

Interview with Eric Carter

Brooke Offenhauser, Interviewer

April 23, 2021

Cottage Grove, Minnesota (interviewer) and St. Paul, Minnesota (interviewee), via Zoom

[00:00]

BO: Hi, my name is Brooke Offenhauser, and I'm a senior at Macalester College. The date is April 23, 2021. I'm speaking today with Professor Eric Carter from Macalester. So, hello! I want to ask you some questions about your experience with the COVID-19 pandemic. You're welcome to answer in however much detail you feel comfortable sharing, and you can always decline to answer by just asking to skip a question. Before we jump in, I do want to ask your consent to record this response for the Macalester College archives to be saved and shared or future Macalester members and historians.

EC: Yes, you have my consent.

[00:39]

BO: Great. So, thank you for taking the time to share your experience with me. First, can you just tell me a little bit about yourself? Can you tell me about your hobbies, things like to do, your family, what you do for a living, that kind of stuff?

EC: Sure. So, my name is Eric Carter. I'm originally from California from the Los Angeles area. That's where I grew up, and I went to college at [the University of California] Berkeley, as my

hat shows. I spent a lot of time living in Latin America; I have a lot of connections to that region because my mother is originally from Ecuador. And so I have a lot of family in Ecuador and Argentina. And so the year after I graduated from college, I spent a year traveling around South America. And that's when I decided I wanted to go to graduate school to become a geographer. I mean it didn't happen quite so suddenly, but I want to move the story along. And then I went to graduate school in geography at the University of Wisconsin. And I did field research in Ecuador for my master's thesis and then in Argentina for my dissertation. And my work progressively became more involved with public health issues in Latin America and the history of infectious disease control and vector-borne disease control. And after graduate school, I taught for a few years at a college in Pennsylvania. And then I taught at Grinnell College for a few years from 2007 to 2012. And then I've been here at Macalester since 2012. And I live in St. Paul, and I've lived very close to campus the whole time that I've been teaching at Macalester except for the year that I was on sabbatical. We were living in Argentina and Chile and Costa Rica, and that was from 2015 to 2016. And I have a wife and two children. My wife works at St. Kate's University. And I have two daughters; one is eight, and one is 12. So they both go to Capitol Hill School. One's in the elementary school and one's in the middle school at Capitol Hill, which is also here in St. Paul. And I'm in the geography department; I'm a professor here. I'm also the Director of the Community and Global Health (CGH) Concentration, and that's something that I've been doing for the last four or five years as well.

[03:22]

BO: Awesome, that sounds great. So, now diving into your experiences with the pandemic. First, try and think back to early 2020 or even late 2019. How did you first learn about COVID-19?

EC: Yeah, so it's interesting. So 2020 started off really great. My wife and I were actually in Guatemala for a conference, a Latin Americanist geographers conference. And so we spent New Year's Eve 2019 there and into the new year. And I believe that the very first reports of COVID-19 came out, like the first official reports, came out on December 30 or 31 of 2019. Very, very late in December if I'm not mistaken. So, I didn't hear about it for a few weeks. I heard a little bit about it in the news. And actually, it's kind of strange to say this, but it was around January 10 or 12 that my younger daughter, who was only in second grade at the time, had to do a current events report for her class. You know, she's seven years old, but she had to do a current events report, and she found a story about this. [laughter] I know it seems crazy, but she found the story about this new virus in China. And so she actually was the first person to bring it to my attention. I mean it's still pretty early, I think, compared to when a lot of other people found out about it.

[4:58]

But then, very quickly, it became part of my life because I was teaching -- so in the spring semester, I was teaching Medical Geography, which is the class that you're in now, Geography-256. And I was also teaching the capstone seminar for medical geography, and then I was also teaching the CGH senior seminar. And so as I was planning my course for the spring in January, I started thinking like 'oh, this is -- COVID-19, this is' -- I think at that time we called it the coronavirus or novel coronavirus -- 'this is going to be great because it's a pandemic, an epidemic that's unfolding in real-time.' And I always cover pandemics in my class, and it's a subject matter that I feel really familiar with. And sadly I was thinking like, 'well, this would be really valuable for my course, because we'll be able to see this pandemic unfolding in real-time.'

But I didn't think it was going to become what it became. So, it was really early January when I became conscious of it, and then my consciousness grew and grew and grew but along with my students, too. That was the other interesting part is like every, every week or sometimes every day, we would kind of learn more about this story in real-time. And we were following it very closely together, my students and myself. We were very on top of things from a very early point.

[06:31]

BO: Do you remember your first impressions of COVID-19?

EC: Yeah, so my first impression was that this was very similar to SARS in the early 2000s. I was making comparisons to SARS from 2002 to 2003. And then the MERS pandemic, or epidemic if you want to call it that, from a few years ago because they're similar viruses. And so I thought -- my impression was that this was something that was going to spread to some countries, but that the epidemic will be brought under control in an early stage. I guess I didn't think it was going to be quite so contagious. And so I thought that it was going to be sort of smaller outbreaks in some places and certainly cause problems in those places, but I didn't think it would spread quite so much. I remember being very impressed with the Chinese government's response to the pandemic at first because I remember -- one of the memories I have very strongly is seeing a video of this effort to build a hospital for COVID patients, probably in January. And it was like this huge hospital they built in like two days and I was like 'oh this is just another example of Chinese engineering, ingenuity, and prowess.' And they had like, you know, a hundred bulldozers and tractors, and they just put this thing up so quickly. And it gave me an

impression that things are under control. So, I guess I tended to minimize it a little bit at first and distance myself from it quite a bit. I kept an intellectual distance from it for quite a few weeks.

