

# Gregory Knott Interview

Secretary of the Board of Trustees and Former Assistant Dean of Libraries for Business Operations

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## **SPEAKERS**

Greg Knott, Kinsey Brown

### **Kinsey Brown 00:00**

All right. Good morning. My name is Kinsey Brown. I'm a graduate assistant representing the University of Illinois archives. Today is Thursday, June 30. And I'm here with Gregory Knott, the secretary of the board of trustees and former Assistant Dean of Libraries for business operations. Greg is a two-time alumnus of the U of I system with a Master of Business Administration and a master's in library and information sciences, a lifelong member of the Urbana Champaign community. Greg also sits on the Champaign County Farm Bureau, and serves the Boy Scouts of America as the prairie lands Council Vice President for Development. Today is June 30. We are here at the Archives meeting room to discuss the Board of Trustees' responses to the COVID 19 pandemic, for inclusion in the University of Illinois COVID-19 documentation project. Greg, thank you so much for joining.

### **Greg Knott 00:54**

Well, thank you. It's my pleasure to be here.

### **Kinsey Brown 00:56**

Absolutely. So, to start us off, do you remember the first time that you heard about the COVID 19 pandemic?

### **Greg Knott 01:03**

I do? I've always been a news junkie. So, I've always been some life on the news. And I remember I think in December of 2019, starting to hear those early cases in China. And I think, you know, I remember hearing the first one, I think, was in Seattle or somewhere. And of course, it spread, obviously, across the country. So, I was attuned to it really early. But I had no idea of what the future impact was going to be, you know, in terms of the world.

### **Kinsey Brown 01:32**

Absolutely. Yeah. Did the emergence of COVID-19 have any effect on your work prior to the lockdown?

### **Greg Knott 01:39**

We had some conversations about it. You know, the interesting thing is, I started as board secretary in January of '20, 2020. So, I left here at the University Library in December 2018. So, I started the role. And I worked with my predecessor, DeDe Williams, who's the prior board secretary. And so, she was

training me and get me acclimated up there. And, you know, you talk about it, you know, in passing, especially as it started getting closer to March, we started paying some more attention, but I don't think we had any sense of what was to come in terms of impact on our work in the university in the world. So

**Kinsey Brown** 02:20

absolutely, I don't think any mistakes. So, to that effect, do you remember your last day on campus before going into lockdown, that would have been about mid-March of 2020?

**Greg Knott** 02:29

Well, we have Yeah, I do. Remember, we were having a March board meeting at the Lana union. And so it was, for me, my second board meeting in this role. And I know we were talking about it. And I remember talking to Dr. Stuart King, he's one of the university trustees and is a medical doctor at Christie and Champaign. Just about you know, you know, is it real? What does it mean? Are the precautions that we're talking about from, you know, FDA, and others, those things we should be doing? So, I remember having that lunchtime conversation with him. I remember the other thing that was going on was the big 10 basketball tournament. And so, it came to an abrupt conclusion. And we knew, and I think the NBA canceled their games. So, we knew right, then it was getting really serious. And again, still, I don't think we understood what the impact was gonna be. But we knew that day, as we wrapped up that Board maker that was on that Thursday of that week, that we probably were going to be in for some big changes, but yet still didn't know quite.

**Kinsey Brown** 03:40

So, did you work from home at any time during 2020? And if so, how did that change your work responsibilities?

**Greg Knott** 03:47

So, I remember DD saying very specifically, DD Williams, your training is now because we're going home and we're just gonna have to figure this out as we go. So, I remember, you know, we were talking on the third floor of Henry administration building where the President the rest of us are our offices, our take home everything because we don't know where we're coming back that we only think it's a couple of weeks. So, you know, grab a laptop, grab your notes, and whatever it would be, and, and we'll go home and work. And so definitely went home. Obviously, we didn't really come back for almost two years. So, it definitely impacted our how we do our work. I had never heard of Zoom prior to that time. So, you know, instantly, we switched our day-to-day meetings on Zoom. And, you know, we could talk more about the Trustees meetings as we go but shifted everything because I don't, we didn't understand the timeline. You know, because what we were saying early on was, you know, take home some work and, you know, as a supervisor for my employees, you know, when we spoke with HR, you know, maybe there's projects they can do you know, Updating spreadsheets and, and things like that, that are critical work, but aren't necessarily vital work. So, we were trying to fill time, well, you know, two weeks, four weeks, and the time went on. And so, then you still had to do the day-to-day business. And that's when we begin to adapt.

**Kinsey Brown** 05:20

What strategies did you adopt to make working remotely more effective?

