

# Lowa Mwilambwe Interview

Associate Vice Chancellor for Auxiliary, Health & Wellbeing, University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign

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## SPEAKERS

Lowa Mwilambwe, Inbar Michael

**Lowa Mwilambwe** 00:00

No, no question on my part.

**Inbar Michael** 00:01

All right. Okay. So, my name is Inbar Michael, and I'm a graduate student representing the University of Illinois Archives. And I'll let my interviewee introduce themselves.

**Lowa Mwilambwe** 00:01

My name is Lowa Mwilambwe, and I am Associate Vice Chancellor. I oversee the auxiliary health and wellbeing and that includes departments such as University Housing, Dining, Campus Recreation, the Illini Union, Parking, State Farm Center, which is co-managed with the Athletics, the Counseling Center, and Student Affairs Technology. Now, I didn't forget anyone.

**Inbar Michael** 00:56

Great, thank you. So just some logistics for when we transcribe the whole thing. Today's date is February 14, 2023. And we're here we're in the Archives, but we're also on Zoom to discuss the Department of Student Affairs responses to the COVID-19 pandemic, for inclusion in the University of Illinois COVID-19 Documentation Project. Okay. So, we have some warmup questions, and then we'll go into some more specific questions about your department and then end with some closing questions. So, my first question for you is, we were wondering if you could tell us a little bit about the department that you work for, just like in general so that we can understand what its main functions are. And then some questions to think about is, is it a long-standing department? Or was it something that's about more recently, and then again, like I mentioned, what are the primary functions goals that are required for that department?

**Lowa Mwilambwe** 02:00

So, I work in the Division of Student Affairs, one of the AVCs. Associate Vice Chancellor, I report to the Vice Chancellor for Student Affairs who oversees the whole division. Our division focuses on providing co-curricular or enhancing the quality of life, the experience of students on campus. So, we as a division, we have, you know, three AVCs. And they are responsible for a different area. One of them is the Dean of Students, so oversees the Dean of Student operations, Stephen Bryan. Jim Hintz is over Student Success, Belonging, and Inclusion SSIB, and he oversees the cultural centers some of the students success and operational areas. So, the Conference Center includes areas such as BNAACC

[Bruce D. Nesbitt African American Cultural Center], La Casa, the Native American House, etc. And then on the Student Success, New Student Orientation, the Career Center, the Office of Minority Student Affairs, and then there's my area, of course, and, you know, this is a long-standing division that has been in existence for as long as I've been here on campus and beyond.

**Inbar Michael 03:35**

Excellent, thank you. And I was wondering if you could- I know that you did mention a little bit, but if you could also, perhaps go more in depth about your specific role [inaudible]. Yeah, like responsibilities that you might have. And we'll get into like, pandemic responsibilities in just a few questions, like in general. Yeah.

**Lowa Mwilambwe 03:58**

So, I oversee like I said, eight or nine departments, you know, Parking, of course, is responsible for parking related matters. You know, maintenance for parking lot, making sure that, you know, people pay for where they park, that our facilities are well maintained. And then you know, when guests are visiting campus, they have a place where they can park conveniently. In terms of the Illini Union, the Illini Union is a community center of the campus, it offers a variety of programs and services for the convenience of the campus. So that's why you have, you know, conference rooms where people can meet. You have dining in the lower level, you have a hotel so that people have a place to stay when you know, they are here on campus visiting for whatever reason, maybe interviews, maybe it's the weekend, they just want to come back to campus as alumni. Or maybe its parents who are coming to visit their kids, they have a place to stay on campus. The Union operates a bookstore that is also offered that offer services to students in terms of where they buy their books and other self-goods such as shirts, polos, and all of that. The going to Campus Recreation, Campus Recreation is there to really enhance the campus student wellness, overall giving students the opportunity to engage in activities that will enhance their wellness. You know, some of it is physical meaning, you know, you could be weightlifting, it could be running on a treadmill, swimming, etc. Some of it is, you know, they opened a food pantry very recently to assist students who have, you know, a food insecure, etc. They have fields outside where, you know, you can play soccer, [urban kick] practice, tennis courts, basketball courts, etc. Then going to McKinley [Health Center] since I'm talking about wellbeing McKinley provides students Ambulatory Health Services. So, it's not a you know, hospital where you can stay, but you go in for the day, and you see doctors, nurses, psychiatrists, psychologists, or you get your blood drawn, because you have to do some testing. But, you know, you don't stay overnight, as you would at Carle Care, you know. They have a variety of services that they offer, including X-rays, etc. They also have a unit that provides health education to students, so trying to stay ahead of, you know, students getting sick, training them on, you know, for example, how to properly train for a marathon, you know, not getting injured, talking to a trainer, or they also have dieticians, who can help students understand how you need to- what type of diet you need to have to lose weight, or to maintain your weight or take care of whatever ailment you have. The Counseling Center is another unit that I oversee. And you know, mental health being what it is today, especially having been exacerbated by COVID has become even more critical. They have a variety of mental health providers LCSW these licensed clinical social workers, or psychologists who are, you know, more advanced skills in terms of counseling, they offer a variety of services, whether it's individual counseling or group counseling, they do it in person online. And the same for McKinney as well. You can see a doctor online or nurse online or in-person. And the

