Martin McFarlane Interview

Director of International Student and Scholar Services, University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign

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SPEAKERS
Martin McFarlane, Paul Gilbert II

Paul Gilbert II 00:00
My name is Paul Gilbert II I am a graduate student representing the University of Illinois Archives.

Martin McFarlane 00:02
And I am Martin MacFarlane I'm the Director of International Student and Scholar Services at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign.

Paul Gilbert II 00:08
For the rest of the interview, we're going to refer to that office as either international student scholar services or I triple s. Today's date is Friday, October 7 2022. You're here at the University Archives to discuss how the COVID-19 pandemic impacted the responsibilities of the university's International Student and Scholar Services. Okay, first question just for context of anyone listening about how many international students are currently enrolled at the university?

Martin McFarlane 00:42
A lot. We are consistently on even the first or second in the rankings of international students, at public universities in the United States. In terms of enrollment, we are normally between 10 and 11,000 international students, but that doesn't include students who are under the University Sponsorship but are not necessarily enrolled. Perhaps they are seeking work opportunities but we are still sponsoring them and they are still under student visas. So when you include those, the number goes over 14,000. And then when we add in our international faculty, staff and scholars who are another 2,000 or so there. So in total, we're a little over 16,000 in terms of the international population that our office is responsible for.

Paul Gilbert II 01:45
That is more people than my school's undergraduate and graduate programs combined.

Martin McFarlane 01:51
Yeah. Yeah, it's a lot.

Paul Gilbert II 01:55
And in what capacities does your office work with these international students and scholars?

Martin McFarlane 02:01

We have we have 2 million aims, but realistically, we're far more known for one of them, which is immigration work, we act as the sponsors of the international students who are coming to work here, or sorry to study here or as sponsors of international employees who are coming to work here. We are in charged with maintaining their visa status in cooperation with them. So obviously, the visa holder has a lot of responsibilities that they have to do, but we try to ensure that they are making those responsibilities and we report to the relevant government agencies United States Citizenship and Immigration Services, Department of Homeland Security, various units who we are federally mandated to report on. So very basically all of them, an international student arrives at the border to the United States, they present immigration documents that say they're going to study at the University of Illinois. Well, Department of Homeland Security wants to know that that student reported and showed up at the University of Illinois. So we have to send a report within 30 days that says yes, this student arrived. So the student has to check in with us. We review their immigration documents, and then we send that report. And we send that report, not only for every new international student, but we also send that every semester for every continuing student so that the agency knows that student is still here. On top of that, throughout the semester, we have to be verifying that the student is maintaining the credit numbers that their particular visa requires. In most cases, this is 12 credits, but there are a number of exceptions. So whenever an international student drops below that, we have to contact them, remind them of their responsibilities and make sure that they get back up to the correct amount. On top of that, we're monitoring work and approving work authorizations, we are really just the ca-. Not exactly the stewards of the visa status, but we are maintaining compliance for all 16,000 that I mentioned. And so that's what we're mostly known for students and faculty and staff and scholars mostly come to us for immigration services. That's generally on campus, ISSS immigration office, but we work for University of Illinois we do not work for US Citizenship and Immigration Services. So, on top of those responsibilities, we try to ensure that international students, faculty, staff, scholars, have a fully rendered international educational experience so that means programming and events not just orientations, but ongoing events throughout the year that deal with cross cultural communication deal with sometimes fun stuff, just events to get to know the campus and community. Other times more serious things like we will work with faculty and staff on cultural differences from students from certain countries. Maybe you're unsure why a student from a certain country isn't reacting in the same way to the syllabus for students from the United States is, we will try to look at the cultural and the US political reasons that that might be in trying to help the faculty and staff in that way. So so we do a lot of events. We do a lot of programming we do a lot of social stuff as well. But in general we we are known for the immigration work, but we support our international population both in those those ways.

Paul Gilbert II 05:49

So in summary, you would say the three goals of this office is to help international students get here, make them feel welcome while they're here, and make sure they stay in compliance so they can stay here and complete their individual programs.

Martin McFarlane 06:06

That a pretty good summary yeah.

Paul Gilbert II 06:10

So as we are aware of because we're living in this moment, but people looking back in the future may not be aware of. The first reports about COVID-19 started to emanate from around the Wuhan area in China. Considering the fact that you work with many international students as part of your job. Do you remember when COVID-19 first when you first learned about COVID-19 emergence and were you more attuned to it because of the fact that you've worked with this population? And who might have been aware of it sooner than everyone else?

Martin McFarlane 06:49
Possibly because one of the things that we do have to do is monitor global events and things that could impact our international population. And so I was aware of the early conversations about the virus in and I'm not sure if it was December, but certainly in January of that year, and I do remember that although at the time, I wasn't aware of the significance. We were having a staff meeting right at the beginning of the spring semester, so middle of January 2020. And one of the items I mentioned was there is some concern in the Wuhan area of China with at the time it wasn't called COVID-19. At the time, I'm not even sure they were saying Coronavirus. We just saying, you know, there's an infectious disease issue. And I would say because of that we might be getting contact from some students in that area who are unable to arrive at the beginning of the spring semester. We need to be aware of that. And we've got standard practices for any students who can't arrive at the beginning of the semester we talked about the possibility of deferring to a later semester we talked about to them about the consequences of what would happen if they arrived late. What edits need to happen to immigration documents to allow that. So it was really just ah hey we might see a few more of these [clocks]. We might see a few more of these questions because we're aware that this is happening in this area of China.