**Greg Knott 05:24**

Well, communication was the most important thing. So, we had to make sure everybody had the right amount of technology. You know, and, you know, for my small office group, there's nine of us candidates, you know, make sure they had home internet, you know, I remember the university and the system had hotspots available if you needed them, you know, so you had to be connected. And then the other then was the technology was it up to speed? I know, we had to buy some, you know, new cameras and, you know, things for people to use to be able to work remotely, you know, a keyboard and things that, you know, they may have left at work, because, you know, you didn't think you'd need them that overtime? Of course, they did. And then we I know specifically our office, we got everybody. Laptop. So, communication was number one. What we also did immediately was we started twice a week staff meetings. So, Mondays and Wednesdays, and we were meeting just to stay in touch, you know, and maybe see how things were going. Because there were more questions than we had answers at that point in time. And, you know, again, I was new, you know, so they didn't really know me. And of course, Deedee was going to retire in May of '20. So, she was winding up her career. And we were in that transitory space. And we knew we had a May board meeting. So, we already began to talk about, you know, what was that going to do? How are we going to do that? There's actually then at the President's level, we started having cabinet meetings, because I'm a member of his cabinet, at least twice a week. And very early, we had Dr. Bob Berry, she's the head of human health, which you about Chicago, he was coming in and really given us the medical perspective. And because the numbers, you know, the COVID, numbers started to move up. And very quickly, we started accumulating data, the system through some of the expertise at the faculty at Urbana, and trying to put some metrics around it. And then they were trying to do some projections. But, you know, I came back to communication because we were all not together. So, we had to quickly pivot and learn how to work differently. So, I think in many ways, everybody was new. And so, it wasn't just me. It was everyone learning how to communicate and to do that over and over. And people were nervous. They didn't know what it meant. It never worked at home. I've never worked at home in terms of anything extensively at time. So, it was a learning process for sure. As we got home.

**Kinsey Brown 07:52**

And I bet people appreciated this twice a week meetings, just to see human faces.

**Greg Knott 07:56**

They did and, you know, because you weren't seeing anybody that you know, once they really locked this down. You were at home. And in my case, my daughter that first year was a junior here at the university. My son was a junior in high school. And my wife Brooke was in the Alumni Association. So, we're all home, trying to keep them connected because eventually, the classes on campus pivoted and went on, went virtual. My son at the high school, they finally realized they weren't coming back. And so, he went virtual. We canceled his track season. He was an all-star track and field athlete, and we lost that in his junior year. But you know, how to even learn remote that's different to as you can appreciate, than being in person. So, all of that was I think adding distress. To your point. I think people those zoom meetings; they were some reassurances. The ones I had with our Office group, the other ones I was having with the cabinet, because I was, I trusted Dr. Barish. I do trust Dr. Barish and his expertise. So, I felt like I had an advantage of hearing firsthand medical knowledge coming our way of what was going

on. So that was, that was vital not only for my personal reassurance, but I think the system leadership as they started making decisions that played a big factor.

**Kinsey Brown 09:19**

And when it came time to return to campus, do you remember about when you returned to campus? And how did you feel at that point about coming back?

**Greg Knott 09:29**

So, we returned, you know, we're talking about return in early you know, of course, that they kept getting pushed. I think finally, we gave up on 2020 And they would be home coming into 2021. And, you know, the campus was going to try to return to some limited way. We made the decision as a system because you have employees that needed to be on campus because they're serving students and other things directly. Our role, of course, obviously, administrative level we weren't as vital. So have, you know, you're trying to keep down the number of bodies on the campus, so we ended up staying remote, we thought we would be back, you know, by into spring 21, then we went through summer and 21. And by then we were just really playing it, you know, ad hoc as we went and just stay flexible. Eventually, we did come back, for the most part in, you know, spring and 22. But by then, we became so accustomed to working remotely, that my particular office, we did a hybrid model. And that's what we're doing today. So are in fact, there was, as we record this, you know, more spikes in COVID, in May of 2022. So, I've had my folks stay home, for the most part to this month, and then we're going to be in July. But for the foreseeable future, we're going to keep a hybrid work model. So that's one of the remnants of COVID.

**Kinsey Brown 10:56**

Obviously, everybody's been flexible, and all of this. So, you are the secretary of the board of trustees who have final say in all decision making on this campus and throughout the system. This is a heavy responsibility. So how did you and your coworkers manage the pressure of this major decision making in the early days of the pandemic?