[08:28]

BO: Yeah, especially I feel like when it's not in your own backyard, you know, you might just think it will spread to other countries but not necessarily the place that you're in, for sure.

EC: Yes.

[08:41]

BO: So you obviously talked about talking about it with your class, or your classes, but do you remember your first conversations about it with friends and family?

EC: Yeah, I mean we started talking about it really early in my family because of my daughter's initial interest in it and just sort of like, I don't know, it became an everyday topic of conversation. I also want to mention that part of the reason why maybe it didn't make such a big impression on me at first, or I wasn't thinking it would turn into what it did, is I don't have any sort of relations or friends in China. But I do have some family that lives in Italy. And so Italy was one of the first European countries to experience the COVID pandemic starting sometime in February. And so I started hearing from those family members in Italy, and that's what I became a little bit more alarmed because this family lives in Milan. And they were going through a shutdown, a lockdown, I guess. And just hearing their accounts of it, that's when I became just sort of progressively more aware and more concerned. And then my mother, who is still in touch

with relatives everywhere, she would sort of give me reports of what was happening. So yeah, the kinds of conversations we would have are the sort that would be like, 'well what do you think's going to happen? Do you think it's going to come here? What's going to look like?' But in very vague terms.

BO: Very speculative, lots of uncertainty.

EC: Yes.

[10:22]

BO: So now thinking more like March 2020, that's kind of when most people, at least in the United States, associate that shift of, like, 'oh, it's not that big of a deal' to 'this is life-changing.' So when that hit and the pandemic first started impacting us more, what changes were most noticeable for you in your life?

EC: Yeah, so I want to say a little bit about March of 2020. So there were many different things that were happening. So here in St. Paul, there was a teacher strike that had started on -- I think the last day of school for the kids was Monday, March 9. I actually made a little timeline to refer to because I mentioned that I would have a lot of trouble remembering when things happened. So this teacher strike started on Tuesday, March 10. So that was the day that began -- I mean, the first day my kids didn't go to school for the next, I don't know, 10 or 11 months, you know, however many it became. The school closure started even before COVID because of this teacher strike so that's one thing. I remember teaching my classes that week, so this is the week of

March 9 through the 13th, which was the last week before our scheduled spring break for Macalester. And I was still really minimizing the pandemic with my students. I remember there was this one student in Medical Geography who had plans to go to Paris with her family for spring break, and she was asking me for travel advice. Like, you know, should she change her plans or reschedule. And I was like, 'oh, don't worry about it. Everything is going to be fine. I haven't heard anything to the contrary, so you should probably just go ahead with your plans.'

[12:17]

I actually had a trip to Spain planned with my wife. We were meant to travel starting on Friday, March 13. And this was actually for my wife's work, so we are going to be gone the whole following week. And I was in constant communication with a friend I have in Madrid who was going to come pick us up from the airport. Old friend, but haven't been to visit him in Spain; he's from Argentina. And we texted back and forth on WhatsApp for weeks and days leading up to this and until the day we had to cancel our plans we were saying like, 'this is not a big deal.' He was saying, 'it's not a big deal, nothing's happening here. Everything's fine. You should come.' So I guess what I really remember about everything from that time was like everybody was in denial about the impacts of the pandemic until they weren't. I mean it was sort of like a switch went off with many people individually. And as a society, others might have remarked on this too when they're talking to you, there were other things from that week that really stand out. Like the NBA, National Basketball Association, suspended its season. And for some reason that felt very impactful because they don't usually do that. There's too much money at stake, so it must be really important if they suspend their season. And then we had a faculty meeting -- like a meeting of the whole faculty like we usually would; it was normally scheduled [March 10]. But it had a very different tenor to it because this was just before spring break and we were starting

to sense that there are problems ahead. So this is really the first time as faculty we talked about it all together because, at the previous meeting of the February faculty meeting which was a month before, it wasn't even a topic of conversation. And then by the March faculty meeting, we were getting ready to basically close down. And then I also remember that my mother actually came to visit that week because she had planned to come to stay with the kids because we were going to be in Spain. And so when she arrived, I think it was Wednesday of that week, we went out to dinner and everything was sort of still business as usual. We went out to a Japanese restaurant in downtown Minneapolis, and nobody was wearing masks -- nobody was wearing masks at that time at all. We were all in close quarters, busy restaurant. And then, President Trump made an announcement on the radio that night, I guess it was also on TV, announcing the shutdown of travel to and from Europe. Yeah, and then everything just started sort of falling apart from there. I just remember how it was a rapid cascade of events that everything began to change practically overnight or within a matter of days.

[15:21]

BO: Yeah, I feel like a lot of people had that experience where one day was so different from the next that it felt like an entire week was going on in just one day because of how many things were shifting so quickly. It sounds like that is kind of your experience as well.

EC: Yeah, and even for someone like me who studies this and who had been following it really closely. I had also had a couple of media interviews in the weeks prior to that. Like not any big deal, TV interviews or anything like that, but like an interview for CNN.com, for example. And I was talking about President Trump's rhetoric about China and Chinese people and the dangers of

xenophobia. I sort of caught that early on. It was pretty apparent to me, and I had written some stuff about this in the context of the previous pandemic, with the Zika virus pandemic [2016]. So I was already very aware of the pandemic and its consequences, but I still didn't conceptualize it as something that was going to affect me personally or affect my community here in the Twin Cities. And I don't know quite how to explain that sort of denial, but that's how my mind was working at the time.