counseling unit is not designed to serve students long current, it is usually especially individual sessions if the person is going to need more help in a long term, they usually try to work with that person to find someone in the community who's better position to offer that we just, you know, could not afford to serve students long term and also serve students as you know, as needed when the need arises. Housing offers housing both residence halls, family housing, apartments for upperclassmen and women and the- you know, they offer dining opportunity, they also do catering across campus. So, it's not just, you know, dining in the residence hall but they offer the full gamut in terms of housing, probably one of the largest staff on campus with more than 600 full-time staff and about 2000 student employees. So, a large unit. So I've talked about Student Affairs Technology is a group of so we've created a shared service program where we share resources and all of the IT folks in the different units have been pulled to provide so that, you know, deepen the bench provide more support, so that you know units that only had one person, have more support when there's a sick person or a person leaves you're not left with a big gap in your unit for six months before you hire another, another person. So let me see. Did I forget anyone out there? I think I covered everybody.

**Inbar Michael 10:20**

Okay, that's quite a lot of departments. Thank you. So, kind of transitioning more into some questions about COVID. We were wondering, do you remember the first time you heard about the emergence of COVID-19?

**Lowa Mwilambwe 10:38**

I think at the time, it was in December, January window and I was out of the country in Africa. Okay. And we were suddenly here. And you know, this was a whole family trip. So soon, I hear about, well, you know, there's some going on in China, I don't know exactly what it is, people are sick, etc. We made it back home safely. Then in January, we started hearing more and more and how people got sick. And, you know, so that was the first time I heard about it. And you know, where did it come from? Was it I don't know animal market, etc. Wherever it was in, in China, I don't recall the city. But we saw that on TV. And so that's what I remember.

**Inbar Michael 11:32**

Okay, yeah. Sounds like a lot of people had heard about it around that time as well. And specifically, within like the Student Affairs, what did your- when did your department start to discuss how to handle the COVID pandemic, within the workplace, if they started doing that beforehand? Or even when everyone decided to go on lockdown?

**Lowa Mwilambwe 11:59**

Well, you know, probably from McKinley, because you know, McKinley reporting to me and the director, we started having conversations about hey what are we hearing? What is this disease? And how, you know, are we protecting ourselves? And we have, you know, at the time it was, you know, China seems to be the place where people will come from, we're looking at, okay, how do we deal we have international students who are travel, they're coming back, are we protecting them? Protecting our staff? And making sure that, you know, we continue to provide services to campus. And then, you know, so students when they arrive, international students especially, and even, you know, domestic students, they have to [inaudible], we have to make sure that they are compliant with, you know,