**Greg Knott 11:15**

So, you know, the Board of Trustees is, is the final authority for so many things. So, keeping them informed, keeping them engaged, I remember very early on, one of the committees of the board is the executive committee that's comprised of the chair and two other members. And if they are convenient, they have the full authority of the board to make decisions. And so, because some of the things early on, needed rapid decision making, we convened the executive committee a few times via zoom, and they were making decisions based on, you know, recommendation of the President or others. And so that that's what it was it the President was consistently in contact with the board chair, Don Edwards. And so, they were talking probably almost daily at that point, as these things unfold, and then I was communicating with the board, you know, and more general sense of what was going on. But we were fielding calls, you know, what was going to happen, you know, what do you know about this particular situation, whatever. So, the board, you know, any anytime and their existence, they have to be informed. And so, it was even more critical that we kept that communication channel open with them, you know, as to keep them informed of what was going on. Because, at that time to the governor's office, Governor Pritzker, as you know, as the state ramped up their efforts, they looked to the

University of Illinois system for guidance on, you know, they were running the data models and things about how this was going to play out. Of course, the Hospital in Chicago is one of the UI is one of the major hospitals in the Chicago area. So, impact on that. So, they were leaning on us, too. So, there was also communications with the governor's office and with the, you know, the trustees again, to kind of sync things up, and to see have a unified approach as to where the state was going to go in the university, they may was not playing a big role in that. So that was a lot of is communication in our game, you got to keep those communication channels open. And I guess that's probably what you've heard me talk about consistently, as we discuss things is the amount of communication, I think increased it had to because we weren't there together. And the issues were more timely and vital, that perhaps some of the routine business that we do.

**Kinsey Brown 13:39**

Absolutely. Now to go off script a little bit. You mentioned that you worked with the governor's office, we actually recently spoke to Julie Pryde from the Champaign Urbana Public Health department-- District. Yes. Was she, did you? Were you speaking to her at any point? Are they...

**Greg Knott 13:58**

Not me personally, because you know, my role is more in the background on some of the stuff but definitely keep in mind, there's the system, you have AI system, and then there was the Urbana campus. And I know the, you know, they're about a campus put together quickly a task force, and they teamed up with CUPHD, Julie pride was leading those efforts. So, they were talking about what was the local effort here, to coordinate things. And then, of course, Chancellor Jones and others were reporting back to us. And then, you know, these twice a week cabinet meetings, we were having, you know, all the Chancellors were in there as well. So there, you know, there was joint system UI system and university leadership, but definitely that communication was going to happen that between Julian, the Chancellor and the team here, but they reformed the president all the time. You know, where the state came in. I think early. Governor Pritzker was making decisions about, you know, what was the state going to shut down or What was going to be open, he and his team were looking at the data that was being provided by the University. And so that was critical in their decisions, as they were, you know, using the following the science to see what the state reaction was going to be.

**Kinsey Brown 15:15**

That's actually a great segue into my next question. So, the decision making from your office applies to the entirety of the university system. During the height of the pandemic, I imagine that the needs of the urban Chicago campus are very different from the needs of the more rural Urbana Champaign campus. So how did you design a one size that fits all policies for each campus throughout the system?

**Greg Knott 15:39**

So even in normal times, universities have their own autonomy. So, their decision making, you know, from the chancellor on down is local. That, you know, there was some coordinated efforts across the three. But your question, you know, is specific that says each of those conditions were different, in Sangamon. County and Springfield, here in Champaign County. And then, of course, in Cook County, and the city of Chicago, you know, and each of those universities, were dealing with the local entities there. So, I think what President Killeen did, and you know, with the board's you know, guidance was,

you know, give that latitude to tilt, to continue to them to make those decisions locally. But yet, there were things that at an appropriate level, they were coordinating through the system, you know, HR kinds of decisions, you know, they were all talking together. So, I'd say they were making joint decisions between the university and the system. And I think that, again, goes back to the leadership, and the communication they were having, and the frequency they were having of it, to make those decisions. But each Chancellor made their decisions for their campus with their teams as they applied to local. But generally, you know, when the university the system shut down, that was a collective decision. It wasn't, it really wasn't any top-down decisions. It was of a collaborative nature.

**Kinsey Brown 17:01**

To make sense, you know, each campus is so unique. So, the Board of Trustees has a lot of authority, obviously, on our campuses. But the university system is also a major player in the communities that surround our campuses. How did the decision making in your office support these communities throughout the pandemic?

**Greg Knott 17:19**

So again, you know, from the Board Office, we're communicating things out, so it was less making decisions and was communicating like that. But I tried to be in tune with, you know, not only things that were being said, in the cabinet meetings and information come in there, but paying attention to the local media and what was being said, and just other local contacts, I have to see what they were learning social media, you could follow social media. And there was a lot of information, a lot of disinformation out there, that was useful to gauge people's reactions, to see what they were thinking, as, you know, decisions were made. And of course, as you know, there was a wide disparity of feelings about those decisions. But it was very useful in it. And that helped me track things to know what to keep the board informed with, you know, because though, they might have the authority of the day-to-day decision making they delegate to the President. And of course, he did the Chancellor's and so on. But it's definitely a partnership, especially in a situation unprecedented, like the pandemic.