Paul Gilbert II 06:57
Understatement of the century.

Martin McFarlane 07:26
Exactly. Oh, we joke about it now, but oh remember that meeting you might hear about this. Yeah. Everybody heard about it.

Paul Gilbert II 08:28
Do you remember the last day you were on campus before everything shut down?

Martin McFarlane 08:33
Yeah, we so leading up to that day. I think maybe it was a week before we were talking about whether um we feel comfortable closing the office doors like still being on campus to help serve but closing the office doors and most of the staff wanted to at this time there was a lot of fear in the media and in the community and a lot of lack of information. No one really knew what was going on. And so I remember my staff very much wanted us to close the door because we were one of the units that we felt would be most affected because we have people coming from all over the world and they're coming into our space not necessarily other spaces, really only internationals come into our office well as well as for domestic faculty and staff. So we close the doors and then it would just seem to be and then soon as we did that. The next day there was calls from campus saying we are now encouraging remote work. I

mean, I think next day it was almost like we're now we're almost mandating it. So we just started that was a really, really rough week because we had never worked remote before. Our office have never done that because first and foremost, we are a customer service unit. We that's what we are. We are here to serve the international population. We don't even close up lunch, because we want to be available should there be something that an international student or scholar needs to get in touch with us about and needs to physically ask those questions. And so we were getting all of these laptops that we had that are generally used for international student check-in. They weren't completely up to date new laptops, they were, there for all use of a couple of weeks in August when we need additional tech. We use it when you go to a conference, but they weren't. They weren't-

Paul Gilbert II 08:38
They didn't have all the bells and whistles

Martin McFarlane 09:37
Exactly and they weren't commonly used. So we were working with our tech services people to make sure that all of these were going to be appropriate for long term use for our purposes. We have a system of record called Synapses and it's a program that's unique to our well unique on campus to our office many of our international offices um over on university [south] use it, but we had to make sure that this would run appropriately on the laptops cause otherwise speak to the useless we need that program. And so it was a lot of okay, you've got that get back to your laptop, you can work from home now. Who needs needs a phone who needs a printer who needs these things to be able to effectively do their jobs? And half the time we were getting a lot of I felt unnecessary bureaucracy from [I thought] here at unit or from campus as a whole because we had to have these check forms for who was taking the laptops but we weren't electronic at the time. So they had to be physically signed on. I'm physically signing a bunch of paperwork just to make sure people can take stuff home and it just all feel very frantic. But throughout that week, more and more people were able to work from home until the last day. I think it was just me my associate director and perhaps a couple of other people who were shutting things down at the office putting up signs saying we are here to serve you but it's going to be from phone and it's going to be from email and just closing everything down.

Paul Gilbert II 12:22
So you start to explain this we are going a little bit out of order now what other air force support the university gave you as far as transition since like you said this is the first time you've ever had to do something like this.

Martin McFarlane 12:39
I think we will mostly on our own. I don't think there was extensive help from campus to do that. I think it was mostly ISSS working out what was going to work from us. Our parent unit is Illinois International. And we were reporting to Illinois International Agency. These are the steps I'm taking this is what we're going to do, but I don't think there was any significant assistance from campus to do this.

Paul Gilbert II 13:09
So can you talk more about what Synapses is as a program?

Martin McFarlane 13:16

Sure Synapses is a way for the university systems record, which is Banner, to communicate with Seavus which is a government system of record for international students. So we have to go back to what I said earlier. So we have to report every semester that every international student is here that we've got 11,000 students registering for class, you have to manually enter that data into Seavus. We no right? you wouldn't do it but what Synapses allowed it does is it pulls data from Banner. It says okay, here's your 10- 11,000 students who are registered for this semester, and then it can batch that information up to Seavus in. It can save 11,000 records in time, but it seems like 1 or 2,000 records so you can get it done in a couple of in a day or two just by batching all of this data

Paul Gilbert II 14:16

Versus like an entire year weap-. Office [more of its] staff tried to do it by hand and all the-

Martin McFarlane 14:23

Exactly-

Paul Gilbert II 14:24

Bureaucratic mess that is trying to send all that stuff

Martin McFarlane 14:26

Universities who have one to 200 international students you could get away without batching software like Synapses, but every other major university has something not necessarily Synapses but they have something like that. Synapses was actually developed by the University of Indiana's ISSS Office for this precise purpose, so as well as that well it has, has information from both systems in it. So we've got information that we take from Seavus and we put that in Synapses. So we've got all the information that the government has but then we've got information from Banner as well like all the registration and classwork and we we are able to make notes in it so that if one advisor is handling a case, and then they are out to the other advisor has all of their notes in it, so it's really just a comprehensive case management system for everything that we do. And so without that, it's pretty much impossible for us to do the work that we need to do.

Paul Gilbert II 15:27

And did you slash are you currently using any other technology to help facilitate the assistance you provide to the international students and scholarly community such as using zoom for remote communication in a maybe turning to virtual games as a form of, of the social hours that you would work through in more normal times, just to name a couple examples?