required vaccines. So, we check, you know, some of their information, they bring that information or they upload it, and we check it. Those who don't have all the requirements, well they have to get vaccinated and meet the state requirements, you know, the state said, rules and regulations when it comes to vaccination. So, we had to go through all of that process and make sure that okay, we are hearing this, people are coming from this specific area, how are we protecting ourselves to make sure that- and protecting our staff to make sure that we continue to provide services. So, I know McKinley has the setup, and then just sharing information within our team, how are we going to handle this this issue? And so, when the decision was made that okay, this is becoming serious enough people are getting sick enough- in our planning, we looked at okay, for example, the residence halls. What do we do? You know, why and how do we continue to offer services? Some of our students well, one day they can't go home all right because they are here, they are taking classes and we are not set up to take classes online. How do we feed them if they stay in the residence halls? Our first-year students who are scattered who could not go into one, I mean, they did not say in their hall in their building, because we couldn't operate all 25 buildings that we are responsible for, we had to kind of consolidate. So, there's that piece about the consolidation, there is a piece about okay, all of these students who are here have to go home because we are saying that campus shuts down. How do we deal with room and board? We're not gonna offer the service the university has told them to go back home. So, they are really not in violation of the contract. How do we refund whatever portion of our room and board is left? I mean, those are all the things that we were thinking about. And on the McKinley side of the counseling side, we had already started planning for online services. You know, but it had to be secure communication. Because, you know, those are medical visits. And so, you couldn't do it on just a regular Zoom, so they can get secured version, I believe, yeah, I think they had this, they were doing it on Zoom. So they had to get a secure version of Zoom, that was FERPA [Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act], that was meeting all of the HIPAA [Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act] covered. And so, you know, taking a lot, in terms of technology, we had to make sure that we set up both areas, get people comfortable around, you know, having medical visits or counseling sessions, with staff. So, you know, those are some of the things that we had to think about in campus strike. I don't recall, I don't remember how long- they were not close very long. How do we- campus right may have been close now that I think about it for a while, but how do we maintain a facility where people are coming to work out? You have to deal with COVID? Some people didn't want to wear a mask. What our policies and procedure but yeah, you know, you working out, you're breathing hard. And you know, you are you're sharing, you know, germs and how do we clean up right after somebody's worked out and not expose students? And, you know, for housing, we're also and I know, I'm a little bit all over the place. I'm just seeing trying to recollect. And I'm sure they've shared with you, but how do we clean all of those facilities? And how do we feed students? And prevent people from, you know, getting sick, and sharing germs, and the virus, as they get food. So, you know, they came up with a plan where people could take food out, you know, all of that. In the [Illini] Union. We stayed open, just we stayed closed, maybe a few days, and then had to reopen to give students the opportunity to come in and out those that wanted to study. How do we go about cleaning, cleaning restaurants, etc. So, there are a lot of things, you know, were going through our minds, you know, when I look at all of the units that I oversee, you know, trying to have a semblance, and there was no way. You know, as I look at the team and the staff, a lot of my units could not close. You can't just say, okay, we're gonna lock up the building, and go, we have people here and you have people here, we need staff here to facilitate.

**Inbar Michael 18:31**

Right. It's definitely complicated decisions to have to make, especially when you're working with the student population that's on campus. So yeah, thank you for sharing that with us. And then do you recall your last day on campus before it had gone into lockdown around- the date that was given to me here was around March 17 of 2020. I know that you still had to continue to operate different facilities, but before like, right before going into the formal lockdown, can you describe how like it felt or like how those around you were feeling like what was like, kind of going on around with everyone?

**Lowa Mwilambwe 19:13**

So, for me, it wasn't a matter of lockdown. It was okay, we're gonna continue to operate. I'm not- that's not an option, came to serve our students. And I don't know how many days I stayed at home, but I made sure because I had operations that were operating and staff that was coming into work. I didn't feel it was, you know, appropriate or fair that I as a supervisor would, you know, work from home. So, I came in very often, but I remember for a lot of folks it was well, we're gonna shut down and just operate online. And for me, it was, well, you know, we- how do we continue to operate? And provide services to the campus because we have people who, you know, even if in the residence hall students are gone, but in the community, and the students who live off campus, well they're still here, they still have apartments and landlords don't, you know, are not known to let them off the out of their lease. So, you took some of the- most of the units were, that at least that reported [to] me, were here, so there was no plan to close. Or if we made adjustments, it was a matter of how are we gonna schedule our staff? We know that, you know, traffic will decrease, we are not going to have a whole, like for example, in the Union, we're gonna stay open because students people need to come into the building. But some of these activities and events, public events were prohibited. So, we may not need as many staff, but we still need to remain open. And how do we stagger staff to make sure that you know, the building is clean, and that we take all the precautions necessary. So, we're going through that whole process of planning and changing schedules, etc. And I think, you know, it was the same for Housing, and other places, how do we continue to provide services, knowing that we are not as busy, but we're not laying off anyone. Everybody, you know, is keeping their job, and we continue to work, so everybody had to make some adjustments in terms of the way they operated.

**Inbar Michael 21:50**

Right. Okay, we'll go ahead and get into some of the more specific department questions and also some things about SHIELD. So, you have held your role since 2016. And we were wondering, how has the pandemic changed priorities within your position.