**Kinsey Brown 18:24**

So just to speak to that kind of back-and-forth communication with the community, in your role as Secretary, part of that is requesting areas responding to requests from the public, but you're also a very active member of the local community. So, through your research on social media and those communication connections, how did you find that the community here locally responded to the innovations that were going on on campus, like the contact tracing ventilators, etc.?

**Greg Knott 18:51**

Well, I think early, you know, you felt his team approach, and the committee was all together. And, you know, didn't know what to expect. And we're hopeful that these things we were doing in terms of staying at home would help the mitigation and that the ventilators and things that were being developed would be useful. And of course, the, you know, has the vaccine and the drugs. They had, of course, a longer time to develop. You know, just in the organizations I was in, you know, the Champaign County Farm is saying they had they work from home, they went home, the boy scouts, they went home, we canceled all of our events for the Boy Scouts. The farmers, you know, champion County Farm Bureau, and the farmers were deemed vital immediately, because, you know, their spring planting season was

right as this began in March. So, they you know, they were adapting very quickly, of course, for them a lot of that they still had to put their crops into things. So, I think it depended on where you were in the community as to the impact and how you felt about it. There's, I think, a lot of nervousness, a lot of uncertainty. A lot of hope a lot of you unification I think as the week since the months and as the years moved on, obviously, people had divergent opinions about what should have been or not been done. And, you know, that's kind of led to where we are at least here in June of 2022. But I, you know, I don't think we needed you know, the only, you know, you go back in time, our only reference point really to this in recent history was 1918. And the pandemic, and I remember very early on, it's like, Well, what did what did we do, then? What did the university do? There are much smaller, different technologies. So, we were looking back to see what they were doing and some of their, you know, things. And then how do you apply those to today? But definitely, the emotions, I think, in the local community. They evolved and changed over time. But I think our community leaders not I know, I know. The mayor's the chancellor, Julie pride, and others were very strong leaders, and, you know, exhibited a high level, my opinion of good leadership, to try to lead the community in the area to this, you know, there's so much uncertainty. And, you know, that's hard for people to deal with. And in this day of misinformation, it just gets magnified. And so, I know they stuck to it. And they had some very tough decisions to make. And I know it was very stressful on them. But I think they showed great leadership for the community in general, we can't do this, the town and gown concept you hear, you know, there's probably never been closer between the community and the university, especially in Champaign Urbana. And I sense that from Springfield, I wasn't there. Chicago, since that's a bigger metropolitan area, Chicago, they were dealing with, not only the state of Illinois, but the city, Chicago public health, they were a team up there more people so different, you know, factors to consider as we go through it.

**Kinsey Brown 22:02**

Absolutely. Once again, a perfect segue. This pandemic has been a roller coaster of waves, variants and constantly changing guidelines. What do you think about the university's responses? So, changes in guidelines and requirements as those changed to evolve with the pandemic?

**Greg Knott 22:21**

Well, I think I should say, first that President Killeen, you know, he was, is vitally concerned about the safety of all the students, faculty and staff, that was always at the format or forefront of any decision he was making, or discussions that were being had was, how do you keep people save? I think the other piece of it also was, you know, I know he said early on, you know, people are gonna remember how they retreated during this whole thing as employees or students or whatever. And so those drove, you know, a lot of things. Well, we didn't lay anybody off, we kept everybody employed, you know, on the payroll, we were being creative with, at times with work and, you know, being flexible on how it evolved and things. And so, you know, that's, that's to the university's credit, in my view, that we kept, you know, people employed, because economically, you know, the, the country took a hit economically, but locally, keeping all those people employed was very important, you know, and I think sent a very clear message of how valued they are, and how important they are, you know, for students and keeping people safe. I know, there was a lot of layers in it, you know, skepticism about people had about testing and masks and all that. But all those decisions were made with the safety of the campus in general, but equally keep layer to keep the campus opened, effort had reopened. You know, there was our three universities, our residential experience, you can do a lot of it online. But as a student, as you know, you

gain as much from that day to day being on campus, you know, things that you learn, and so that that was part of it. How do you keep us safe? How do you keep us open; you couldn't shut down forever. You know, I think after that first few months of April, they were out and they were tired. And so, we had to be adaptive to how they came in. So, I heard a lot in the community, but I know the Board of Trustees specifically, were very supportive of the President and his decisions as we had the board meetings as they went over time, they were all on Zoom. And, you know, the board was updated constantly, you know, either at the meetings or written communications or other formats as we went. So, they were supportive, and you know, keep in mind they're from all over the state where they're where they're geographically located. So, you know, they had their own local experience of this, but they do overall. We were definitely one of the Right.