Martin McFarlane 16:01

Yes. And if you want to take an advantage or a positive that came out of all of this, it pushed us to do far more of that. So yes, our appointments became zoom appointments. Normally it was one on one meetings with an advisor and we'd always had phone appointments, but we really transitioned to video conferencing more than phone appointments and we are continuing to do that. Right now we have we offer the option for students starting up a video conferencing or to it happen in-person but during the pandemic, we just went all video conferencing and that was what we were doing. Our social events.

Yeah, we couldn't do those in-person, any in workshop. Some of them worked really well in a virtual format. We have an ongoing event- events that we do every semester, where we have a spotlight on a particular country. And we will ask students from that country to talk about their country. But it's not just here's my country and here's how I grew up what we want to be doing is focusing on cultural differences that help attendees perhaps understand a little bit more about their peers in this country. It helps, I mentioned you know faculty and staff might understand a little bit about why students from certain countries are least likely to answer questions in class because the educational system that they grew up with in that country. So that's a goal of these events and they transition really well to remote because students felt that they could. Sometimes, you know you're standing doing a PowerPoint in person and it feels a bit cold and dull, that somehow when you are sitting at a computer and you're bouncing between screens and you've got somebody there who's talking about it, it worked well. So those events were great, but our social events that the whole point is to meet new people and talk to them. I mean they really struggled because zoom fatigue got real really quick. Like we we were getting great attendance for these things in early through mid 2020, as perhaps the uniqueness of having all of these events remote was still new. And then as that died off, we through 2021 our social programming pretty much became nonexistent, to the extent that we had to move some staff people, some staff members whose main job was programming and training, and we moved them with the immigration advising cycle operation because that's where the need was we had to pivot to what the need from our students was and the need was an wasn't intercultural training, programming social events, the need was what is happening with my immigration status. What can I do? What documents do I need? And we actually ended up unfortunately, losing a couple of staff members who I mean completely reasonably they joined ISSS to do program and training what was no- what wasn't in need, what wasn't the market there anymore, wasn't population wanted that so we put them to do immigration that wasn't really where their heart was. And so they moved on to other opportunities because what the ISSS office needed wasn't what they really signed up for.

Paul Gilbert II 19:33
So speaking of people being shuffled around what happened to the international students when everything went remote were they dispersed into the wind back to their their home countries, were they allowed to stay in dormitories, or is it maintain their immigration status and visas here what happened?

Martin McFarlane 19:58
So, to answer that question, you have to understand a key point of the student visa regulations, which is that if you are coming to the United States to study, you have to be physically needed to be in the United States. And so, if you can't get a student visa for an entirely online program, because the US government or Department of Homeland Security says, well, it's an entirely online program. You don't need to be physically in the United States for an entirely online program. You can't get a student visa to be an entirely online student. You are allowed to take one online class to count towards whatever the total credits you need. So with your average international student, you're required to be a full time student, which is 12 credits, so you can take one three credit class, but the remaining nine credits have to be in person. And that's just a standard rule across the students visa categories. So what happens when suddenly none of the classes are in person? So in March of 2020, when schools were all going remote and when all this was happening, USA CIS did put out a statement and it said that for the remainder of the spring 2020 semester, that regulation would be waived, and students will be able to

remain in the United States, provided they were continuing in their program, even if these classes were now online. So that at least stopped the panic of am I is my visa being taken away, is my status being revoked, do I need to leave the United States? Now to answer your question, certainly, many students did leave, but many students were unable to leave because of so many flights get canceled because of uncertainty regarding were they could travel to lots of countries were putting up their own rules and regulations regarding whether visitors could come, whether it was only citizens, whether you would have to quarantine for how long and you know, 200 plus countries in the in the world and we couldn't advise on all of this was I mean, we weren't- we were struggling to keep up with what the United States was requiring let alone other countries. So unfortunately, students had to do a lot of research on their own to find out where they could travel to many chose to stay in the US because their visa did at least allowed that. Many chose to stay on campus, and others did leave. But we weren't tasked with keeping data or numbers on that and frankly, it would have been impossible to anyway. So how many students actually left the US in that march April time in spring 2020 We have no idea.

Paul Gilbert II 23:07
So, just to make sure that this is clear for the record, students could leave the US they chose to, but they weren't forced to leave by the university.

Martin McFarlane 23:20
Correct.

Paul Gilbert II 23:21
Okay, my alma mater essentially kicked everyone out of housing when they shut down and pretty much left everyone to fend for themselves so-

Martin McFarlane 23:30
Well, now there's I mean when you say forced to leave. I mean, you'd have to talk with University Housing about what policies they enacted, but the United States government and US immigration services and ISSS was not requiring international students to leave the United States. However, if they were not able to stay in university housing, the as you see, kind of have to fend for themselves in the US if they didn't leave.

Paul Gilbert II 24:05
And do you know if housing being on shutdown completely and or was there some space left for international students who just want to go back to their home country, so is that something you don't have?

Martin McFarlane 24:19
I honestly can't remember. What I remember University hosing was encouraging people to leave. I can't remember if they shutdown completely I can't remember if they allowed a small amount of international students to stay or not. I don't know.

Paul Gilbert II 24:38

Rebeca, can you write down in the notes a reminder to reach out to university housing and ask them this question. Do you know roughly when international students were allowed to return to campus housing?

