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Interview with David Glassman

David Glassman

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Subject: Effects of COVID-19

Interviewee: Dr. David Michael Glassman

Interviewer: Benjamin Robert Drake

Place of Interview: Microsoft Teams

Drake: So, how is it being the president of the university during this pandemic?

Glassman: Well, as you can imagine, it's a very challenging time, and one that calls for just a huge number of executive decisions that need to be made up from the beginning of the pandemic, through currently, the pandemic is so dynamic, and changing all the time that it's calling upon, you know, a great deal of research and information gathering, and then informed decision making, and then executing those decisions for the safety of the community.

Drake: Right, of course. So now we're going to move into like different areas of campus and how you think of each though each of those areas have been impacted. So, we're going to start with students. So how do you think a student's day to day or life at EIU has been impacted?

Glassman: If we look at EIU, in the in the typical relationship that we have for students at EIU, it's one of high engagement, it's one of high activity and personalized attention. A lot of discussions in classes, outside of classes. We're a university that the vast majority of our classes are traditionally in person in a small student number setting, with a lot of a lot of interaction. Last March, when the pandemic

began, and we had to abruptly change our operations and have all of our students move remotely, for some of them, it was the first time that they ever had classes on an online modality. And for some of our faculty, it was the first time they taught classes in an online modality. So, you can imagine that that's a stressful situation for both the faculty and students. And, you know, it certainly is different than our normal approach. And so, there is no question that our students have been affected by COVID in a way that they had to become adaptable and flexible, to a changing environment of learning that they have not generally been dealing with in the past. So pretty difficult. And also, for your students in the non-learning areas, just the engagement areas of student organizations, of student athletics, and everything that goes along with the socialization that takes place. And for you know, for students, a lot of students you know, I mean, you come to a university for a university experience, and that experience involves a lot of socialization in outside of classroom activities. And of course, that had to change with the pandemic, putting additional stress and a different type of environment on the students.

Drake: You touched on faculty a little bit. So how do you think employees have been impacted? So not only faculty, but also staff, whether that be administrative staff or like dining hall workers, any up and down the roster?

Glassman: Well, there's two issues that are balancing in the minds of all the employees as well as the students. And that is the health issue, is campus safe? Are we doing

the proper protocols to reduce the amount of viral transmission that could take place on campus, and you know, students and employees are concerned about that they want to be in a safe environment. And then the other side is the students essentially, their learning and their activities, being able to be performed at a normal level, that's, that's expected of our students. So, we want to provide a great education. We want to provide activities that involve engagement, but at the same time, we have to make sure that everybody is safe. So, our faculty are interested in providing the best type of education, they can given the constraints, but everybody is concerned with the health aspects of the university environment and all that it entails.

Drake: Of course. Over the course of the pandemic, we've heard a lot from the Charleston community. So how much on unlike on a scale? How much do you think the university has worked with the Charleston community?

Glassman: Well, I'm not sure what your scale is. But let's say if it was one to five, I would say that we are four and a half or close to five. Since the very start of the pandemic, a very close relationship with the Coles County Department of Health, the Coles County Health Department, and we meet with them almost every other week, to talk about what's taking place on our campus, what's taking place in the Charleston environment, and how we can work together, in order to make sure that we are doing everything possible to minimize the transmission of the virus, we also have a very, very close partnership with the Sarah Bush Lincoln hospital.

And we have all been collaborating together as a team. Of course, Charleston, as you can imagine, at the beginning of the pandemic, they were quite concerned about our students, and the large size of our population at EIU, and how that might affect the community at large. And with the partnership and the work that we've done, and the great work of our faculty and our, and our employees, as well as the incredible work of our students, which I'm very, very proud of the transmission of the virus on our campus has been maintained at a lower rate than what we see out in the city and what we see in our in our county. So, we're doing a great job.

Drake: What strategies do you think have helped the most navigating the relationship with those different organizations?

Glassman: Open communication is of utmost importance, and being able to listen, you know, everybody has their thoughts, everybody has their concerns. And what we've attempted to do is to be listeners first, and then problem solvers in a collaborative manner. So that we can all work together as a unified position. So, for example, when the pandemic, you know, started, and we all went remote, and then over the summer, we spent hundreds of hours of preparing the university so that we could have our students and our employees return. The health department was very concerned that they wouldn't have enough contact tracers to bring, you know, five or 6000 students back into the community. And so, in that partnership, we created a memorandum of agreement. And there are 14 or 16 contact tracers that are

working just for EIU, and concert with the health department. And so that's what allowed us to do some really amazing work in keeping this virus at bay.