**Kinsey Brown 25:02**

And, you know, in hindsight, we look back and realize that the system had a what became a newsworthy response to the pandemic. So, did you enjoy the university administration? Did you realize that you were actively setting an example, not only for the community, but for other universities across the

**Greg Knott 25:21**

country, you don't have to think so early on, I think, you know, the strength of the University of Illinois, it's ground up leadership and innovation, you know, we said at the top of the system, but the innovation always comes from the ground up from faculty, and students and staff. And, you know, as they quickly developed those ventilators and those the saliva tests and other things, they were doing it just because it was the right thing to do, because they're very smart and creative people. And I don't think any of them ever thought about, this is going to get me on the national news, that was never their focus. And But to your question, over time, as we rolled those out, and others became aware of them, I remember I took a phone call from a president of the University of Idaho, that after our saliva testing, and things had gotten a word had gotten out that they wanted to be a part of it. And I mean, so people across the country were watching us, because of the innovations that were coming out of these three universities. And, and wanted to be a part of it. Because, you know, when you have that innovation, and which the speed at which it came to fruition, you know, that was fast, you know, normally things aren't as fast here. But those candidates, you know, because everybody's on the same page, and we have people trying to knock down barriers and red tape, to get them to get them going. Because, you know, the saliva test, you know, had a whole process that had to be approved by FDA. And so, Jay Walsh, the VP of economic development for the system, helped lead those efforts and was, I know, spent probably hundreds of hours, you know, working with folks at you, FDA and others to try to get that emergency use authorization EUA approved for that, but it's the speed at it that caught people's attention. And then I think, you know, the track record, the university has over 150 years of excellence, those two things came together. And President clean was a very effective and firm leader. And I know, of course, was interviewed nationally, internationally a couple of times, because we were the leaders and still are. And so, I think the speed of innovation caught people's attention in a very positive way.

**Kinsey Brown 27:46**



Absolutely. And rightfully so, it was an incredible thing. And continues to be an incredible thing. So, you mentioned earlier that you came into your role as Secretary in the early months of 2020. Did the pandemic affect your career goals as a whole? Or did it affect your transition into the role of Secretary

**Greg Knott** 28:07

Well, definitely impacted the transition because, you know, historically, we go from one secretary to another, you do a transition, you learn the meaning cycles and those things and when all that was gone, and then we were just learn as we went. And so, you know, I like learning, I like, you know, innovation. So, for me, it was sort of exciting, to try to figure out new ways. Probably were heard was, I didn't know people as well as I would have in person. And so again, a lot of these jobs are relationship oriented. And so even to this day, I there's a lot of people, I don't know them as much as I would have probably known to the zoom, you know, kind of thing. So that, that that was part of it. You know, career goal, of course, this is my last, you know, the university job. I'll have today as we record this, I have 34 years in, and so it does make you rethink a lot of things, you know, and that's, that's not unusual. So, you know, I'm figuring out, you know, the end of my career, and probably, you know, you start to reprioritize things makes you think, Well, you're not gonna be around forever. And the other is, maybe there's other things out there you want to do so it's probably got me thinking about, you know, what's next after retire from your go do other things. You know, COVID I think for a lot of people were a lot of people. There's no question about it. And it was physically fatiguing, mentally fatiguing, you know, and when you combine those with a lot of people, for a lot of people. That's exhausting. And so, a lot of people don't do well with uncertainty. I'm okay with it. But I will be the first to say we're on May 5. Clean mental, you know, there's no way for anybody that didn't. I know that the spectrum of that was across the board. And one thing with me I was worried about with my staff; it was their well-being. And so, you know, checking in with those twice a week meetings, you know, was it means to just say, how are you less than it was about? Are we doing this part of the business? Because, you know, the business part is important that people are more important first. And so, there's a lot of that. So definitely, that the tape factor, I'm sure has probably, you know, put my lot put my slides on the end of the tunnel, we'll make a little quicker otherwise.

**Kinsey Brown** 30:44

But it is very reassuring to hear that. It's been a theme in the interviews, people first, you know, people came first and response. So, we had discussed in a previous interview, that pandemic led to a few innovations in your office technologically, can you discuss those as far as you know, technological communications?