Martin McFarlane 24:55
No. Well, I mean, again there wasn't any rule prohibiting them their physical presence in the United States, which is really what we were focused on from an immigration standpoint. So regarding when they were able to come to housing check in no.

Paul Gilbert II 25:16
You touched on this earlier. Right at the beginning. He said that you were you close down your office for visitors like the day before the University System told everyone to go remote that they could and then a day after that they pretty much told everyone to go home regardless.

Martin McFarlane 25:38
I mean, it might not have been day by day, but that's how I remember it being very close to being the next day or days. Within these.

Paul Gilbert II 25:47
Did you enact any other regulations or policies during that year whether it was saying okay, these are the limits on how many people can be in office at a time, or when things started to open back up? Yes, we can do some in person activities again, however, there's a limit on how many people can be in here, everyone's gonna be wearing a mask of this particular quality, yada yada yada.

Martin McFarlane 26:17
So to answer that question, we're gonna go through like a year and a half [obviously]. But one thing I think it's important to point out is we focus a lot on the students and we've talked a lot about the students. When we went entirely remote, not all of our staff was able to be entirely remote because as well as international students, we serve our international faculty, staff and scholars. And a lot of that work includes communication with United States Department of Homeland Security, United States Citizenship and Immigration Services and they won't forward mail. And so mail was still coming to our office that- original documents that we had no other way of getting. In addition, that is the address that is listed on a lot of the things that we were filing with the Department of Labor as well. When we are getting work visas we have to work with Department of Labor. So there's lots of government agencies that we are working with, that still will not send electronic documents, that only send paper original documents, and they'll only send them to the fixed address that you have. So our staff that deal with that still have to be coming onto campus on a regular basis. So, to answer your question about how we started to do that is we had a rotation system for staff that dealt with that. And each day one of them would come in for not long sometimes it was just to check mail other times it was to sign some originals, do some filing, documents when you hire or when you host international employees, there are certain documents that have to be kept accessible to the public. So you have to check on these public access files as well. So anyway, we would have somebody doing that. So throughout the pandemic, there was never a case where every single member of ISSS was entirely remote. But the majority of us were just those who work with faculty and staff were coming in once a day for a couple of hours to do

something. And then when we started to open up myself and a couple of other senior members of staff would start to come back to the office maybe once or twice a week. We made sure that there was never more than three people in the office at a time we made sure everybody was masked and then we kind of preped for a reopening as it were, which was to happen at the beginning of the fall 2021 semester. So a year and a half into the pandemic. Kind of at the beginning of that of summer 2021. We were told the university is looking in fall 2021 to be as open as it can be. ISSS is a front-facing customer service unit and therefore shoul be reopened as much as its possible. So what we did was we had a pha- we did it in phases. Throughout June and early July. We asked anybody who hadn't been on campus for a year and a half, come back, spend a day at your in your workstation. What do you need, like what-what- a year and a half later? What is your computer still working and updated? Do you have all of the supplies that you need is the you know some of the rooms were musty because they haven't really been occupied for a while. What needs cleaned what needs updated give us a list of stuff. So that was happening we got about- we got staff of about 25 and everybody signed up for a day again making sure it was no more than three people at any given time. And then by mid-July, we've got all of that taken care of and we wanted to help ease people back into it. So for I think it was four weeks. We had a one week on one week off rotation just to kind of get your back in for a week [of into that one for a week] and just ease yourself back in understanding that people have now gotten used to remote work. We've been doing it for a year and a half. So just as much as it was a culture shift to send people home. It was a big culture shift to bring people back. And so we did that for a few weeks and then by the second week of August 2021, we went back about I think that first week we still keep the door closed, like ok everybody is now back everybody remains masked, but we're all here. Are we able to get everything we need done okay, now we can open the doors now we are back to as much normal services as we can but we still retained a lot of what we were doing in the pandemic so it wasn't just well no you can get remote, that- we can still get you remote meetings if you want many students still choose to do that. If you want to meet in person we're still going to require you mask. But it was- it was like a phased return.

Paul Gilbert II 31:56
How does your priorities as the director of I triple S changed during the pandemic as it waxed and waned? Were there any unexpected challenges as crazy of a question as that sounds?

Martin McFarlane 32:12
I mean, I didn't expect any of it, I mean I don't know how you plan to suddenly change the entire way that you do business but one thing that I did notice was we very quickly lost the sense of team. The office, I like to think our office has a good sense of camaraderie, a good sense of team. People will chat go from office to office and chat and not necessarily about work because you talk about your weekend or what have you but getting to know each other helps when you've got complicated cases or when you're working through a difficult issues. With international students. You know how your teammate works. And we were losing that the only time you were calling people was for work related things. And so that was an issue that I saw developing and looked to assist with. The other big issue was just constant information changes, everything was happening all the time, new information was coming out about you know, growth cases in this area or issues a particular country was having. So so much of my time in that year and a half before we went back to the office was spent looking up lots of global news and reading issue, things that came out of immigration and compiling that and I would send a weekly

