

Reminiscences of Susan Waryck

June 4, 2021

Narrator: Susan Waryck, Dean of Students, Champlain College

Interviewer: Erica Donnis, Champlain College Special Collections Director

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Transcriptionist: Erica Donnis, Champlain College Special Collections Director

Introduction

The following oral history is the result of a recorded interview with Susan Waryck, Dean of Students at Champlain College, conducted by Erica Donnis, Champlain College Special Collections Director, on May 17, 2021. This interview is part of the Champlain College Archives COVID-19 Oral History Project. Readers are asked to bear in mind that they are reading a transcript of the spoken word, rather than written prose. This interview is transcribed in full in this document; an ellipsis [...] indicates a pause in the conversation rather than content that has been removed. The following transcript has been reviewed, edited, and approved by the narrator.

Interview Transcription

[Start of recording]

Donnis: Hi, I'm Erica Donnis. I'm the Special Collections Director here at Champlain College. Today is June 4th, 2021. And we are conducting an oral history interview. Susan, would you mind introducing yourself, please?

Waryck: No problem. I'm Susan Waryck. I'm the Dean of Students, and I've been at Champlain College for about two years now.

Donnis: Great. So have you held any other positions at Champlain prior to moving into your current one?

Waryck: No ma'am. This is my first and only [chuckles].

Donnis: So who do you report to? How do you fit into the organizational structure here at Champlain College?

Waryck: So I report to Danelle Berube, as the Vice President of Student Affairs. Yeah. That's who I report to.

Donnis: So I want to start off the interview just by asking you a couple questions about life and work prior to the arrival of the pandemic. So I'm wondering if you could tell us a little bit about what your quote-unquote "regular" job responsibilities were or are. Any maybe one way to get at that is, prior to the pandemic, what did a typical day look like for you?

Waryck: Sure. So as I shared, I've been with the College for just two years, so my pre-pandemic experience is only about seven or eight months. You know, I started in July of 2019. But at that point my role as the Dean of Students is really to support students and try to help them create a good successful experience for them. I supervise the areas of Student Affairs that would support students in the residence halls, the counseling department, the student health department, international student services, and our conduct process. So those are the primary ... And we actually added a new role, the Wellbeing and Success Coach, was created prior to the pandemic. So those are the areas that I work with. So a lot of my time is dealt working with staff members who are trying to solve problems for students, or issues for students, and just helping them manage those different processes.

And you know, certainly students who have extreme issues, or extreme conduct situations, will rise to my level. So sometimes I would deal with those students individually, or their parents. And so with that responding to crisis situations. So if there's, like I said, an extreme situation, a mental health situation, I would be called in to help with that particular situation. We had water, water main breaks in the, in that first winter that I was here, and so that affected the residence halls, and we did have to try to figure out a way to help relocate those students while the water main was being fixed, and ... So those kinds of things would be my day-to-day kind of thing prior to the pandemic.

Donnis: So how has the pandemic affected your job responsibilities?

Waryck: [laughs]. It affected every aspect of my work. So coordinating the, coordinating the team that work in the residence halls and helping work with the team in student health. You know, those were the two major parts that the College faced in managing COVID. In order to keep our building, in order to keep our students on campus to be able to attend in-person classes, those became two very significant areas.

So everything from trying to devise ways to ensure that our students, who were in individual rooms primarily, so single rooms across campus. And many of them were not going to in-person classes for a variety of reasons as the pandemic went on. Either faculty stopped teaching their classes in person because students weren't coming, or students stopped coming because other students weren't coming. So a lot of, a lot of classes ended up being primarily virtual. And then students just, you know, would sometimes decide that being in the rooms, and logging on to a video call, was just much easier, in the dead of, you know, February winter, than walking to the quad to a particular class.

So you know that sense of isolation was something that we really had to, had to be cognizant of and create systems to check in with students and make sure that they were well. If a student did show signs of COVID, and they, we would move them to quarantine or isolation housing depending on their situation. So primarily it had to do with bathroom situations. If they didn't have a bathroom that they could use individually by themselves and not infect anybody else, we needed to move them to a different facility. So that created a whole process of, you know, working with the Student Health Center staff, the housing and residential life staff, and the student event center staff – not student events, Event Center staff – who really bonded together to create a process to move these students and then to check in on them as they were in those quarantine and isolation places.