**Lowa Mwilambwe 22:15**

So, one of the big impact that the pandemic had, was a significant loss of revenue. So for example, you know, Housing, you know, from March through the end of May lost maybe 1/3 of their revenue. In terms of students staying in the residence hall, or maybe a quarter of their revenue. So that's a significant loss. You know, when you have \$100 million budgets, you do not plan for it. And then you have all of these requirements. On the student fee side, we also get a refund of the fees. And so when you lose that kind of revenue, you have to decide and determine, you know, how do you handle your priorities, you have to reprioritize if, and we dipped into a lot of our reserves, to overcome the challenges that we face in terms of the lost revenue. And, you know, for some of our activities, we were planning, for

example, on upgrading some of our facilities, buying furniture, buying new equipment, well we had to postpone a lot of those things. So we defer, you know, we deferred maintenance until we build enough reserves to get back to the point where we could, we can, again, aggressively pursue fixing up maintaining some of our facilities. But we had to go through that process with a lot of the units to kind of assess and look at the lay of the land and the new our new environment and the impact of that, and then make determination, what we need to do going forward. You know, it has had, you know, we had to reprioritize a lot of things and as we look, even up until today, we are still dealing with that. Does that mean that we are in a position to really do some of the things that we were planning on doing two or three years ago? You know, we've postponed some of our plans to push for, you know, some changes, we had to delay hiring for example, you know, whereas we were thinking about being at point A, well you know, or from C, we had to go back and say, Okay, we can't hire, we don't have vacancies. And so, you know, and for some of these units, I remember closing some dining facilities, you know, in the midst of COVID, because one, we couldn't hire as many people as we wanted, our people were getting sick. And as I remember, some weekends during the pandemic, we closed the facility because we didn't have enough staff to work. People again, is sick, they were exposed, and there was a prime, you know, standard procedure that we have to follow, if you're expose you within six feet of a person, if you eat dinner with them, well all the people, it was 10 people were eating dinner around the table, well, all of them couldn't work. And before you know you get a critical [mass] and you pretty much, you know, had to shut down. And so, you know, that had an impact, you know, on us, but you know, when I look at some of the other priority, for example, dealing with minimum wage increases, right. Those are state mandates, we have no choice but to implement them, you know, so people need to get paid. Today, \$13 an hour is the minimum. Well, we had to come up with the money reprioritize what we need to do to make sure that we had enough, you know, funding to pay all the people that we hired, you know, especially students to pay them a minimum wage low.

**Inbar Michael** 27:00

Right. Yeah, definitely. I didn't even consider how like with housing and things like that, because some of the students might have gone home and things like that, that source of income, like can affect so many other operations. So, I believe you had search, you worked with SHIELD. So, we're wondering, when you started working with SHIELD, and then how did SHIELD collaborate with your department?

**Lowa Mwilambwe** 27:33

You know, we were involved on many levels. I think, for me, I'll do on the test and tell [SHIELD: Target, Test, Tell committee], but I think where I did most of my work is with the COVID Operational Leadership Team, COLT. You know, because of my role, and the areas that I oversee between McKinley, Housing, Campus Recreation, we had to look at what- how we need to plan for COVID and our response. So, you know, for example, at the height of the issue, and the pandemic, when Housing was running out of space, you know, we had to look at other spaces, and coordinating that working with the Union, for example, to find additional space. You know, that was, you know, a bit of my responsibility, making sure that there was communication, making sure that we took whatever, you know, shortcut because, you know, Housing has got to have a balance, right? You, you have students in the residence halls, they are your priority. And that's the thing that I made sure I often communicated it. You can't have students who are off campus moving to housing during COVID. And then you tell the students who are have a contract with Housing, but we don't have space for you, you need to go home, you know, parents have

been seriously upset. So, trying to you know, we're running a fine walking a fine line. We so we determined that well, maybe we can turn the hotel at the Union into a COVID, you know, facility where the, you know, we could maybe house students, if we're running out of space, we move students who were off campus to the Union hotel, kind of balance, you know. And then we also had to have, okay, you know, in housing, you have secure doors, you have to get in, you have to swipe your ID, so we know who's coming in and out, but in the Union well, you know, someone can leave their room and go to Sixth Street, even though they're sick. We had to staff that and make sure that, you know, we had the proper staffing to help out. The other thing, you know, in terms of working with other folks, just the communication to students making sure that we did all that we need to do to notify soon make sure that they were aware that they tested positive. I mean, that came through the Dean of Students, but a lot of that was also coordinated through McKinley and the IT team at McKinley, or Student Affairs Technology, you know, folks who were involved with the communication for- so making those resources available to campus to made sure that we were properly handling, you know, positive tests or making, you know, the EHR, the electronic health record platform that we use, medic app, available to the rest of the campus, because that was also another part that was very important in terms of dealing with COVID. And so, as part of that whole, you know, SHIELD team, I was involved in, you know, the different relationships and making sure that we had a proper response from at least the areas that I oversaw.