Drake: Awesome. So, over the course of the pandemic, I'm sure your role has changed a lot. So how do you think in what ways has your role changed the most?

Glassman: There's no prior training for a president about how to deal with a global pandemic that our country hasn't seen in over 100 years. There was nothing really to prepare me, except for the H1N1 virus surge that took place a few years ago. But at that time, I wasn't I wasn't a president. So, I was not in that position to have to make those decisions. So, for me, what has changed is the importance of science in dealing in the decision-making process during a pandemic. You have to be constantly aware of what's taking place as new knowledge is coming about in this particular virus, this Coronavirus, and also to be listening to those that know best and that would be the scientists, the CDC, the Illinois Department of Public Health. And of course, we were also guided by the governor's office as well as the Illinois Board of Higher Education and working in concert, so it changed me. I'm always interested in Student Health, and I'm always been involved with the health of the community and the student centered and to promote good lifestyles in health care. But this is this is totally different. And it just took it to another level of how to make a campus safe, how to have people how to motivate them, to respect the virus, which I think you really have to respect this virus. Regardless, if you were an asymptomatic carrier of the virus, or you're infected by the virus, or

even if you have never been infected, you have to respect it. And how do you get students and employees to respect at the same time how to get students and employees to feel comfortable that you have done due diligence and created an environment on campus in which you are keeping them safe and healthy. So, it changed, it changed me a lot. And it is still doing that because the pandemic is not over. In fact, you know, it's changing right now. It's surging in the nation; it's surging in our in our county and across our state. But at the same time, tomorrow, we're supposed to hear whether a vaccine is approved by the CDC or the FDA, rather to start combating the virus. So, when that comes into play, you know, I have to I have to balance the keep the campus safe, keep the students learning and engaged. And how does the vaccine play into our future here at EIU?

Drake: Awesome. So, what do you think University-wise, has changed the most?

Glassman: Universities have a tendency to change very slowly. That pandemic was a catalyst, for the university to change very, very rapidly in order to navigate through this pandemic. And I think one thing that it does show us is that university can be flexible, it can be adaptable, and it can respond to changes in the environment. And that's going to be helpful as we continue in the future. As our students change, as technology changes, we're going to need to be adaptable just in our normal learning paradigms as we move forward in the post pandemic era. And so, I think it you know, it's, it's been dreadful, it's been hard, it continues to

be hard, but there will be some things that we learn from the pandemic, that we'll be implementing, in the post pandemic environment.

Drake: Cool. Um, so you talked a lot about working with like health departments and the community as a whole. But are there any other factors that like, influence the policies that you put in place, for instance, like the mask mandate, other things like that?

Glassman: Yeah, over the course of the summer, in fact, our mass mandate has changed a couple different times and actually became harder and harder, that is more restrictive and more restrictive as we as we moved. These mandates these policies that we put in the return to campus plan that we have on our website, where was the outcome of again, hundreds of hours of discussions, and following what the CDC was recommending for various types of businesses, industries, organizations, as well as universities, and trying to put together a plan that implements best practices, best practices in air quality, best practices in masking best practices in social distance, and so on, and so on. And something that many people might not know is that the, the presidents and chancellors of the 12 public universities in Illinois, have been having meetings every Wednesday afternoon. And we've been doing that, since the time of the impasse in 2015, is when we've started to do that. And so even though we are different types of universities and have different missions and everything else, the President's talk every single week, and that was very helpful during the pandemic, because we could share

what's taking place, what are the challenges, what are they doing, what are we doing, and start comparing, so that the universities all had a great set of, of information coming in to do what was the best practice for their own individual University. And that was very, very helpful to be able to talk to the other presidents and see what they're doing, how they're communicating it, and then to report back to one another. This has worked, this hasn't worked, and this is where we're seeing challenges, and this is how we're working. resolving them. Very, very helpful.

Drake: So, I've talked to other people throughout campus, because we're doing interviews with like, people up and down. How do you think that the students have handled all the different changes? Do you think that they were a bit resistant? Do you think that they accepted them? Does, that makes sense?