**Greg Knott** 31:05

So, you know, going to zoom, certainly we did not advance it, I had never heard of, but how you use that and adapt to it, we quickly had to figure out and so, you know, you turn on the stream of meeting? Well, the things we also do for just our either in person or virtual meetings, is we distribute them out to the world. And so, we had to figure out how to do that. Not only within the Zoom product, that we've worked with a team that you have i Springfield, that does our streaming for us. And normally when we're live, they're bringing their cameras in. And we do that. So, because our board meetings are in production, you know, they're, you know, there's an agenda, they're scripted with, you know, there's a whole litany of things we go through to prepare for those. And so, we had to reinvent that when we did

it virtually. Because the end was the same, you know, the board had to discuss approve things, you know, it just changed how we did it. One of the one of the things Vance Martin, who works in accessibility in my office, had joined us part time came in full time, he had been a UI Springfield, we had a keyboard for as part of a game and full time, because we had one trusty crane Dale, who was visually impaired, or blind. And so, this was even before the pandemic. So, we had done some things, you know, in preparing his materials so that they were accessible, etc. But really, what that spurred us to thinking was, well, what about other people that have not only visual impairments, but hearing and other than other impairments? Well, Vance, worked with Lawrence and gray, who's a teaching professor in the Department of Computer Science here, and had a conversation about a video player that Lawrence has been working on. And that video player can do things that beyond what zoom can in terms of accessibility. And so, we got in touch with him. And through some conversations, he needed some funding. And so, I worked with a big girl, she was the comptroller at the time, and we got some funding to develop this video player. And it's as we record is very close to being put into production. What that video player B considers the first fully accessible video player across the country. Now, Zoom does captioning, this will do captioning, this will translate into 14 other languages. This will also for those that are hearing impaired. As soon as we do a PowerPoint deck that's shown across the in the meeting, it can take those images and verbalize what they are to the people that are listening in this case. So, they're not only hearing the audio of what the participants are saying, but they should be able to know what's on the screen being shown. And so that that's a piece of the innovation, because we stayed in zoom so long, you know, and I was always trying to find ways to improve it. And when we met with Lawrence, and I could see what realize what his work was going to be able to do. We want to accelerate that because his player that we're going to adopt it in the Board Office has far reaching application in the classroom, which is even more important. So those are some of the innovations. You know, we took over all of our own video and sound production. We still work with a group from Springfield, we had what we called an encoder, which was to try to improve the captioning. We ended up hiring to do imagine like the stenographers well we have when you watch our meetings now, you don't see this demographer, but she is encoding the live transcript because I was worried about the accuracy of zoom has improved the accuracy of the transcription over time. But this, the higher degree of accuracy was more important. So, things like that, those were those were the innovations, you know, give her a very small shot, you know. So that's the scale which we were. But I think those will have lasting impact. When we've come back live. One of the things we've done in terms of the board meetings, is we kept the zoom, you know, everybody's now okay, is zoom in? Well, we can, so we kept that. So, in other words, you know, the board meetings in Chicago, traditionally, everybody had to go there, at the end of the day, the trustees are all still on site, because of the Open Meetings Act. But other presenters and things that, you know, if you're in at Urbana, and you'll need to present for 15 minutes will zoom you in. So, we've tried to keep that what we've learned from the pandemic, and incorporate with more than a traditional, so even the meaning sort of have a hybrid flavor.

**Kinsey Brown 36:01**

Absolutely. So, speaking of kind of using technology to make ends meet, and even kind of advanced the work that you're doing, did the pandemic affect your how your team and department uses social media to both interact with each other, and also the public? I remember you mentioned that it was a good way to get information, but was it also uses and information out?

**Greg Knott 36:27**

The Board of Trustees, we don't have any accounts, social media accounts, so we rely on the system to do that. But absolutely, you know, because again, you know, you would have a conversation at the cabinet, or wherever it was, these decisions were being made? Well, we had to communicate that information out. So, we were of course, communicating directly to the board. And, you know, an effective organization speaks with one voice, you know, whoever that voice is, and so we, you know, we work, Tom Hardy, early was the Director of External Relations and Communications, he retired, and Adrian is on, took his spot. So, Adrian and her team really were doing the communicating, you know, out on the social media, and you know, and then the campuses each day, of course, each had their, their own launcher departments, and then things do too. So, as an office, we don't use that form of social media. Now, what we do have, you can call us, we have an email box that gets filled up regularly with lots of questions and advice from the public on a wide array of things. So that's how we are engaging. And then of course, one other thing I guess we did at our meetings, and our in-person meetings, you can the public can request to speak to the board or public comment. And that was practical and zoom. So, one thing we did to keep that in place as we were recording those in advance. So in other words, if you have five minutes to speak, on a particular topic, we did that in advance, and got a lot of positive feedback from those that were speaking, because it kept, you know, their voice heard that, but I wasn't gonna let them into the Zoom, because, you know, early on, if you remember, zoom that resume bombing, while we were very hyper vigilant about that, that's still am. And so, we have a whole security protocol to go through, to try to keep only those that need to be in the meeting in the meeting. And so, by recording the public comments in advance, we did that, but social media played a huge impact on communicating out what the university was doing. And then of course, you could read the comments, you know, various opinions on that people liked it or not.