digest to the team. Ev- and for about a year and a half, every week I sent, here's the update everything that's happened this week, things that you need to know. And you know, I would say this is happening in Thailand or this is happening in Japan, or this is happening in Brazil, because students from these countries are going to be talking to you and it's impossible it was impossible to get all of the information but that was a big thing for me. I hadn't anticipated how much our staff would want that, how much they would want to know everything that's changing. And those emails got comp- long and complex by the end of it. I was breaking things down into global news, domestic news, University of Illinois news because you know the U of I would come out with various different statements every so often. So those were, I think those were the biggest challenges it was maintaining the sense of team within the office and you know just fatigue environment, and all that and at the same time making sure that we had the knowledge to adequately advise there was often a frustration amongst our staff that we were expected to know stuff. And I get that if you're coming to us as immigration experts, you expect us to know stuff. But there was- it was more than that. It was an expectation that we knew stuff that hadn't been announced yet. Or we knew stuff prior to it getting announced that the Department of Homeland Security was not calling or giving universities updates before they would announce something. The University of Illinois was not really consulting ISSS before creating policies. So we did not know things in advance. We were often-

Paul Gilbert II 35:51
Finding things out as everyone else did

Martin McFarlane 35:53
Big- there was a big big issue in spring of 20- of summer of 2020. Where the government announced something that was stupid and dumb and it eventually got overturned, but they announced it one morning and we are reading it as the calls are coming in. We had no advanced knowledge of this. And so that was again it gets back to trying to make sure that our staff had the tools they needed to do their job and it was very difficult when knowledge was constantly changing.

Paul Gilbert II 36:27
So from what you can recall, did the university experience any changes? Either in the positive or in the negative in terms of overall international student enrollment during that and following academic year?

Martin McFarlane 36:45
Oh, it plummeted in terms of actual numbers enrolled we had 10 and a half thousand international students enrolled is a generally good number for us to see and it fluctuates up and down a bit but that was always a nice standard number. Then in fall of 2020 that felled to about 7,500. Yeah, I mean, it's a big jump into over 3000 students just just didn't enroll, percentage wise and you've lost almost a third. So yes, if you think about, the numbers made sense in the end, because when you think about new students, every fall, we generally check in between 3 and 3 and a half 1000 new international students massive undertaking and that's a pretty consistent number. In Fall 2020, we checked in about 700. So that's a drop of about 3000 And that's how much our overall numbers dropped by so it's not exactly a one to one comparison, but really what happened was, students continued to graduate, but they weren't replaced by new students coming in in fall of 2020. So what we believe from these numbers is we didn't really lose a lot of students who were already here, there were some students who withdrew

and went home and didn't return, but really the number drop came because new students didn't come in fall 2020. So we do get asked that a lot how many students left? Well, some, but statistically significant is the number who didn't come.

Paul Gilbert II 39:01
And these were all- the students who did come back these were all people who physically came back and were taking classes, right? Or-

Martin McFarlane 39:13
Maybe

Paul Gilbert II 39:13
Or are there still some students zooming in 12 hours away?

Martin McFarlane 39:19
Yes. And here is where it gets complex. So you remember, a few moments ago, I said but there was this stupid thing that happened in summer of 2020 So - when was it was July?

Paul Gilbert II 39:39
Could you be more specific when you say, quote, unquote, the stupid-

Martin McFarlane 39:43
Oh I'm about to get to it, I was just trying to work out the date because I believe it was the first because I was on vacation. And so it was the weekend. It was the week following July 4. And the stupid thing was USCIS and the Department of Homeland Security came out and said, well, that we vote we need all the international students to see if you can take all your classes online. That was just for spring it's gone, going forward for federal regulations still applies. Any international student who's in the United States can only take one online course towards their degree program all the other courses have to be in person. Now, University of Illinois, like almost every other university in the country was not planning on having full in person classes in the fall of 2020. They were making plans to offer most of their programs- of their classes remote. But this announcement now told international students if you can't take at least 90 credits in person, which none of our international students would be able to do because of what we were planning to offer you have to leave the United States. Now that was crazy. Because it's not just University of Illinois, international students across the United States were effectively being kicked out of the United States. Flights in summer of 2020 were either impossible to get or ludicrously overpriced because of how few flights were running. The quarantine issues in certain countries, Max- in some cases prevented our international students leaving and even if you are a citizen of a particular country, there were some countries that was basically closing their borders at that time. It would- and this is an example of something that was announced without us getting any information about it so of course, constant calls. What do I do? What do I do? Well, we didn't know. There was thankfully, a legal challenge to this. Lots of schools got together. A few schools were listed as the as the main people on the on the challenge. University of Illinois did sign on to the amicus brief, so we were technically part of it. And DHS back down effectively immediately. I remember being on the Zoom call with hundreds of other people as the court case happened. And the schools showed up with like this army of lawyers

ready to argue their case. And the government showed up with this one guy. And the judge came out and said here's here's what the government said, here's the challenge. And I believe that the government has decided to withdraw this and this one guy's like, yeah, we are now vacating this. He said so there is no case to hear we are done. And that was- and this month, or just this month of hell, July 2020. Where international students have been threatened with having to be kicked out of the country, all across the United States. Were ISSS offices, not just ours, all across the nation that been getting bombarded with all of these calls. What do I do? How you help us? It suddenly went away. But that was a stressful time because universities were trying to decide who can be offered in person classes. How do we do that? We don't want our international students to have to be thrown out the United States. But we've got this government order that says we're going to have to do that. So thankfully, thankfully, that didn't happen and the students were able to stay. Now after all that back to your original question. Where were they, we don't know. Because when the government note that said it's okay this way you can continue, international students can continue to maintain their international status and be entirely remote. Well, once you've done that, we don't know if you're in the United States or not. We can look in Banner, and see that as an international student you are full time enrolled student. But we don't know if you're taking those classes from Korea or from next door because these classes weren't specifically coded as online. They were still in person classes as far as the university was concerned. They were just being offered through zoom. So we had no idea where our students were. And we were constantly asked, you know, we have- how many international students left and how many students stayed? There was never any method for them to report back to us there was never any requirement for them to report back to us.

