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Subject: Effects of COVID-19

Interviewee: Dr. Zachary Luke Newell

Interviewer: Benjamin Robert Drake

Place of Interview: Zoom

Drake: So, we will go ahead and jump right into it. First question in your own words, what is your role on campus?

Newell: So, I'm Dean of the library, so I provide oversight and, and operation of the library.

Drake: Perfect. So, from your personal point of view, how do you think COVID has impacted Eastern's campus?

Newell: Well, I think we've had to put, press the pause button on most of the face-to-face instruction and think a little bit differently about how we offer services. So EIU generally is sort of disrupted the relationship to students in the classroom. And I think we've prioritized at EIU face-to-face instruction. So, we've had to sort of hit the ground with offering some hybrid or online learning. And I think the same has been for the library too, in terms of the services that we offer, which we've had to find more creative ways to offer that service, knowing that we can't offer it fully face-to-face. And then the other issue is I think we've really had the ground in terms of offering access to certain hardware technology and services in a different way. So, for instance, like the library, [inaudible] as I'd imagine, some of other parts of EIU had to sort of redirect or try to refigure how we make technology and certain resources accessible to students and even some of the faculty and staff

who didn't encounter that they were going to need certain platforms or technology moving forward.

Drake: Okay. Um so during the pandemic, obviously everyone's faced very tough challenges, but from your position and your role, what do you think has been the biggest challenge?

Newell: I think maintaining some semblance of normalcy during this whole process, and it was one part of it. And then the other part is just continuing to communicate and trying to figure out what's that timetable for returning to normal. I mean, realizing that, you know, we need [inaudible] is, and we still need to move forward, and we still keep our eye on the future, but then try to figure out where that sense of opportunity overlaps with a sense of immediacy and then figure out what we can appropriate or adopt moving forward. So that it makes sense as part of a holistic program of practice. If that makes sense. I mean, it's a couple of those things, but they all really come down to, you know, continue messaging and keeping our eye on the future as to what we normally would have done anyway.

Drake: Awesome. so obviously the library has implemented like a bunch of different policies. What do you think the biggest change for the library has been?

Newell: It's hard to say. I don't know if there's one, one biggest one per se. I mean, obviously the masking policy is the biggest change in it and enforcing the masking policy and understanding all through the pandemic. Even now we're almost a year into it getting, getting students primarily on board with this idea,

you know, Hey, this is for your wellbeing and for other's wellbeing. But I, but I think just the, the small disruptions, you know, we offer sort of a curbside pickup, you know, don't go into the stacks cleaning stuff down, refiguring the way we access the study room so that we can't meet as a group necessarily anymore, but, you know, to one or two people in the physical distancing and then offering some services virtually that normally in some cases it's easier to do that face to face. So, like research help via zoom or via teams in some ways. So those little things I think, so it's just the sort of observation of some of the health criteria around the pandemic.

Drake: So, continuing with the policies when you, when the library kind of like comes up with a new policy or institutes a new policy, what goes into making those policies? Like where do you what's the way to word it? Like, what's the process for that?

Newell: Do you mean specific to the pandemic?

Drake: Yeah. Like specific to the pandemic and the library policies,

Newell: It depends on a number of factors. So, like the quarantining policy, we were taking recommendations really from we're part of a consortium, in fact, part of a couple of consortia. And so, say the state library or the state. So, the, the, the Illinois state library will make a recommendation that goes to our consortia or consortium. And then the con one of the consortia say CARLI, which is out of Champaign will say, "Hey, we really recommend based on the federal

government's recommendation or whatever, the, the, the research shows that you should quarantine materials for say seven days, or they've reduced it to five days or four days or three days." And so, we set policies based on those recommendations or even early on in the fall. I mean, we realized as we got a little further along in the, in the pandemic, that there were still a request among students who might have classes online, they might've been coming from a face-to-face class, they're going to an online class, but they can't make it back either to their residency off campus or across campus. And they wanted access to the study room, you know, so they could engage in their online class without having to return home. And so, part of that process would be working with some of those authority figures on campus, the epidemiologist Dr. Sheila Simons, or Dr. Eric Davidson at the health center to say, Hey, we want to open the study rooms, but how can we do this safe, safely? Do we need a buffer after they get in? Do they need to do the students need to wear their mask by buffer? I mean, after they're in, do we allow half hours so we can get in there, clean the room to make sure that the air is, is filtered and whatnot. So, a number of factors, you know, sometimes it's just norming from our professional organizations, other times it's based on health recommendations and just talking to people across campus, and then just making sure that norming from some of our sister organizations, like other state university libraries.