[16:41]

BO: Yeah. So thinking more about your personal experience, how did your daily routine change? How was that sudden shift for you?

EC: Yeah, I mean it changed very drastically, very quickly. So, I was working more from home. I think that's pretty typical for a lot of people. But unlike some people maybe at Macalester, I kept coming into my office. I wasn't totally sure if there was a rule against it, but I continued coming to my office, and it was like a ghost town around here. I mean things that had been started were just left as they were. And in that week, I remember things like on the whiteboard that people had written, and they just stayed there for months because everything was empty. Nobody was using this place, so everything became very weird. I guess that's one part of the change in routine. So suddenly like alone, feeling quite alone on campus. We weren't wearing masks yet, in general, so that was something that came a little bit later. Of course, I was also spending more time at home. And my wife and I had to try to figure out ways to sort of juggle our schedules. The kids were home now all the time as well, so that had already started with the teacher strike. But now that we had the option of teaching from home, working from home, it

made it a little bit easier to deal with this issue. Also, the routine has changed because I do -- I mean you asked me about my hobbies earlier, and I didn't answer that question. I really like music; I like going to concerts. My wife and I both do. So we used to go to a lot of concerts, and we had a lot of concerts planned. And we had to cancel all that. We used to go out to dinner a lot, go to bars, you know, fun things. [laughs] So all of that changed and also just really restricted the number of trips that we make to the store. I kept shopping the whole time. I would go to Target or Whole Foods or different places, but it was basically just to get groceries and household necessities. There were no other reasons anymore to go out. So I was spending a lot more time in and around the house for sure. And then also doing everything on Zoom. That was a really sudden change because, in addition to my classes, I was also on this committee, actually a couple of college committees. And so we would meet in person, and suddenly everything is on Zoom. And that was a little bit of an adjustment because we hadn't done that before, not even experimentally or temporarily for other reasons. It was a really sudden shift.

[19:45]

BO: Yeah, lots of big changes pretty quickly. Yeah. So, thinking more -- we can move into more of your general experiences throughout the past year or so, but feel free to pull out specific events or timelines. I know you made a timeline to share. Thinking about your role as a professor, how did COVID-19 change how you taught classes?

EC: Yeah. Okay, so one of the things that happened with the pandemic was that our spring break was extended from a week to two weeks, you may remember this. That was really necessary, and so we had time to retool and rethink our classes a little bit. And I think the administration -- and

not exactly the administration, but different groups on campus that are really centered on pedagogy, like the teaching of pedagogy -- did a good job stressing that we couldn't try to just teach our classes as we usually would but just on Zoom, and that the pandemic was causing all kinds of displacement and disruptions that we as faculty might not have been aware of. Because it's true. I mean I was dimly aware of this fact that the students all had to move out of the dorms, except for some students like international students who maybe got exceptions. Our students kind of scattered to the four winds. Not everybody had good internet at their house. Some people had very precarious situations, and people were traveling still, like internationally, to get home. So it was, you know, we were just more conscious that we had to change things up for our students because their circumstances were just very dynamic and oftentimes problematic. And so that was one thing. And then I also recognize that we just have to -- I mean I approached the second half of the spring semester like some professors did which was that this is just sort of an emergency and we're just sort of doing triage to get through the last part of this academic year as painlessly as possible. But also maybe to still try to live deeply in that moment of the pandemic.

[22:15]

So anyway, one of the things I did in the medical geography class I was teaching at the time: I totally changed the final project. The students had only maybe made their project topic proposals by that stage so it wasn't like the students had already invested a lot of time in their final projects. But instead of it being a research project, we did this COVID-19 pandemic journaling project. So I had done a little bit of this in previous classes for different subjects but basically, students had to write a daily journal to essentially document or chronicle what was happening in their daily lives. And then they did group work together to try to -- this is a little bit qualitative research too -- to identify kind of cross-cutting themes in their lives during this time. And it was

about a four- or five-week period that they were able to chronicle or document what was going on and then process it more analytically for the final project. And that came out really nicely. That actually got contributed to the college archives. And I don't exactly remember how I found out about it but that was interesting because Ellen Holt-Werle, who is the college archivist, had started collecting artifacts of the pandemic. You know, basically visual artifacts for the most part. And I said, 'well, could we do a class project to contribute to the archive?' And she was really interested in doing that, so that was actually kind of fun -- I mean as fun as we could make it -- to contribute that to the archive. So the students felt like -- I don't know exactly how they felt, but I thought that they might feel like part of history. This will be a time that we will always remember, but we need to break things down because otherwise, we'll forget. So, that was part of it.

[24:13]

Then for my seminar class, the capstone seminar. That was different. What I did in that class -- I knew the students really well, I'd known them for a long time -- I just basically gave them the option of if they didn't write the capstone paper, then they could still get a passing grade in the class and they could take the class pass/fail. And I think that only one out of the eight students elected to write the final paper. So that was a little bit of a way to get myself a free pass, as well. To be honest, I didn't want to have to try to carry these eight students across the finish line for writing a project when there were so many distractions. And they also being seniors were just really disappointed about the way that their final semester turned out. They're just going through a lot. So I said like, 'why push it? Why make my own life difficult at the same time? And let's just let them have this easy out because these circumstances are extraordinary.' And so I guess, in the long run, or the medium term since last year, I think that the pandemic has made me think

about new ways of structuring assignments. Like, just being creative and just taking a ‘to heck with it’ sort of approach and saying like ‘hey let’s just try this and see what happens.’ I mean if I am clear enough with the instructions and I structure it well enough, we could do all kinds of creative things with our assignments. And the students have seemed to enjoy that. So, every time I’ve taught medical geography, those three times since the pandemic started, there’s always like a COVID-related project like the one you guys are doing now. So that’s been good. I mean, just to be in the moment, I suppose.