Paul Gilbert II 45:02
So you talked about how the number of students who enrolled in a university for the first time really took a nosedive in fall 2020. Have we since returned to a more normal number of student enrollees coming from international countries.

Martin McFarlane 45:23
Yep, fall 21 was fun, because in fall 2020 I say there's about 700 new international students, well except for the few thousand who didn't normally come.

Paul Gilbert II 45:38
Right.

Martin McFarlane 45:38
Well then came in fall 2021 along with the cohort that would normally come in fall [2020]. So we had normal- almost 5,000 new international students show up in fall 2021

Paul Gilbert II 45:53
So I want to make sure I'm understanding this correctly. The normal batch of students came in and-

Martin McFarlane 46:01
A lot of the students who had been admitted fall 2020-

Martin McFarlane 46:06

Deferred and came in fall 2021. Not all of them would- if it had been all of them, we would have seen about 7,000 new students show up. But 5,000 is still very significant. It's more than you would see in a normal year. So we had the fall 2021 cohort plus around 1500-2000 fall 2020s who had deferred. And now this past this past fall, so fall 2022 We just checked in, still we're still kind of making it up because we checked in about 4200 new international students this year. And so yes, our numbers are back to where they were pre-pandemic, if not a bit over.

Paul Gilbert II 46:06

Deferred-

Paul Gilbert II 47:00

So this is a two part question. Firstly, would you say that Chinese students represent a large population of the international student population at UIUC.

Martin McFarlane 47:13

They are over half, little above of the international- about one of every two international students is Chinese.

Paul Gilbert II 47:25

So with that in mind, especially with some of the other let's just say questionable actions that were enacted during the nascent stages of the pandemic by the US government. How did the COVID-19 pandemic impact relations with the current and future Chinese students, especially in terms of their relationship with the rest of the student body?

Martin McFarlane 48:00

It's a difficult and complex question because we could only see what was being reported to us. I mean, frankly, we weren't living the Chinese student experience. And so it's difficult to speak on behalf of them. But we were certainly made aware of the rising anti-Chinese sentiment. If not specifically on campus. The Chinese students certainly felt it in the media, we certainly felt it- that it was the growing sentiment within the United States. And so, yes- that would that would come to our attention and anytime that we felt that we needed to engage with our Chinese students, particularly with the CSSA, which is one of the largest international student groups on campus, the Chinese Students and Scholars Association, they were a good voice for the Chinese population on campus and they often alert us if there are things going on. But as much as that was a distressing time, the long term impacts don't seem to have been as significant as perhaps as we've been concerned with. Because if we look at the numbers we just talked about the rebounding it's still about one in every two international students is Chinese. Percentage was around 53 54% pre-pandemic, it's about the same now. So I don't believe it hurt our overall attendance. I don't believe it hurt our overall numbers but certainly wasn't a pleasant time for our Chinese population.

Paul Gilbert II 49:48

And with that in mind, did you provide additional supports for your Chinese students is considering how much extra nonsense they were being forced to deal with. It's bad enough they're going through

pandemic just like us, but especially in the media, of being almost blamed for the existence of the pandemic.

Martin McFarlane 50:12
Yeah, beyond me- beyond sending out emails of support to our population. We felt- we did feel a bit powerless with that because you know, we're not on campus. Campus is shut down basically, and really the only way we communicate is electronically. But for Chinese scholars, particularly. They have a slightly different population because our Chinese students are here to do to finish all their classes semester by semester. Our Chinese scholars are doing all our scholars are here doing research, not necessarily being enrolled in class. We are working with professors and researchers on campus, and a lot of that workshops don't and so for them, a lot of them didn't have anything left to do because they weren't registered for class and the labs were all shut. So they were expected to return home but China was not letting scholars return home, even if they had antibodies in their systems. There was a period of time when China was just- even if you were a Chinese citizen, you could not return home to China. But the conditions of you being in the United States were that you were performing research but you were now not able to perform because the functionality on campus wasn't there for you to do it. So you were stuck. And so yes, in those cases, what we were doing, we were working closely with the departments. We were trying to find ways that we could amend their program to allow them to stay in the United States by doing perhaps research in - potentially a slightly different area. There's a lot of immigration rules that made it difficult to change that. So we were within the rules and regulations as much as they allow we were amending and editing and changing categories and extending programs and doing whatever we could to allow our Chinese population to remain here because they have nowhere else to go. So yeah, that was an example of something where we would deliver- we were distinctly aware of a problem that was unique to the Chinese population that we were trying to assess.