**Inbar Michael 32:12**

Okay, so the COVID Operation Leadership Team was a part of SHIELD?

**Lowa Mwilambwe 32:17**

It wasn't part of SHIELD per se, but a lot of people interface with SHIELD Illinois, but we decided operationally that we needed to have this team made operational decisions. Outside of SHIELD to determine how the campus was going to respond. [Inaudible] people on that team from either IT to, you know, the Vice Chancellor for Administration, Mike DeLorenzo, to Public Affairs in terms of how we communicated with campus when it came to, you know, the dashboard, or encouraging people to test to go get vaccinated, etc.

**Inbar Michael 33:07**

Okay, that makes sense. Okay. So also, when was this team formed? Was it early on? Like, do you know around what time or like, even when did you join it?

**Lowa Mwilambwe 33:07**

I think I want to say it was in early Fall 20. And I would say probably now July, August, that's when we started meeting. You know, we felt like there was a gap there. And we need to make, you know, lot of decisions. For example, when students were not responding to okay, I tested positive. So, what do we do? Well, you know, the Dean of Students needs to get involved. It'd be nice if we could automate a text message, because students, you know, instead of reading email, they probably respond to text message a little bit quicker. So, those are things that and so, you know, we have to devote resources. And so, we discussed that within that team, said okay this is how we need to proceed. And then we proceed.

**Inbar Michael 33:33**

Okay. Thank you for clarifying. You served as the liaison between the Champaign Urbana Public Health District [CUPHD] and UIUC, what did this entail responsibility wise being a liaison?

**Lowa Mwilambwe 34:41**

I and there were many people who are liaison so I'm not the only [inaudible] I think, you know, where I was most involved with CUPHD it was around- so you know, benefits as soon as, you know, could get- when they tested positive, and I've had a long-standing relationship with CUPHD, since I started this role. Because, you know, whenever people test positive, I may need to interface with CUPHD in terms of contact tracing, but, you know, part of it was really about, you know, contact tracing, and making sure that we had a process in place when student, so when a student tested positive, who was to talk to them, and who was to do the contact tracing. Right? And so, for students of campus, and CUPHD did that, with student on campus, we had a team that was working with students as well in Housing, right? There was students in a residence hall, I think that's how we kind of split the role. So and then in terms of getting students to, you know, the isolation space, isolation room, etc, you know, we had to work with CUPHD as well, to get them where they needed to get and then the other thing that came up was, while we have this issue of transportation, students they get the notification it's nine o'clock at night, and they're not feeling well, what do we do? So, work on a transportation system. We started on campus first then we went to CU, I mean to MTD [Champaign-Urbana Mass Transit District] made those rented with MTD, so they could transport data bus dedicated to that, but they were not transporting a lot of people. And then we decided to cut it back to campus. We had a van that was retrofitted. So to minimize exposures, you know, by the drivers, but that van circulated a good portion of the day, in the evening, and then also on the weekend to transport students. So, making those type of arrangements, you know, in terms of isolation space, off-campus, isolation space on-campus, students getting funding or money for food, when they were on-camp off-campus. That was some of the conversation that that we had. And then also, when a student tested positive, we created an interface with- all of our positives, went to CUPHD. And then CUPHD, the contact tracing for those were off-campus, like I said, and those students who were on-campus, they- we did the contact tracing through Housing. So that was kind of my, but it is a relationship that I've had with CUPHD. Even prior to this where we talked about some of- the you just have to contact tracing and maybe benefits that students could have access to.

**Inbar Michael 38:37**

Okay, great. Thank you. Okay, so you are also the representative for campus integration of public health communications, a lot of this I'm getting from the email that director Jamie Singson sent to me, which was very helpful. Could you walk us through the process of implementing these communications on the university campus? And then some, some things to consider. Also, if this is like too many questions at once, just let me know. And we can talk about them one at a time. But how like, what was the format of these health communications? And then what information was the focus? And did it differ between whether you were addressing students, faculty or staff?