[26:12]

BO: Yeah, that definitely makes sense. Thank you for that. So I do want to get back to your relationship with students, but how did COVID-19 impact your department and your relationships with other professors?

EC: So, in our department, things went really smoothly. I mean, thankfully, to be honest, we have such a great department. I’m not just saying that because it’s being recorded for posterity [laughs] but we really do have a lot of common ground. There’s a lot of harmony, I guess you could say, in our department. And so we kind of tackled this problem together. This problem of living through the pandemic. And we gave each other advice. Like that was important, little teaching tips, you know. So for example, I remember pretty clearly that Xavier Haro-Carrión -- back then he was a postdoc in our department, now he’s an assistant professor. I mean basically, his job titles changed because he shifted to being a tenure track professor. At that time he was a postdoctoral fellow in our department. He was teaching the Environment and Society in Latin America class that I usually teach but he’s taking over that class, at least, sometimes now.

Anyway, because he's so much younger than us and so much more freshly out of graduate school -- I guess he only finished graduate school a couple years ago -- and he had taught at the University of Florida, he had a lot more expertise in online teaching. He had done quite a bit of that at Florida, and we had done basically nothing in our department as far as online teaching goes. So he was really helpful in explaining to us different tools but also kind of like how to pace things when we're doing online teaching. Like how much material students can handle at a time when lectures are recorded. So he was super helpful, but there was that information sharing that happened pretty naturally in our department. So we all really got along great. And the only drawback is that we saw each other a lot less often. So, the only person who I saw regularly and who I have seen very regularly this whole time has been Professor Bill Moseley because he and I have been the only ones who have habitually worked in the office. And so we see each other almost every day or every few days. So it's a little bit harder to stay in touch with everybody else in the department but we all know we're working hard. We talk to each other still pretty frequently so things have been good in my department, for sure.

BO: Yeah, that's really great to hear. A little less uncertainty with that I'm sure helps a lot.

EC: Absolutely.

[29:23]

BO: Okay. So going back to students. How, if at all, do you think COVID-19 has changed your relationship with your students?

EC: Well I think I've gotten to know them better in some ways and less well in others. I think that's because of some of these assignments I've mentioned, these things like the journals that they were keeping. For that group it was actually something that I remember really well that even though we had been meeting in person for the first half of the semester and I had seen them face to face, I probably wouldn't have gotten them as well as I did if they hadn't done this project we kind of had to do or I made them do, I guess you could say. They revealed so much about their lives. Just like little things like the kinds of TV shows they watched, how many brothers and sisters they have, those sorts of things. So that was really interesting. So in some ways, it got me a little bit closer to my students. I think that maybe as well it has kind of equalized my relationships with students a little bit more. I guess I would say that maybe in classes before the pandemic -- let's say they had a class of 20 people. There might be five that I feel like I would get to know really well because they're the ones who spoke up the most often or would stay after class to talk to me or what have you. But then maybe because of this modality of online learning, for whatever reason, it's kind of hard for me to explain right now, but it feels like I'm getting to know the students a little bit more equally. While that doesn't mean I'm getting to know them very well, there's a little bit more equilibrium in terms of my relationships with the students.

[31:15]

And I guess I've also just become more flexible because I've been kind of needing that flexibility in my own life. Like now, if anybody asks me for an extension or something like that I just habitually will say yes, whereas in the past my first response might have been, 'no. Explain to me why you need an exception.' And put the burden on them to explain why their situation is so rough that they needed the extension. But now it's kind of like, 'it's fine. Just take it.' It's

easier for me just to say yes then just move on, because I think that everybody needs a little bit more flexibility these days.

BO: Yeah, I feel like that's definitely been the name of the game for a year now.

EC: Yeah, yeah, so I've definitely become more flexible.

[32:09]

BO: Yeah, that's good. Have you noticed any changes with how students interact with each other or engage with class or learn in general?

EC: Yeah, I have. So I've been teaching a lot of classes in person. It's something I've really tried to do so. Almost every opportunity I've had to teach classes face to face in person, I've taken advantage of. And I've noticed that, yeah, it's a little bit awkward for the students to be in an in-person class because of the social distancing measures and the mask-wearing. Like everybody has a different sense of personal space than they might have had a year ago. Just to generalize broadly. And so it's a little bit harder for them to interact sometimes when they're in conversation or working on a group project or something like that. So that's become a little bit more awkward, I guess. And I also get the impression -- I could be wrong about this, but it's an impression anyway -- that some of the normal, usual social cues of conversation are way harder to gauge in this environment. So when we're online like this on Zoom, it's hard because we can't make eye contact with people. I mean, I might be making eye contact with you, but we can't make eye contact simultaneously with each other, and this is a problem. And then in an in-person

setting, it's almost the opposite. Like eye contact is the only thing you have, in some ways, because you can't use the rest of your face to express yourself. And that can also be uncomfortable because you're staring at people's eyes. And so then some people maybe gesticulate more to get their point across. I've always been somebody who gesticulates, but I guess I would like to see – maybe I need to teach this -- I think the students could do more of that. They're still using some of the same body language that they always had, but they need more body language to be able to show people how a conversation is shifting or how they're reacting to something that's said. So I feel like there's less of a give and take or a response to what people are saying. Like it's very hard to gauge what people are thinking. It's very hard for me to gauge what students are thinking when I talk to them. So I've seen that change. And then I also think that -- I mean this is based on kind of limited knowledge, but I think that the social worlds of the students have shrunk quite a bit because students have been taking this idea of living in pods -- is that the right word?