So we still had the normal [gestures with air quotes] if you will issues of if there was a roommate disagreement, the housing and residential life staff would have to respond to that. But it had the added impact of safety protocols as a, as a staff member went in to any space on campus and interacted with students. We always had to make sure we were distanced from the students, have a mask on. Ideally not be in a space that was closed for more than, than fifteen minutes because then you could turn into a contact if a student ended up testing positive or was a contact.

So, you know, we created protocols for so many things to manage the students' risk while they were in our residential spaces. And just working with so many different people across campus in ways that we hadn't done before.

So, and you know, our counseling team shifted quickly to doing video, teletherapy with students who were in the State of Vermont. They could do consultations with students who were remote but needed some counseling services. There were state restrictions on counseling across state lines, and so they would do more of consultations, try to get them connected to therapy in their area.

I'll stop there. So my work was supporting the staff in creating those protocols and thinking through the different, the different dynamics that each one created. And trying to problem solve for new problems that just continued to develop. And just trying to support staff, who were a little bit nervous too about interacting with, with students who could potentially be positive [for COVID] or were in quarantine. And constantly working with the Student Health Center to help our staff understand the precautions that we were taking would protect us. And, and just trying to reassure staff that we're not, we're not intending to try to put them in to situations where they were going to be more at risk, but inherently, they were going to be in situations where they were more at risk than if they didn't interact with these students at all. So just trying to make sure staff felt comfortable to, to complete their roles and manage their, their responsibilities.

Donnis: So what has been a typical day for you during the pandemic, or is there such a thing?

Waryck: [chuckles] You know, I was primarily remote from when we closed the College in March [2020] until, until about the first of August [2020]. I think. I think I started coming back to campus in August. So the remote days were a lot of video calls, and you know, just sort of solving the next problem that was on our horizon.

And so early on, it was, okay, move all the students home. And by move them home ... Luckily you know, we closed the College – I don't know if it was luckily or not – but the College shut, was closed, when the students were primarily gone from campus on spring break. So, but they didn't take their things with them. So students who lived with us, we had to coordinate getting them connected with their belongings, and we had to follow state guidance. You know, if a student had left the state, and then were trying to come back into the state, that was a challenge because of, I can't even remember when the quarantine [travel] rules went into place. If you visited across state lines.

But, you know, we couldn't have a lot of people come back at the same time with their parents trying to move them out, so that process was, I will say, much of a logistical nightmare, to coordinate and plan.

But that spent a lot of our time, we spent a lot of our time for the first part of the pandemic coordinating that.

Then, I would say in June, the problem was primarily on looking at the fall [semester of 2020] trying to decide can we bring these students back in a safe way and let them live in campus housing. And you know, lots of decisions, lots of input into decisions about what would be the safest way to bring students back to campus. Once we, once the College finally landed on the decision of allowing students to come back in primarily single room, single rooms, we had to do a different housing selection process, essentially. And then that was a, a situation that created a loss, essentially, for students who thought they were going to have housing and then didn't. So a lot of communicating back with students and parents about the decision, about our plans to ...

You know, we tried to, we investigated using off-campus sites for students, if we were to put students in hotels, or even neighboring institutions. Saint Mike's College [Saint Michael's College in Colchester, Vermont] had some bed space available. And so, you know, we, we spent time thinking about what that would look like, and what kind of protocols and staffing we would have to put in place if we had students at those locations. Ultimately we made, the College made a decision to not put students in off-campus sites.

So we spent a lot of time making all these, or trying to create decisions and protocols, and then we didn't go that route. Which is fine. I think that was the best decision, but that's kind of an epitome of what it looked like. You would plan for what you knew at the time, and then a decision either from the state or from administration in the College would be made that would shift your planning again. And so we just did a lot, we the staff did a lot of shifting. And I'm so tired of the word "pivot," but that's truly ... You know, every ... We just did a lot of pivoting.