**Kinsey Brown 38:52**

So, within your office, how has the pandemic changed your goals and priorities?

**Greg Knott 39:00**

Well, it probably tweaked them more than changed. And, you know, I mean, for us, you know, our major objective is to put on six board meetings a year, and then do all the things that are required in between those cycles to get the work done. How we did it, though, you know, and how we're communicating with not only each other, but no, we're receivers of information. You know, if you think about everything that ends up on our agenda, has typically come from a department to a dean to Chancellor, you know, and so that communication channels had to be open. You know, again, you know, I think it causes you to reprioritize what's important, you know, because I kept in, not the only one, I think marketing department said, take care your kids, take care of your family, take care of yourself, you know, and so you learn to work different. So, I guess The priorities, the outcome may have been very similar for us in terms of the product meeting, but how we did it, and the fact that maybe it wasn't always an eight to five, because I was really flexible. I'm like, you know, I know, if you got young kids at home, you know, that you get they got to have your attention. Okay. So maybe, maybe you're working three hours a night so that, you know, anyway, I was flexible for that. So, I think that's how we changed. But again, I think in general, all of this you figure out what's more important than what isn't?

**Kinsey Brown 40:36**

Number one, because I think it connects really well to what we're speaking about. Do you think that your office will ever return to pre pandemic operations? Or has your workplace changed forever? And do you see those changes, as you

**Greg Knott 40:51**

know, it won't go back to what it was. I like history. So, I look, I like a mod that I like, looking at timelines. And so, when I see this kind of, I look back over the last 100 years, and I see big events, my mind that we set history, Vietnam, or 911, Vietnam, World War Two World War One, depression, and the, you know, all of those have this like you're going, then you have this major shift. And the pandemic is that major shift, we just don't know yet, what the final impact of that is going to be because we're still evolving out of it, you know, our office, least when I'm there in the leadership position, we'll keep a hybrid model. Because, you know, it's funny, when I was here, and my role in human resources at the library, head of HR, I wasn't a big proponent of work from home, okay, I just am out of that generation, you got to be there. And, you know, just to how it was how I've come up. But, you know, people prove themselves that they could do the work remotely. And so, you know, hey, change my mind, and you learn some, that's a good thing. So, I've changed my view completely on it. That said, I worry about the disconnectedness of people. So, as we record, this kind of what my office is doing, is I said, we'll stay hybrid. And I want you to be there two days a week. One day, I'm going to pick which is Wednesday, we'll all be there. So, we're all together. In the other day, they can pick and be flexible. What I found is over time, people started to drift back, because they missed, you know, their colleagues or your home and the dogs bark, and the TV's on in the background with the kids. And you're just ready to get out of there. Because the other thing you'd notice when you work from home, is it's hard to delineate when it's over, you know what I mean? So, it's, it's, it's less clarity in that workday. So, I think over time, it'll, it'll shake itself out as to what the new normal going forward is, I think a lot of people a year ago, my daughter's textbook example, Dad, I want a job where I can work remote, I want to work remote. This was over and over and over, well, now a year and a half later, or whatever. She's older. And so, it's like, wow, you know, maybe I, you know, want to do both. Okay. And I think she exemplifies what a lot of people found is, you can sit at home that whole time and work, but you miss the social interaction with people. So, I think we'll come up with a hybrid, I think the university system and the university themselves are still figuring it out how it's gonna work. Because we're still a residential institution. Some jobs need to be every day. Others don't. And so, I think it's going to be very unit specific over time.

**Kinsey Brown 43:53**

If you could have done anything differently, what would it be?

**Greg Knott 43:58**

Well, you know, the interesting thing about being obsessed with timelines as I am getting think about everything like that is, you know, early on, this was two weeks, two weeks, four weeks, you know, you wish you would have known, but how would I know further back? You know how long this was going to be? You know, I guess, I don't know that we would have been any more prepared for it. You know, my, again, when you look at history, you know, after 911, you know, we were prepared for everything, if you were, you know, in terms of emergency preparedness, and first responders and, you know, security at all that well, you take it 20 years later, and it's sort of waned. It's still there. That as that's my concern