Drake: Awesome. so over the course of pandemic what do you think has been, what have you seen the biggest challenges that your staff or faculty have faced?

Newell: Couple of things I'd say, you know, continuing engagement and communication, you know, some, some are working from home, some have flexible schedules some because of the changes that get implemented sort of quickly, you know, there's a lot of shifting around a little bit. I think some of it is staying centered and, and reengaging in that sense of wellbeing moving forward, because there's just that constant low-level stress and working through a pandemic and trying to figure out or balance, you know, that obligation, you know, to the students then to the faculty and staff that we're serving, but also a lot going on in everybody's personal lives. And by that, I mean, you know, juggling family working remotely worrying about health and safety. And so, so maybe it's just general wellbeing professionally and personally, I would say probably.

Drake: Awesome. Perfect. So, switching now to a more to the more of the university level what do you think has been the biggest change for the university as a whole?

Newell: I think just readjusting to, to, to teaching, learning, communication and messaging, so that that's a couple of things, but I think they go hand in hand because of the pandemic you know, trying to figure out, do we, do we one stay open, then if we stay open, do we offer face-to-face classes? You know, is it safe to do so? How do you message that environment, but, but try to maintain a sense of not just immediacy, but an eye toward the future about, you know, if we were to down or we offer all classes online where our strength has been face-to-face what will that mean for our future sustainability and our future livelihood too? So, I think it kind of comes hand in hand in terms of messaging, how we're going to

work together as a team, how we're going to do this safely, how we're going to get through this together and how we're going to come out, even stronger if possible, on the other side.

Drake: Yeah. Awesome. So last Spring 2020, we obviously shifted from wholly in-person to wholly online. And it was a pretty quick change. So how did the library handle everything that happened with that? I would assume that there were many books that were checked out. So how did you guys handle the shed from everyone going home?

Newell: You moved from everybody going home. You mean from a staff perspective or a service perspective?

Drake: Both, if you want to.

Newell: I think we handled it well. I mean, I think we were able to accommodate, I mean, we knew that we were going to be, I guess the only building really left on campus that was going to be not fully operational, but operational and open on campus. And we were able to do it with for lack of a better term, sort of a skeletal or essential crew level, I guess you'd say where we could have, you know, five or six people in the building to ride on it. And we knew how to section off, you know, bookshelves get people into the building in such a way so they could utilize services around technology. So we, we handled it well and just continued to, at least I think we handled it well and continue to communicate through it, you know, let everybody know and check in and make sure that they were just logging

what they were doing remotely, tried to get everybody set up with computers and also is just a matter of mobilizing the transition in such a way so that we could sort of bring the office to those who were working remotely and then continue to communicate with what was happening in the library, just to maintain some semblance of service until we could figure out how we were going to pivot come late summer into the fall semester.

Drake: So, from, from other things, I know that you're, you can correct me if I'm wrong, but you're on the COVID transportation team, correct. That transports students to like the apartments that need to quarantine, correct?

Newell: Yup. That is correct.

Drake: Okay. So, I would like to go in like a little bit about that. Like, what is it, first of all like what is in, what do you do?

Newell: Well, my, my role is as a volunteer, if, if somebody in housing is my understanding and I, and I don't know if anybody has tested positive or if they've been contact traced. But the student usually goes from the dorm. So, some on-campus living environment and gets transported to, I mean, I guess it's still on campus, but into designated areas or areas that have been designated as quarantine living arrangements. So, for instance, at one point recently, I transported a student, took the van from University Court apartments, wiped down the van, you know, put on some gloves. And there's a barrier between the backseat of the van, picked up a student at one of the residence halls made sure that they put their stuff

in the, in the van. So, they could quarantine. It was 14 days in the fall. Now I believe it's 10 days and then transported the student over to I can't remember the name of the housing, but they have some housing over near the Lutheran church off of 4th street behind there. There are the university apartments I want to say. So that's not University Court apartments, university apartments. And then just make sure that they feel comfortable, have everything that they need and, and then do it all over again.

Drake: Awesome. so, what, what, this is more of a personal question, but what led to you wanting to volunteer to be a part of that?

Newell: I heard about it through Dr. Anne Flaherty [VP for Student Affairs]. she was mentioning the possibility that they needed some volunteers and I'm very service minded, I guess. And I felt like it was a great opportunity. I wanted to jump at the chance to help students. I mean, I cared, cared deeply about the students, not only they come into the library, but those around campus, and it just seemed like a, a small back and, and, and to make sure they were taken care of. And I felt like it was a good way to connect with the students too. I must be feeling anxious once they're identified as possibly going to quarantine.