Paul Gilbert II 52:33
We talked about this a bit, but there were many instances in which it's the pandemic's origin in Wuhan on and by extension, China was a political ploy slash a smokescreen for people to be blatantly racist. One of the more colorful examples is the since mostly the disused slang term for the- for the COVID 19 pandemic as the Kung flu. Did you receive any additional reports in terms of anti Chinese or anti Asian racism during the pandemic than you'd normally hear about

Martin McFarlane 53:21
[A little bit], I mean kind of as I alluded to, before, we would receive emails from various students saying that they were concerned about this or that they'd heard this. There was a couple of occasions where we did send out messages to the Chinese community in support and making them aware of the resources that are available on campus. For example, if you experience racist behavior, or if you experience something that makes you comfortable there are various units on campus, yet they have the office of inclusion, yet students office yet ISSS there various resources that you can use. So we were- we did put out a couple of statements supporting that population providing them with resources, but I always felt that it was a little bit difficult for us to do anything really meaningful for that population. You know, what we can do when nobody can come together when there can't be anything on campus is generally restricted to either. Do we want to have zoom conversations about this? Already talked over zoom fatigue by that point? No, no one we really wanted to do that. Do we put out an email? Yeah,

we're putting out an email but whose reading them now because everybody's just kind of-, they don't want to hear. So how much we were able to support that population. I don't know if we did a good enough job there. I'm not really sure what we could have done though.

Paul Gilbert II 54:51
And one last question about specifically the Chinese student body here. Again, some entities and people use a pandemic as an excuse to take the mask off and be blatantly discriminatory against a particular population. As far as you're aware of did the university or your office has implements specific pandemic policies for for the Chinese student population?

Martin McFarlane 55:28
No there weren't any specific policies implemented. As I mentioned, we try to assist the Chinese scholars because there were things that we [worked] to their issues. But wasn't any specific policies were created because of that? I mean, on the whole this gets beyond the pandemic, I do think that the Urbana-Champaign population, the university community, and the wider area. I think is a very welcoming and accepting community, I think there was, there was a wonderful example, pre-pandemic. Where [lost] company put out some blatantly racist advertising that was demeaning to our Asian population, particularly our Chinese population, and without any statement from university, without any statement from ISSS the community rallied around the Chinese population in support and that [lost] company is no longer doing business. So there's been many examples I think where the local population sees the value not just with the Chinese community, but of the international community as a whole. So while I agree with you that this was definitely happening. I agree that it had an effect on the Chinese students, I think that perhaps the effects weren't as common locally as they where internationally.

Paul Gilbert II 56:55
Okay, so we're now in academic year 2022-2023. Has I triple S returned to a sense of normalcy? Do you- if the answer is no. Do you think we're ever going to return to a pre-pandemic normal in terms of how the office is run?

Martin McFarlane 57:21
I think we have returned to a sense of whatever our new normal is, and I think that it's almost it's almost better than it was before. We have learned from the pandemic we have learned what services can be removed and what services can't. Pre-pandemic, I would generally have said, no. Our office cannot work remote because of and I would have listed things such as there is a federal regulation that says anybody who has access to see this has to have one office on campus. Well, while that is a federal regulation it doesn't specify how much time you have to be in that office. So we learned from that right you you can't be entirely remote really, but you can be remote certain times. I would have said that, you know, we want students to be coming in for appointments so that we can have these confidential discussions with them because often we are talking about very sensitive matters with their immigration documents. Well, if you are wanting a video call, and you are willing to accept that there is a slight lack of privacy in the video call on your end, why shouldn't we offer that service? So we're learning that there are ways to do our work in a hybrid environment and that's what we've returned to. When you talk about normality our numbers are back to where they were pre-pandemic so our population size is-. Our,

the work that we're doing, we are mostly on campus but we have now let our staff have certain days remote. Most of our staff has at least one remote day and we're growing back, so by the end of the academic year, all of our staff will be working three days in the office two days remotely- [unintelligible]. So that's something that is that the staff have wanted, and they feel better in their work because they are getting this time a good schedule. Our programming events that we want to have in-person are happening in-person. The events that worked well in a remote format are happening in a remote format. There's certain things that we haven't been able to do yet. Pre-pandemic, every June we would travel to China, Korea, we looking at India for pre-arrival orientation events, information session for our international students, the things you needed to know pre-arrival. It's not meant to replace orientation on campus, but here's what's going to happen when you enter the United States. Here's the document you're going to be asked to show, here are things you're going to need to do the moment you get on campus, things that you can't really cover in orientation when you've already arrived and gone through this. We moved those to remote, but the value in those was only 50% of the information. The other value was showing parents and students that were no longer recruiting, but we are still willing to travel halfway around the world to meet you look you in the eye and say we are going to look after your student. We didn't do- haven't done those since June of 2019. We are looking in June of 2023 to return to them, but we can't return to China yet. Right now China is still required as of today, still requiring a seven day quarantine. So if you are entering China, you would have to stay seven days in quarantine before we could do any work, which isn't a reasonable ask for a delegation that would go. So the certain things that we are restricted in doing as the world kind of comes to terms in a pandemic or post-pandemic world, but most of what we're doing, it's either back to the way we were doing it before or it has been improved by what we have learned can be done in a remote world.

