were just trying to reach out to talk to another human being. And I had a couple people say that they were really surprised because before the pandemic, they would have called themselves an introvert. And now that they were stuck at home, you know, in the, you know, they were single people type of thing. So they were home alone. They weren't going to call themselves introverts anymore. Yeah, they realized that they, how much they really needed to be around people. And, and I think that's- I think the pandemic was probably a sociologist dream, you know, in a human experiment of how, what happens when people get isolated.

So I think, you know, we found out how much we really need each other. And on top of that, how we need to actually be around each other. I had a meeting one time, where I was talking with somebody, and talking about that work life balance, you know, we both ended up heading out to the grocery store, and we met each other. And it was like, I just got done talking to them. We're standing in the grocery store. Hi, we both have our masks on, and we must talk for 30 minutes only because we could actually be face to face. So I think the one thing that we learned is that the human condition, we need to be physically in the same spot to be human and to be a society. And we can do a hybrid. But we really have to we have to be together

Paul Gilbert II 1:12:16

All right, like I said that ended all of our questions. I'm going to end the recording.