Drake: So, shifting back to your role as the Dean how, how have, how has that role specifically changed? Have you had to add any responsibilities, has any responsibilities kind of like drifted away or anything like that?



Newell: I don't know if they've been additional responsibilities, but maybe a sense of urgency or maybe the weight of continuing to communicate a little bit more, you know, to try to connect it and make sure that I'm creating more transparency for the faculty and staff. So, they have a sense of what's going on. And in sometimes, you know, I feel I'm able to do that successfully. Other times I'm able to offer that information, but I still don't know anything more because it's, you know, as we were early on in the pandemic, it was always a wait and see, and maybe this wasn't going to last very long. And then as we get details, it's, you know, we'll continue working remotely or as we come back, how are we going to implement safety measures in the library? But a lot of that was kind of figuring that out on the fly, right. And, and taking recommendations from across campus. And then it was more of, you know, are we going to be face-to-face in the spring, or when are we going to get the vaccine or when's testing, that'd be available on campus, you know, all through the fall or the spring. And so just trying to keep everybody on, on task and updated with as much information as possible, which isn't always an easy task if say we don't necessarily know, or I don't always have that information. So maybe just the added responsibility of sort of maybe managing and leading through a crisis and trying to be as transparent as possible with limited information.

Drake: Awesome. so, have you seen kind of the, the library kind of, I don't know, participation is the wrong word, but have you seen students the use of the library go down or how has, do you think the pandemic has affected students' use of the library? If any.

Newell: I'd say initially, maybe the usage went down. I mean, it's kind of shifted because in the spring, when we closed everything, there was a sense of urgency amongst students who needed access to technology who are still using the computer needed to print, print out information. As we opened back up, you know, in the summer it was limited access just because of the limited number of students around. But by the time we got to the fall semester, I'd say there was a little bit of a drop-off maybe because students were sort of feeling their way or getting a sense, you know, "Is it safe to be in the library? Do I need to be in the library with all of these constricted measure, constricted measures.?" But essentially by I'd say by the middle of the fall semester, and even closer to the end, we saw a real uptick.

Newell: And I don't know if it's returned to normal or in some cases might even be larger numbers than normal, because it seems like students are just using the library just out of a need, as a place to go. And because it is a safe place to go. So, I mean, if you can't go out to a restaurant or you can't go out to certain social environments, this is as safe as it can be, where you could still talk to your peers, to your friends, to your classmates. So there has been a precipitous uptick, I think, in the number of students using it based on last semester. And even now to start this semester

Drake: Do you, has the library implemented any like resources or policies for students to kind of like supplement maybe some of the things they've lost because of the pandemic, an example would be I know, I, I don't know. I don't know when it was, but I know you, there was a post on the EIU social media accounts that have

said that the library now offers free printing basically everywhere. So that would be one of those examples.

Newell: Yeah, that's one. And that's something that came from, it's statewide money called a GEAR allocation and GEAR stands for Government Education, Emergency Relief Fund. And so, there was some money that was designed from the state given to us, to public institutions to help retain students, so to help them in many ways. And so that was one initiative. One for instance, was the purchase of a campus-wide zoom license. Another one was free printing and we've targeted the free printing in the library. You know, so students don't have to worry about that extra financial hurdle, even, even if it's small, you know, those little things that you don't want to have to think about it, if you just want to print something out related to class or, you know, whatever the case may be. And then the, one of the other ones that we were just getting up and running as part of the library is a large sum of money. We purchased over a hundred laptops. We have 55 Wi-Fi hotspots. We have a web cams and microphones that we're checking out at the Center for Student Innovation on the ground floor. There's a classroom space down there and it's an old periodical checkout desk, but that's also part of the GEAR allocation to help students.

Drake: Cool. Well, that's all the, the specific questions I have for you, but we do want to give everyone time to, but really anything they want on their record this is going to be about the library, the university, pretty much anything. If you have anything

that you didn't get to say that you wanted to say we wanted to give you that platform. So, I will [inaudible] for that.

Newell: The only thing I want to say as a shout out to the faculty and staff who have just been doing amazing job, and even the students who have been working in the library, because I don't think any of this has been possible or would it be possible without them, and, and given the uncertainty and the stress surrounding the pandemic. I think they've really risen to the challenge in many ways and creative ways to offer surfaces real services for students, faculty, and staff, but students primarily realizing that this is their livelihood, students' livelihood, the faculty and staff's livelihood and realizing that this has got to end at some point and will likely be stronger for it once we come out on the other end. So, I want to be on the record to give a shout out to the faculty and staff and students who have been working in the library to make this possible. I couldn't have done it without them.

Drake: Yeah. Awesome.