about this, as prepared as we are today. Over time, people come and go, memories get short, which is why it's very important to capture all this stuff. From our memories. Now, they're going to weigh in, and I hope we're as prepared the next time as we become prepared in the outcome of this one, I suspect we won't be because we'll be on to something else, something else we will have happened, or we get distracted or whatever, you know. But I don't know, I've done a lot different. You know, I think President Clinton set the tone early in a positive way, as we talked earlier about, you know, take care of people be safe. You know, he still talks about he's, you know, don't have, he's not out there as much, obviously, as he was in the early stages. But I still heard talking about, I got COVID myself, as we recorded this two weeks ago. And, you know, and I thought I had avoided it. But you know, here it is, and I've had all the shots, tumors, you know, I've had all the, and even I got caught up in it. And, you know, so it's still with us. But, you know, so I texted him, you know, we should talk about how we've communicated, but I texted him, said, Well, I finally got it, he's like, Okay, take care of yourself, do this, this, this, you know, call a doctor, whatever that is, first reaction was still, you know, safety and well-being. So, you know, just to the pivot a little bit on the communication. You know, it was interesting, because when you go from a situation where you're having face to face conversations, like we are here, well, all of a sudden, then your instant message, phone call, text, email, you know, and we were using Skype, which is the product right now for the phones, we were using Microsoft Teams, for a while, we're using zoom, we were you know, all kinds of means we're trying to figure out how we're going to talk to each other. And so that was, you know, a big change, because it took a lot more effort to communicate, you know, walking down the hallway, see somebody, it's like, oh, yeah, I need to tell him that heard that. And then all of a sudden, it's just a lot more deliberate. So, there's a lot more thought process I found that had to go into the communication, of course, when that's one of our major purposes, communicate to the board and to the public, we had to think through a lot more than be delivered. And for me, that just meant I had to be thinking about it all the time. And making sure things we didn't forget.

**Kinsey Brown 47:20**

One final question from me, Did you learn anything from this pandemic? I know, we've discussed a lot of things that you've all learned, but did you learn anything about yourself, about your work or about the university that you liked?

**Greg Knott 47:32**

Well, yeah, I mean, you know, I spent my life here, you know, my mom, dad worked here, my grandparents lived here, my great grandfather went here. And so, you know, you have a long history, you kind of take it for granted. And, you know, there have been a lot of innovations have come out of this campus, and the other the other two over the decades, and you just sort of expected, but you don't really realize the impact it can have until you need it. And so that's what they proved here. And all three, not just Urbana, and all three, Springfield, Chicago, enter man, was that so it, it made me really appreciate the power of higher education, the land grant mission, and the impact this institution has every single day, throughout the world, you know, because we didn't talk a lot about you know, we scaled up shield T three, and that was in every county in Illinois, and Kate in K 12 schools. So, makes you really appreciate that, you know, I guess myself, it makes you, you know, sometimes I probably don't have as much patience as I should. And that's okay. But you know, you have got to be more patient. And it's funny, I never used to talk on the phone, I had gotten burned out on my wife talking on

the phone. Well, I have talked on the phone the last two and a half years. And reminded again, it was fine. You know, because what I found was, I had to communicate, I'm an in person, person, that's where I'm best. But, you know, we had to do it in a lot of ways. So, I had to be adaptive. I felt I've always been fairly resilient. And then this one, everybody had to be more resilient. And there's times I was tired of it. You know, you get out and say, I'm tired of wearing these damp MAs. I'm tired of the door checkers at the building, you know, to show my app and be at then you got to take a flashback and say, You know what, they're there for your own sake, and of others. And it's, you know, you got to be part of that team. So, I think we've all gotten tired of, and so that's, that's, that's part of it. You know, I guess I can refuse to ask me about others or what, but you do learn about how many people care and, you know, in my personal opinion, here we are June of 22. The country's very divided. But it was United there. And, you know, I always admired my grandfathers, they both were in World War Two, and, and my grandmother's and all that. And I always wondered what was that feeling like, none of the war, but of that unification of how society was. And I felt we got a small glimpse of what that was from the 1940s. Or other times. And so, I saw that, I wish we could model that back and have society, you know, rally around each other again, I think we will it goes ups and downs in societies times. But that's what I hope is maybe we'll look back and say, Well, you know, we did create a vaccine, we did create the slime in tents. We were doing things to keep people safe. We know we lost a lot of people, you know, over a million deaths or more as we record this, I hope people are cognizant of that. But I also hope we remember the power of science and the power of working and helping each other. So, we bring those together. That's to me what advances society. That's what higher education does best. So, the University of Illinois does best.

**Kinsey Brown 51:12**

Absolutely. I don't have any further questions for you. Is there anything else you'd like to add?

**Greg Knott 51:17**

No, I'm just my own little personal note here. I'm glad you're doing this project. Just a little bit of history of it, President Killeen had said something to me one day about, you know, what did we do in 1980? What were we you know, what was the university's efforts? And he said, you know, we need to capture this knowledge while we can. And so that's kind of what, you know, we contacted down here, and we got this going on. So, I'm very proud of what you guys are doing to document this because your work, we won't realize the benefit of it till 2040 50. You know, so what you're doing today to document this history, I think is extremely important. And as a former library person myself, I'm very proud of this library. So that's what I do. Thank you so much.