Glassman: It certainly makes sense. And, and relative to our students, as I mentioned earlier, I couldn't be more proud of how they have been handling themselves, particularly on campus, they have been observing the masking policy, social distancing policies, there has been very, very few problems with that. And that, that just that just gives me great hope. And, and true belief that our generation that is your generation is just, you know, prepared to understand complicated problems, and willing to do their part to resolve huge problems. And of course, this will not be the only huge problem in your lifetime. And to be able to show that you can come together, and you can work together, is just momentous. So, I'm really proud of

that. We have had some students who have had difficulties moving remote, in there, in their learning, and that have indicated to us that, that this has just been difficult. And we're trying to help as best as we can, you know, through our outstanding faculty, in our administrators to try and help them navigate through it themselves. But I just, you know, and, and really, when I say when I talk to some of my peer institutions, and peer presidents in here, some of the problems that they've experienced on their campus by their students, it makes me feel evermore proud of the Panthers, you know, we've tried to message it, we've tried to be open in our communications, we have been mostly trying to do it through positive reinforcement. And telling people to do it for themselves and to do it for others. And it's the right thing to do, as opposed to taking the approach, if you don't do this, today, you are going to, you know, we are going to have this, you know, kind of kind of the threatening way of getting people to adhere to policies, and we have not done much threatening, we've just continued to indicate this is what we need to do. And we're relying on you to be a part of the solution, and not to be a problem, and students who have taken heed to that.

Drake: Cool. So, what supports Have you implemented for students, specifically academically, and/or emotionally emotional supports?

Glassman: Yeah, those are, those (intelligible) with both parts being very, very important. And that is, when we have moved, you know, we're still doing about 30, some percent of our classes completely in person. And then another 30% or so have

parts of the, the, you know, hybrid parts of the learning experience in person and parts of it online, and then the remainder, you know, totally on online. And so, when we change that, we need to provide certain supports to students to make sure that they are able to maximize their learning. And so, we've talked to our faculty about creating an atmosphere, even if it's online, that's one in which students feel connected between themselves, other students, and the faculty members. We've been providing supports, by way of technology, if we understand that there is a technological gap that some students have to try and assist them with that technology and have that technology available to them on campus so that they have access to it at all times. We have put in other supports with advising and helping our students being advised. If they can't come into the university for advising, they can do it online and have advisors come to them as well as tutoring that's taking place. So, we know it's tough for our students. We understand that we know it's different, and we're trying to make those connections. On the other side, mental health is a serious issue for students. Prior to the pandemic, and in the pandemic, even increasingly so. And we have noticed that in the number of students who are seeking mental health counseling, of course, we have a mental health counseling center. And we are doing work both on campus as well as remotely for our students in mental health. And we recently hired another mental health counselor to join our mental health center, because of the demand that we're getting from students in order to be able to talk to a mental health counselor, we've also, I believe, included some group sessions to be helpful to our students, and other supports such as that. We've also talked to our faculty to

be on the lookout for students who are showing or exhibiting attributes of anxiety, or stress, or depression, and to reach out to those students and to reset reach out to our, our health center, so that they can be contacted and provided with the counseling that they that they need. The pandemic itself is stressful. But add being a student on top of that, is more stressful. And then a student who has been there has had their learning environment altered to one that was very comfortable for them that was in person with all their friends, no masks, and you could hang out together and walk together. That's a third stressor, you know, placed on students right now. And so, we recognize it, and we're doing all that we can to help.

Drake: Awesome. Those are all the questions that I have. But we want to give you time to just kind of like put anything else that you want on the record. So, is there anything else that you think would be important to put on the record or anything, anything else you'd like to say in general?

Glassman: Sure, and I appreciate the opportunity to do so. This, the pandemic has caused our university to rely on the expertise and the assistance of hundreds of people. You know, this is the decisions aren't just being made by myself, or even my small President's Council. We have the emergency management team that has been called into place. All of our faculty have been called in, our Student Services area, every area across campus has had to collaborate and to cooperate with one another in order for us to successfully respond to the pandemic. And I can't give my thanks enough to everybody who has been involved in that. And I can't thank

the students in that for adapting and for coming to EIU to receive their education. Our students are special to us, you know, we have that brand of being all in for our students. And our students are terrific. And they're outstanding. And you know, I'm emotional because I know this is stressful for everybody. And our students have just been incredible. They have been incredible.

Interview Terminated