**Lowa Mwilambwe 39:32**

So, I think this is beyond what I did. But I know, as I sat on COLT, I told you that there was a Public Affairs person. Actually, there were two of them. One of them and I would defer to Allison Vance, who's in Public Affairs. She was really the focus, the person the primary person who was coordinating



communication, she would gather information and information included, you know, information on a dashboard, available resources to students, public health guidelines, just making sure that the campus was well informed about where we were. And the communication, you know, was also done in coordination with CUPHD communication team so that we're all on the same page and communication was geared towards some of it went to students, some to faculty and staff, depending on what it is that was happening.

**Inbar Michael** 40:49

Okay, yeah, thank you for the name, I believe I actually had communicated with Allison Vance before, but we only got documentation. So maybe I'll ask her a little bit more about the communications that she was involved with. Thank you. All right. So, I know that part of your role is working within Student Affairs, so I was curious if you ever, like directly talk to students about their concerns throughout the pandemic? And then if so, what were some issues that they brought up? And how were they addressed?

**Lowa Mwilambwe** 41:30

I don't know that they, in my role, I was directly talking to students. And I may have talked to student staff but addressed students directly at least I don't recall [inaudible] I didn't. But, you know, in all of these units there are so many students, difficult for me to do my job and talk to students directly. But, you know, when an issue came up, certainly, you know, forwarded the issue to the most appropriate staff. If it was a medical issue, then it went to McKinley and McKinley team addressed it. If it was a housing issue, then it went to- you know, a lot of times we get complaints about, well, my son or daughter is not getting food, or they have not been fed, etc. We'll find out what location then this would usually come from parents, we find out the location and follow up. But you know, give that information to the Housing director and they had a system on how to track students and how to get them what day they need. I wouldn't say that I was particularly the one talking directly to students about concern, but you know, I've talked I talked to students whenever I get a chance. In passing they how's it going? What do you need? Is everything fine? Do you feel like you have- we take good care of you? So yeah, those type of things but directly? No.

**Inbar Michael** 43:18

Okay. Yeah, I'm just like writing notes as we go through. So, you had mentioned you were a part of COLT. Additionally, were you a part of any like other committees or specific like SHIELD committees throughout the pandemic? Or was that like the main one you were on?

**Lowa Mwilambwe** 43:42

I think COLT was the main one that was a test and tell part of SHIELD, but I don't know that that subcommittee, the committee did a whole lot. I think there were kind of, you know, you begin with these lofty goals and get to the nitty gritty. I don't think that that committee really did what it was designed to do. And it fell by the wayside as we got deeper into COVID. And all of us got busy with what we need to do. For me, like COLT was a weekly meeting, sometimes it was every other day meeting, at the height of it. You know, I think we met maybe every day when it was really bad. And then we went to every other day, and then you know, now we meet once a week. All right. So that's COLT and that for me, that's probably the committee that I was most involved with. But you know, that said there were times

where we would meet with campus leadership, talk about, you know, approach when it came to, you know, our response to issues, how we dealt with fees, refunds, how we charged fees at the beginning of the year, etc.

**Inbar Michael 45:12**

Okay, great. Yeah, that's good know. I had included a little note to myself that you had mentioned in the Google Form that you filled out for us about COLT, but I wasn't sure if there's any other community that you were a part of. And the final thing that director Singson had mentioned to me was that you worked with the medical exemptions process and appeals. We were wondering how early along in the pandemic was this option available. What types of exemptions were included? And then what was the process of the medical exemption request?

**Lowa Mwilambwe 45:53**

Oh, wow. So this was probably in Spring, Fall 20. As we return to school, we started talking about that, because, you know, you had one, we need to know where students were, they need to test if they were here. For some of the grad students, they're like, I'm not coming to campus, I don't want to come to campus, why do I need to test on a regular basis, because you're exposing me, if I come to campus, I'm going to be testing with people who are sick, and all that. And so we had to come up with a process. And then you know, there were students who had a valid reason why they shouldn't test. You know, and so, we had to come up with a way to deal with that. So, depending on where the students were, what they were doing, when or whether they need to come to campus or not, we came up with a process where they would submit a request. And we would review and make a determination, whether we need to exempt them from testing. Also, and I think that that process was an electronic process that we use. Students, there were students also who could not spit enough to test so I think, McKinley started offering a nasal test [inaudible]. The're students who medically they couldn't. And, you know, we- all of that was reviewed by McKinley, a medical team, but students who had a special need. I remember student maybe being or maybe a spouse being pregnant, and student did not wanna, you know, expose themselves. So I knew are not coming to campus didn't need to come to campus and said, Okay, you know, you are fine. So there was all kinds of considerations to be given. I think, you know, the- [inaudible] we got better over time and refine our processes, to make sure that we were timely in our response and also, you know, having a better understanding of how to deal the disease, function, where we need to make exceptions or not.