Paul Gilbert II 1:01:28
Would you say that the goals and priorities of your office have changed after results of the pandemic. In what about how you interact in and develop relationships with other entities in the broader UIUC community?

Martin McFarlane 1:01:49
I think- the goal- the external goals of our office have not changed, the external goal of our office was always to offer the best services to our international community that we could culturally sensitive services of highest quality where we were ensuring they had the best international educational experience possible. And that is- that's remained the same. I think what has changed is more of our internal goals with regards to the staff that we have. The staff that we have came out of [unintelligible] two years of working remote, and they say look we are overworked and we are now being asked to return on campus when so many offices are able be remote why is that the case. Yes we are customer service but we demonstrated we can do this. And so we- we started to really look at the health of people that are working in our office, not just job satisfaction, you know mental health and how can we help that because if we are helping our staff we are help out international students and scholars the people who are serving them are happier. So as I said we've been able to develop a hybrid format, we were able to put together a proposal which was accepted by campus to increase our staffing numbers so we can get our student-to-advisor ratio down because it was too high. So we bring in more staff to do the work. We make the staff who are doing the work happier in their positions and by focusing there that has an outward effect on the work that we do with other units and students. So I don't think yeah, I

don't think our external mission changed but it certainly helped us look at how we were doing business internally.

Paul Gilbert II 1:03:43
So essentially, it's like when you're on the airplane and they say hey put on your oxygen mask first before you help other people because you can't help other people if you can't take care of yourself first.

Martin McFarlane 1:03:56
I really like that analogy. I really like that. Yes.

Paul Gilbert II 1:04:00
And one final question. You talked about things that the office learned or things you've learned about what the office is capable of that you didn't think that you could accomplish pre pandemic. But what about yourself, what are the things that you learned or grew to appreciate about yourself as a leader or or as an individual that for one reason or another wasn't particularly clear to you until the pandemic forced you to reevaluate your priorities and goals

Martin McFarlane 1:04:36
I learned that I'm more flexible than I thought I was. You know, I've been with ISSS for since 2005. I've been the director since 2015. And so about 17 years with the same unit okay in different roles but 17 years with the same unit and I am- I've been in charge of that unit for over four years before the pandemic started. So there is- you can get stuck in your ways you can be well this is this is working so why change it and I think the I'm never going to say that the pandemic was a good effect I'm never going to say that because it was not and I don't want anyone to ever have to live through that. But it did allow me the opportunity to realize you know what we can do [unintelligible] we can change things that way and its not the worst thing in the world. Just because I don't like working remotely, and I don't, personally speaking that's another thing I've learned about myself. I hate working remotely because for me I like to keep my work and personal life separate and when I'm bringing my work home it's not like oh I have more home time. It's my work is now at my home and I felt that very very much, I never felt that I wasn't at work, because suddenly now work was where I lived. Other people can draw that distinction. And that's okay. That's something else just because I hate it. Some other people love it, and were more productive, and that's fine too. We have to find a way to balance people like me who would prefer to be work at the office and then when I'm out of the office I'm done and I'm not thinking about it versus people never want to go into the office. So I think the pandemic helped me see other people's points of view and help explore other ways of devolve of doing things. I'm very excited about- for where I think we're going to be by the end of this academic year. We're going to have a staff that is larger is working in a hybrid environment, that they wanted to is generally happier. We were able to increase salaries as well. So I think by the end of this year, we're going to have an office that is in a much better place to help international students than we was three years ago. Still don't think- still don't to want to have gone through the pandemic, but we are at a better place than we were pre-pandemic.

Paul Gilbert II 1:07:09
May I give you one final metaphor before we end the recording.

Martin McFarlane 1:07:13
Sure, your last one was great.

Paul Gilbert II 1:07:16
Even the worst of storms are still followed by rainbows. And I feel like the pandemic was very much a major hurricane that's at- have left a lot of refuse and destruction in it's wake, but there are still rays of sunshine and that's come afterwards. Not necessarily downplaying how catastrophic of an impact it was but just as a reminder that things will get better and have gotten better after making it through to the other side. You have any questions for us?

Martin McFarlane 1:08:04
No no, this was this was I was worried about reliving all of this, but it was actually good to talk to you. I think one of the things that we learned or not learned, but one of the things that really ran through this whole time was for international students, faculty, staff, scholars, when they come to the United States they fully accept that there are rules and regulations that they are going to have to abide. That's just a given, I mean get that, you understand that. And all they really want is to know what those are so they can plan for it. And that was so difficult during the during the pandemic is because the US government is constantly changing those rules on them, and they weren't able to appropriately plan and then when they were- they did put a plan together the carpet was pulled out from under them again. And so- I'm going back to one of your points, like one of the biggest struggles for us, it was just information and getting out of the pandemic and into a place where we feel competent again. A lot of us felt incompetent because we were being asked things but we couldn't guarantee. Students were like can I go home and come back? I don't know because I've no idea what USCIS is gonna put on tomorrow. The information I am giving you as of this moment is accurate, but it could change this afternoon and has. So- be where we are now in a place where that's happening less and less, where we are have an office that feels that they have the skills and tools to be able to do their job. It's a very nice place to have got

Paul Gilbert II 1:09:46
all right end the recording

1:09:49
You