[35:13]

BO: Yeah.

EC: These small groups for the sake of protecting themselves from COVID and protecting others from COVID transmission. And so, yeah, this is not a good time to be a social butterfly and be like, you know, the one student who knows a hundred people. Like maybe now it's five people that they spend all their time with. And so, that's also been a big change that I've noticed. I've also noticed, maybe it's a byproduct of that, sometimes really harmonious deep relationships they build with these people who are in their pod. But then also more room for interpersonal

conflict and conflicts that are harder to get out of because they're kind of stuck with the people in their pods. So I hear a lot of complaints about roommates and housemates, but almost talking about them like family. It's like these two people that you can't get rid of, you know, you have to deal with them. So that's something else I've noticed a little bit of.

[36:18]

BO: Yeah, I wonder too if having to be socially distant in classes, like not being able to create those organic connections, I wonder too if that has inhibited connection within class. Did that kind of make sense?

EC: Yeah. Yeah, it definitely has. And I haven't found a way to really build those kinds of connections or cultivate them. I probably could try harder and be more inventive about ways to create that sense of community, but that's an area of improvement for me for sure.

[37:00]

BO: I think it's hard for everyone. Yeah. So moving away from classes. I know that you're a part of the Educational Policy and Governance Committee. Could you talk a little bit about what you do as a part of that group, and then your experience with it during the COVID-19 pandemic?

EC: Yeah, so I'm glad you asked. [laughs] So, this committee. We just call it EPAG. The Educational Policy and Governance Committee is one of the major committees of faculty, and they're basically -- we are basically in charge of governance related to the curriculum. I was the chair of this committee for the 2019-2020 academic year. And so there's seven faculty members

that serve on it along with the provost, associate dean, the registrar, the librarian, director of academic programs, and student reps. And so, our day-to-day before COVID was a lot of really mundane stuff, you know, like course approval changes or reviewing departmental reviews. So like departments get reviewed every 10 years, basically. They have an external review. And so they would write up these reports and then when we read these reports, and we would send lots of memos. We have to organize the reviews. Or if the department is changing the structure of its major, we would review that. So it's really important work but mundane, I guess you could say. Another way of putting it is almost anything that you see in the course catalog -- which nobody actually looks at the course catalog, but that's the official document of record of the curriculum -- everything that's in the course catalog essentially goes through EPAG at one point or another. So it's an important committee because we do that kind of work. And so the day-to-day before that was -- well, the other thing we were handling -- this is also something that used to weigh on me a lot -- the policy for end-of-course surveys, like the student evaluations of teaching, so EPAG was also in charge of that. And that was something we ended up spending a lot of time talking about. The other thing that EPAG does too is that -- I'm going to go on. It could be a little boring, but I think it's important that this kind of stuff gets into the record if anybody ever cares to look at this site later on.

[39:44]

How the administration responded to the pandemic is what I'm going to start to get into. But EPAG also handles what we call allocations which is when a department applies to have a new faculty line created, like a new tenure track position created. It goes through the allocations committee which is basically EPAG. And that's actually the last piece of business that we did before the pandemic shutdown. We met as allocations to talk about these new positions that we

were considering. And that was like a really weird meeting too because it was Thursday -- I wrote it down -- so it was Thursday the 12th of March. And so the meeting had been planned for a long time, and it was really interesting how we continued to go about our business even though we all knew that the campus was about to shut down. And like the provost [Karine Moe] was there too and she didn't say it in such certain terms that she didn't say like, 'yes, we're shutting down on Monday,' but she already knew that we were planning to shut down, so we got that vibe that this would be the last time we would meet in person for a long time. So then when the pandemic came, our business really shifted a lot. Like a lot. Our work was completely transformed in a lot of different ways. And we became more visible and we were an important part of the response to the pandemic.

[41:20]

BO: Yeah. Well, I think you talked a little bit about the work you did with that group over the summer. Is there anything you want to expand on with that?

EC: Yeah, I would. I'll take a few minutes to talk about this because I went back and looked and kind of reconstructed this timeline. I think I mentioned this to you before our interview that my memories of that time are a little foggy, you know, or just like a lot happening. It's hard to remember everything that happened. But it was interesting to go back and look at almost like a day-to-day or week-by-week record of what transpired. One point I want to emphasize before I give you a little bit of the story is that we're dealing in retrospect. You know, it was March into April of 2020 and like our knowledge of the future was just like, well, anytime. We had very little knowledge of what was yet to come. And the future of the pandemic was really uncertain,

right? And so we were in such an early stage that we didn't know. It wasn't really clear what the mortality rates were, which are the groups that are most affected, if students were very highly affected by the virus. Could students be super-spreaders? Could dorms be areas for super spreading? Or classrooms? Places where germs could spread really quickly like they do in flu season. Like all these things were unknown. And then, this is clear for the whole country, but there wasn't very strong guidance or very good guidance from the federal government about what to do in the pandemic. And I think it's actually really fortunate that we're in the state of Minnesota because starting in probably April the colleges and universities in Minnesota began to work pretty closely with whoever the liaisons were in the Minnesota Department of Health to get really good public health advice. More authoritative public health guidance from the Minnesota Department of Health that we began to use as essentially our own script for what we were doing. We took their guidance as important and scientifically valid and well informed. And it has informed all of our decisions.