**Inbar Michael 49:03**

So, is this exemption process only for testing or was there also something that you worked with that was related to like the vaccine once that had come out?

**Lowa Mwilambwe 49:15**

Yeah, for the vaccine once it came out. I believe that it went to- so McKinley did the medical exemptions for students. The Dean of Students took care of religious exemptions. And then OAE [Office for Access & Equality], the Diversity, Equity and Inclusion area, did it for staff. I think that's how we split it. McKinley and the Dean of Students already deal with religious exemptions, a medical exemption and medical this is for any anything, right? Medically related goes to McKinley if it's for students, and then if it's religious, it goes to the Dean of Students Office.

**Inbar Michael 50:16**

Okay. All right, thank you. So those were kind of like our main questions more related to the work that you had done throughout the pandemic. Before we move to more wrap up questions, was there something you wanted to discuss about the work you did in your position through the pandemic? Like anything you felt like we didn't touch on enough or discuss?

**Lowa Mwilambwe 50:38**

No, I think we touched on, hopefully, you know, on everything.

**Inbar Michael 50:45**

Okay, so we'll move into some of our last few questions. So this pandemic has been quite a roller coaster of waves, variants and constantly changing guidelines. What do you think about the university's responses to the evolution of the pandemic?

**Lowa Mwilambwe 51:03**

I think the university response was outstanding. At times, you know, I think that we could have been a little bit more relaxed. But, you know, we were dealing with a variety of things, right? From faculty and staff who feared for their health, to the community who felt like maybe students were not really complying with all of the requirements, to parents who feared for their family. I remember, you know, some parents worried about international students coming from other places. And, in my mind, you know, when you looked at infection, rates, and dashboards across the world, there were places in the United States where there was a high transmission rate higher than anywhere other places around the world. And parents did not have that issue with people coming, or their kids go into that area. But when you're looking at international students, because of the number of students we have, you worry about it. And in my mind, I was thinking, wow, you know, let's be a little bit more scientific and approach and look at numbers before we start losing our mind. So I would say certain things we did longer than we should have, but, you know, at times we did that for, you know, good reasons, because you also have to, not only do you have to manage the disease, but you also have to manage public opinion. Whatever that means, right? And sometimes you have to manage the faculty opinion I still remember, some faculty members being overly concerned about the transmission of the disease. You know, so.

**Inbar Michael 53:30**

Great, okay. Were you personally, or like things perhaps that you've seen in your work, what have been some of the most challenging parts of working during the pandemic?

**Lowa Mwilambwe 53:44**

For me for almost a year and a half, two years, I did not take vacation time. I did not take a break. I remember, you know, traveling, and being in a different time zone, maybe seven hours, in a different time zone and still having to participate and deal with meetings here. So at times I was abroad and it was midnight, and because it was 3pm here, I was online. I'm like, okay, when do I take a vacation? It's not really a true vacation, I lost several vacation days. So that lack of flexibility was not a really- it is something that we could have done better, considering what we did, but as far as the administration is concerned, and how do you make exceptions for some and not others. You know, so, for those of us

who were in a position where we were working because I had days where I work from had meetings at 6am. All the way up, you know, to 9pm?

**Inbar Michael** 55:08

Wow. Okay.

**Lowia Mwilambwe** 55:10

You know, and weekend included.

**Inbar Michael** 55:15

Okay. Wow.

**Lowia Mwilambwe** 55:16

So it was, you know, and so that was just related to COVID. And my area of responsibility did not change, right? So I still had a lot of other issues that I had to deal with.

**Inbar Michael** 55:35

Yeah. Almost like working like, two jobs at once.

**Lowia Mwilambwe** 55:42

Yeah, it was, honestly, it was very, very demand. For me, I think that that was the most challenging piece. And, you know, just making sure that, okay, we stay, staff stayed healthy, that we could count on, for example, our staff who worked in the, in Housing, for example, on the COVID [inaudible]. You know, they're still drawing the same salary as those who didn't they have PPS [personal protective equipment], etc. But still, you know, you could easily get exposed, and I wish we had been placing a significant differential pay as an incentive for the for those folks, but we're dealing with a pandemic, and you know, you can't think about everything else.