[44:05]

In the first stages post-spring break, so late March to early April, we had to do a lot of stuff to handle the problems of that semester. So like we changed the pass/fail policy, for example, to make it possible for students to take any class pass/fail and as many as they wanted and up until the last day of classes they could declare. So that was not a hard decision to make. Some students advocated for making the pass/fail mandatory for all students for all classes. And I know some other colleges did that. And I think some of our students wanted us to do that because it had something to do with medical school applications, if I'm not mistaken. That was part of it. So like colleges or graduate schools would accept grades that were pass/fail if the students had no choice but to take it pass/fail. But we decided in the end like the students really had to be the

ones to make this decision themselves. Like we gave them all of the liberty they needed to make this decision but they had to do it themselves. And I think that something like one in four students took a pass/fail that semester. And we were fine with that.

[45:34]

And then we did other little things through the first part of April, but looking back at things, it was pretty early in April or at least by mid-April that we already started thinking about the fall. And we started looking at basically counting backwards from the start of the fall semester, which was September 2. And the provost [Karine Moe] and the president at the time who was President Brian Rosenberg were really insistent -- well -- they were very set on having classes start in one form or another on September 2, on the originally scheduled date. Although we did entertain some plans to shift the whole calendar, actually. So, starting in April, we spent a lot of time rethinking the academic calendar for this year, the year that we're in now. And this was actually a really big endeavor because we had always had semesters at Macalester. And most of us who teach at Macalester had always been at colleges that are in a semester system. And it just comes really naturally to us, and we take it for granted, sort of like the air we breathe. And so we actually had to really study things that we never even thought about. Like the meaning of credit hour. So like what does it mean if a course is worth four credits? Like we never thought about that. So the registrar had to explain, 'well for Macalester, a four-credit course means students are in class for three hours a week.' And then we had to translate that into a potentially online environment. And so we just started thinking like what does it actually mean to be *in class* for an hour if you're not in class at all? Right? So we looked a little bit at how colleges who have a lot of virtual learning do it. And this is the time -- it was like late April early May -- that we started coming up with the module system. And so I know that this has been a little bit controversial.

But I just wanted to say that EPAG is the committee that did all the work to put this calendar together, although we didn't make the final decision on the calendar. We made recommendations to the provost and the president. But we studied seven different types of calendars that we could do. And this is actually where our analytical skills came into play. This was something that was actually really interesting to do on EPAG because the faculty on the committee bring different skills to the table, and there's some really strong analytical skills. And so we're trying to figure out all the pros and cons to these different calendars. So we entertain the idea, for example, of shifting the whole academic year back to start in January and not having done anything in the fall. We thought about trimesters. We thought about a whole bunch of different options. And then the reason that we settled on the module system was that -- there was two main reasons. One is that we wanted to be really flexible. And so we had this idea in mind that we could treat these modules -- like we could do one module remotely, and then when the pandemic conditions permitted, we could switch to in-person in the next module. And so we had this sense that by making the periods shorter, we wouldn't get stuck with one mode of instruction for a whole semester. We could switch more quickly. And it didn't quite work out that way. But, you know, there's a lot of things we didn't know at the time.

[49:44]

And then the other reason why -- this is something that came out of the experience of spring 2020. And you were a student, right, here in spring 2020? [Brooke nods] And so the feedback that we got from our students was that it was really difficult to take four classes simultaneously if they're all online. It was very burdensome. The Zoom fatigue was really real. And so what we started steering towards was having students take only two classes simultaneously. Right? And then introducing more asynchronous content so that would also reduce the amount of time spent

on Zoom. And we like Zoom, I guess. It has become a really useful tool, but we were just feeling like it was intolerable to do four courses simultaneously in an all-remote setting. There was a possibility that it would be remote for every class. So that's how we ended up with the module system. We did a lot of consultation with different groups of faculty. Like there were some different channels of communication for consultation about the pros and cons of these different plans and EPAG aggregated all this feedback and found that the consensus was around this module system. We didn't do very much, to be honest, to get the students' feedback about this. Partially because time was really short. We were working on this on our own schedule where we had to make these decisions really quickly. But as faculty we tried to think what was in the best interest of everybody. And I don't know how the students would have reacted to these different plans because they probably would have seen a lot of the same pros and cons. I think that some of the deficiencies in the module system only became apparent in practice and once we started using it.

[52:07]

So, that was just in the spring, and then by early May, actually, we already started -- so one thing is to say we're going to modules, but we also had to design a new course calendar, like a weekly calendar. And at first, we also thought that the module system was going to be easy to adjust to because we thought we could just take classes already set up for a semester, and just sort of use some kind of algorithm to throw them into different modules in a very simple way. And that didn't turn out to be feasible, so we had to redo the whole course schedule. Usually it takes the registrar like three months to build the schedule for the academic year. And we had to do it in about three weeks. And so that was -- it was a very stressful time because we had to come up with a schedule. And we also had to explain it to people because it wasn't really intuitive. It has

become more familiar to us now but at first it was really not intuitive it's like, 'why are there five blocks of one hour and 15 minutes each day, but these 15-minute breaks between? Why are there these longer blocks?' And all this kind of stuff. I mean there's reasons for all of that. And like one of the main reasons for those really long blocks is because of lab courses. And the lab courses needed time to move students in and out if they're going to cut the number of students in half who could be in the same space. And we spent a lot of time -- I spent a lot of time talking to groups of faculty from different departments like the science departments, foreign languages, theatre and dance, music, and art because different departments had different needs. For social science departments like geography it was actually really pretty easy. It was like we could just take our regular courses and fit them into this new structure very easily. But it was really hard for other departments. It was just a lot of work trying to customize the schedule and create it in such a way that you could kind of please everybody as best we could.

[54:32]

And all at the same time, we still had no clear idea if classes were going to be remote or online or some mix of the two, so we actually delayed that decision. So the first decision was about the calendar and the course schedule, and then we delayed the decision about the mode of instruction, as we called it, until very late in the summer. And I think that that was a good decision. One other thing I'll mention, for now because I've been running off at the mouth for a long time now, is that by about early June -- there was a lot of people involved in planning the fall semester. So EPAG was just one unit in this ecosystem, I guess you could say. And we had this really good division of labor. It was kind of interesting to observe all of this from the perspective of organizational dynamics. Like the organization of complex systems. I mean obviously some of this organization was done not organically or spontaneously but by directive.

But at the same time, we started to sort out our responsibilities in a good way, very early on. So like I really pushed because I was chairing EPAG -- I don't know if I mentioned that, I was the chair of EPAG at the time. That's why I was so involved. I pushed for us *just* to focus on the curriculum. *Just* to focus on things like the schedule, pass/fail policies, and stuff like that. Just to get out of the business of the health and safety decisions, like actually trying to figure out how to handle learning during the pandemic. There was a whole different group which is the Infectious Disease Task Force that was studying that issue. Then they had another group that was related to them called the Learning Spaces Working Group or Learning Spaces Committee. And this was a group that was led by Tom Halverson of MSCS [Mathematics, Statistics, and Computer Science]. And this group was actually going around to every -- my understanding is they were going around to every room on campus with people from Facilities as well. And measuring the volume of rooms and how quickly air would circulate through the room. It's based on the HVAC [heating, ventilation, and air conditioning] system for the different classrooms and using that information to calculate a new capacity for each room. A COVID capacity. And then that fed into the registrar's decision-making about classroom spaces. So they were doing that work.

[57:10]

The Infectious Disease Task Force, like I mentioned, they were in constant communication with the Minnesota Department of Health. And they were empowered -- I want to emphasize this too - - the Infectious Disease Task Force basically took priority over everybody else's work. And every decision that we made was sort of pending their endorsement of it [the Infectious Disease Task Force] because health and safety came first. And then there's another group, which is based in the Serie Center for Scholarship and Teaching, which is physically located in the library and now it just exists in the cloud. But they'd always worked on pedagogy. Like helping faculty

improve their pedagogy. And so they kind of took over the realm of preparing faculty to teach online because so few of us had experience with it other than the end of that spring semester. And so they spent all summer holding workshops and training sessions to gear us up for either all remote or hybrid teaching. And then we also had this other committee called FAC which is the Faculty Advisory Council that I was also a member of by virtue of being the chair of EPAG. And we were channeling the faculty's concerns to the administration, to the senior staff. And we all worked, I thought, we worked pretty well together, and that we had defined territories of action. But there were always interconnections between these different groups like every group had at least one member on another one of these committees. So there was really good information sharing. And it also made it so that when President [Suzanne] Rivera began on June 1, there was a pretty smooth transition. I mean she had actually started sitting in on a lot of our committee meetings about two weeks or so before she became president officially. And then when she got here, I think that she had the organizational capacity and structure to start making decisions very quickly. And decisions had to be made like every single day. Or every few days there was some major decision that had to be made. So, it was a team effort. And my whole summer, the whole spring and summer, was just dominated by this work. EPAG had never met before in the summer. It was just an academic year committee and we met almost every single week of the summer. FAC continued to meet every -- basically the [academic] year never ended for me and for a lot of other people, but that's okay. I mean it was -- we did what we could to try to get us through this time.

[1:00:08]

BO: Thank you very much for that. I feel like that is really important information that I had not known. And from a student perspective, it felt very easy, you know? You don't think about all the things that go into it. You just went 'oh okay I'm going to take these classes.' So I think this is a really important perspective so thank you for sharing all of that. I appreciate it. So I know we're almost out of time but I do have one more question then I'll open it up to anything else you want to share. So, as a medical geographer and having a specialty in infectious diseases and studying these pandemics and epidemics. Did you feel like you were looked to by anyone in your life -- coworkers, students, family, friends -- as an expert among everything that was happening? I know you kind of mentioned one instance of this but did that happen a lot? And how was that for you?

[01:01:07]

EC: Yeah, I mean it did actually happen quite a bit. I mean among my friends and family, the situation is a little bit different. Like my father-in-law is a doctor, and he's a really good doctor. And actually, we have a lot of doctor friends and so like I defer to them on sort of the biomedical side of things. And you know it's interesting. I guess I can answer this in a few different ways. So I mentioned early in the pandemic sometime in February, I had these media interviews where I was talking basically about the political and social context of the pandemic. It wasn't really the work of like an epidemiologist. It was more like social commentary that I was making, and I felt like I had expertise in that area. But, you know, even though I know a lot about infectious diseases, I found it to be really humbling, this experience. Because, to be honest, I mean so many of the things that I thought were going to happen did not come to pass. Like I was just wrong about a lot of things. Like I said before, I really underestimated the possibility that the U.S.

would be so impacted by the pandemic. And so there was a time where I kind of retreated from trying to be an authority on COVID and just trying to learn more about it. And letting others make the decisions. There was also a time somewhat early in this decision-making process about the fall which I talked about before where there were suggestions made to me that I should take more of a prominent role on something like the Infectious Disease Task Force because I'm the head of CGH and I know a lot about medical geography and something about epidemiology. But I really defer to the scientists who are in that group a little bit more. I mean Dr. Steph Walters, who's a doctor with public health training, and Paul Overvoorde. It was the two of them -- I mean, everybody has worked really hard, but they're really important figures in all this because they were the heads of the Infectious Disease Task Force. They've brought such clear analysis to all of these decisions that they made and really understood the science really well. And so, I felt like it was okay not to be the smartest guy in the room. Yeah. I guess I've never really thought I was in the first place, you know, maybe only under certain conditions I may be the smartest guy in the room. But this time I was like, you know, there are people who know way more about this, and they're nearby. Like, they're on this campus, or they're in the Minnesota Department of Health, or it's Mike Osterholm from the University of Minnesota. So we have like all these sorts of figures around here who can guide us through this much better than I can. So I guess I ended up approaching my subject matter with a lot more humility and openness to new ideas.