**Inbar Michael** 56:35

Yeah, definitely. Have you seen any long term changes within your department or your role?

**Lowia Mwilambwe** 56:47

I would say long term is just how we work. You know, I don't know, before the pandemic, if we could ever have guessed that we could work from home other folks, right? So, I think this is a good thing. I have no issues with that. I think that having the ability to have a hybrid schedule is important. Looking at offering services, what are services that we can offer online and give staff a little bit more, you know, flexibility is important. You know, at McKinley, we had been talking, I think since 2016-2017. that you know we need to have an online, be able to see students online. And that didn't happen until COVID.

**Inbar Michael** 57:53

Oh, wow. Okay.

**Lowia Mwilambwe** 57:54

But when COVID hit, it was like, Okay, we got a plan, we have the infrastructure in place. And so we just need to, you know, flip the switch, and we can do it. And so it kind of pushed us across the line to be able to do that. Those are major, major changes that, you know, the counseling center the same, you know I know, we still struggle a little bit with online in a counseling center, because where do you want to counsel students? Do you want to counsel them in person or online? Is that the same impact? And so, but overall, I think if there was anything that has had a long term impact, its ability to be flexible, and where we were. Because it really, and I know, we're still at the beginning of this process, it will really will change how we do our work long term, how much space we need for the campus. I'm sure that as a result of people working from home, our utility bill, significantly change, the cost of cleaning our facilities is substantially changed, you know, dropped. I don't know, I haven't asked facilities, but I'm assuming that what we spend in terms of toilet paper on campus it's probably a little bit lower than what we spent in the past pre-COVID.

**Inbar Michael** 59:40

Great, so that was my final question. Was there anything else that you wanted to discuss or you feel like that was- I know I asked that before but just like right before we close up, was there anything else?

**Lowa Mwilambwe** 59:58

No, I think we- If I think of anything else, I'll call you or send you an email. But I think we've gone through and I've shared with you what I can remember, you know? Almost six months a year removed from the heat of, and then I can. So I may have forgotten a few things, but I think I've covered it all.

**Inbar Michael** 1:00:21

Yeah, kind of like, in when it was when we were like, deep into the pandemic, I feel like we're kind of just like operating on survival mode. So make sense to not always remember everything. But yeah, thank you so much for your time and for speaking with us today. Yeah, if you have anything that you do, remember, you can always send me an email. And we can include that within the transcription work that we do. So before we end, just so you know, we do I did send it to your assistant to have you fill out an interview agreement. And we need this so that we can make the transcription and audio that we're going to work on public this is [inaudible]

**Lowa Mwilambwe** 1:01:06

I thought I sent it to you.

**Inbar Michael** 1:01:09

I will check again and see.

**Lowa Mwilambwe** 1:01:11

When did you send it?

**Inbar Michael** 1:01:16

Let me see.

**Lowa Mwilambwe** 1:01:20

I thought I sent an agreement that I signed.

**Inbar Michael** 1:01:25

It's possible that it was not added to the workspace that I'm looking at, because I don't have direct access to see all the documents. I just see what my supervisor uploads. Let me just take a look.

**Lowia Mwilambwe** 1:01:48

Because I remember filling out a document.

**Inbar Michael** 1:01:51

Okay, it was filled out. I sent it. On January 26. There was a preliminary survey, which was a Google form. And I saw that you did fill that out on Thursday. And then there was also a project interview agreement that was in that same email.

**Lowia Mwilambwe** 1:02:15

Okay, you said when you send again

**Inbar Michael** 1:02:18

On the 26th of January, and I included you in that email as well.

**Lowia Mwilambwe** 1:02:32

Let me see, well, why don't you send me send me again.

**Inbar Michael** 1:02:37

Sounds good. I will just send you like a link to the interviewer agreement. So there was a couple there, so maybe it was like little confusing. Okay, I will send it after we finish after we close the zoom. I'll rewrite the email and send it to you.

**Lowia Mwilambwe** 1:03:05

Sounds good.

**Inbar Michael** 1:03:06

All right. Great. Thank you again.

**Lowia Mwilambwe** 1:03:08

Thank you take care.

**Inbar Michael** 1:03:10

You as well