[1:04:54]

BO: Yeah. That's a very interesting perspective, for sure. So lastly, is there anything that we haven't talked about yet that you would like to share?

EC: There's a couple of things I had written down that I wanted to mention as a part of the chronicle of this time. One is that on Monday, May 25 George Floyd was murdered. And so this is another incident of that summer or beginning of the summer that was transformative. And it also increased the stress levels around here to off the charts because like we're already dealing with the pandemic and trying to plan for the pandemic. And then President Rivera was traveling to join us in the administration during the uprising. And it was a very chaotic and difficult time. And that was something that really stands out was watching the third precinct headquarters, of the Minneapolis Police Department, burn down. The local looting and property destruction happening not right around campus but pretty close like in the Midway area. Like around where the Target Midway is. But Lake Street of course in Minneapolis got it much worse. And so I remember that as being -- there's this context around all these things that were happening. They were really hard to avoid so like there's that piece of context with the George Floyd murder and the riots and the uprising and the protests.

[1:06:47]

And then of course we had the political context of the country. I remember going through this election campaign and we were trying, well some of us were working really hard to get rid of this president [Donald Trump] who on a daily basis was making every bad decision possible in response to the pandemic and also inflaming passions and polarizing the public on these questions. I think maybe here at Macalester and in Twin Cities we're really a little bit insulated from that of much of the time. But there were some really specific moments where this affected us as a campus. And so this is something I had kind of forgotten about, but I wanted to mention it because I think it's an important part of this history. So around July 4, Independence Day, I was actually down in Oklahoma because that's where my in-laws live. But I was still telecommuting

for all this committee work I was doing. I was also trying to finish this book project I've been working on. And so at my in-law's house in Oklahoma, I completely sealed myself off or tried to seal myself off from the rest of the world for like a week. I didn't go out once. [laughter] I stayed in a gated community and never interacted with a single Oklahoman. I always enjoy visiting but I was just like -- I needed time to myself. Anyway what I was going to tell you about was that on July 6, the Department of Homeland Security issued this directive through ICE, Immigration and Customs Enforcement, that caused a lot of turmoil for us. So basically their new rule that they announced was that the international students were going to be in violation of their visas if they were taking all their courses online. And so this put us in a really difficult position as a college because we felt like we wanted to allow faculty to teach courses online if they wanted to. And most did. Most have been teaching all online all year [2020-21]. But it also seemed like we needed to figure out a way, all of a sudden, so that all of our international students would be taking at least one course in person so that they wouldn't be a violation of their visa and potentially be deported. And so that decision came down from the federal government. I mean, I don't know how. I'm sure Trump signed off on it. It definitely was in line with his way of thinking about things.

[1:09:37]

And then they rescinded that decision like eight days later. So, for eight days we were in this panic, and we were talking to lawyers. And everybody on campus was trying to -- especially like in student affairs and the international student program. On EPAG we were talking about this. Everybody who was involved with the planning was trying to figure out like what do we do now, how do we get around this, how do we obey the letter of this law while still serving our international students well? And then they [the Trump administration] rescinded it, eight days

later for reasons unknown. And so that was the kind of just suddenly huge mood swings like back and forth all the time. Which I also just remember for that summer. It was just like there was nothing ever settled or certain. And the federal government policy didn't help us at all. I often remark that we would have been so much better off as a country if the people who are in our senior leadership at the college, like Provost Moe or President Rivera or Paul Overvoorde, were also running the country. That's not the way the world works, but we got no help from the government. So that was all part of the context of that summer, how challenging it was. And then, on August 15, that was the last day I was the chair of EPAG. I felt like a tremendous weight had been lifted off my shoulders at that time. I've continued to serve on that committee, but I'm not the chair of it so it's a lot less work and a lot less responsibility, but I was glad to have been of service. And I really was so pleased with the way that there were so many people working behind the scenes. I don't think people really recognize that. I had this list that I made of like 30 or 40 or 50 people who were involved, who are really heavily involved with this planning process. And I don't know if for a lot of them their work is ever going to be recognized, that it was a huge lift and we managed to do it. And our goal was to reopen to campus on time and we did. We've had our ups and downs during the academic year, but we showed that it was possible. I mean there were a lot of people, among some of my faculty colleagues, who were really negative, and they were sort of naysayers about any possibility of the campus reopening during the pandemic. And we've been able to do it safely. And that's because of this tremendous effort that went into planning it, starting really last spring, so I'm pretty proud of being a part of that team.

[1:12:39]

BO: Thank you for all of that. These are great perspectives to add into the story.

EC: Yeah, thanks so much.

BO: Yeah. So I think that concludes our interview. I just want to say thank you again for your time and for your experiences. I think they're going to be really important additions to the archives, so I just really appreciate you sharing with me today.

EC: Yeah, thanks so much, Brooke.