And so my day to day would have been, again, spending time with staff, and trying to work through protocols and plans. And then spending time with putting together communication to students and families. We did a lot of town halls – I feel like it was a lot of town halls – and webinars with parents and students. And I think that that was appreciated. I think, you know, the feedback we got was ... You know, even though we didn't have all the answers, at least sharing what we did know, and sharing what we knew to be a question, with these audiences, was appreciated. I myself would have been frustrated, I think, because it, you know, because the parent can't plan to how to take their student back to college. Are they looking for off-campus housing, or are they waiting to see if they can have on-campus housing. Are they trying to keep their student at home to do studying remotely, or, you know. It just, it was a, it was a constant challenge of trying to communicate as much as we knew in such a timely way, and not having all the answers. And knowing pretty every, every webinar or every town hall or every email ended, with "But this is all subject to change." You know, so [chuckles] was our little caveat and our out, if you will. But that was the, that was the reality we were living in.

So, so, when I got to, when I came back to campus in August [of 2020], then it was still a lot of video calls. So even though I'm on campus now, and my door is closed, even though I was there, you didn't interact with people. Because every, all of your interactions were video.

And but, so we were planning for move in, was the next, was the next hurdle. We did it in a very different way than we have in the past. And so students all had to be funneled through one location so that we could check certain things. Did they do the health pledge? Did they sign the consent to test form? Did they understand they were going to have to do this daily health screen every day? You know, so, when they arrived on campus, we were like, "Did you do the daily health screen for today?" "Oh no, I didn't know I had to do that." "Yeah. Every day. From now until we say don't do it anymore."

And then, and then you know, as students moved in, following up with students about, about behaviors that were not in line with the health pledge. So sometimes students would share that with us about other students. Or, we'd get reports from faculty or staff and, and have to follow up. And you know, the state had very, very strict guidelines on making sure that you followed up with students. You had to create the health pledge, A, and you had to hold students accountable to the health pledge. And if the, if you deemed it to be major violation of the health pledge, which might be, you know, breaking quarantine, if they were told they had to be in quarantine. So that all students had to be quarantined if they weren't coming from the State of Vermont for the first two weeks of every term. And if ... You know, students like to use social media, and they don't really pay attention to what they're putting on social media. So sometimes things would come through social media, and it would identifying themselves as breaking quarantine. And so we did remove students from campus housing and from participating in in-person classes because those were considered major violations of that health pledge. And luckily, they were removed, but could still participate in remote classes, so they were still able to continue with their education. But, you know, we deemed them as a risk to the rest of the community, and they weren't, they weren't following the guidelines to the health pledge. So, so that piece of, you know, following up with students and then following up with their parents because they didn't understand. You know, this is like a minor violation, and helping them understand why it wasn't minor.

So, now I've forgotten your question. The day to day [laughs], the day to day life. You know, truly just solving for the next problems. And, and dealing with ... And in all of this, you still had the, the similar struggles that a first-year student might have, or a returning student might have, whether it be anxiety or depression. Or the transition issues of coming to a college for the first time. Our first-year students experienced a very different first year than any other first year student. I mean and that's, you know, common across the country. And we understood that. And we tried to create opportunities for them to connect with students virtually so that they could make those connections with other students. And, and feel like Champlain was their new home. But it was hard. So we, we, you know, I would constantly, would interact with parents, who would call me to say "I'm worried about my son. I'm worried about my daughter." And we would try to deploy staff to get them engaged. And then constant follow up with the parents about those, those issues.

And you know, some students, after the fall semester [of 2020], did make the decision to stay home for the spring semester [of 2021] because being on campus was, was so isolating for them because of the protocols we had to put in place for, for managing guests who could come to their space, and dining facilities. I mean, everything was, was so different for them, and it wasn't the experience they were hoping for. It wasn't the experience we wanted to give them either, you know.

So even though ... I guess I would say even though I was on campus for the majority of this last academic year, a lot of my work, most of my work, was done through video calls and, and through Google Docs and that kind of stuff. Because, because that's the way most other people were coming from us. I mean, any large meeting, most people were videoing in from their homes, and very few folks were actually on campus. And it wasn't safe to really, there weren't a lot of places where we could have meetings of the size of people that we had based on the distancing that we needed to maintain. So we've only just now started, and you know, this is since most of the staff in the housing department have been vaccinated, that we've started to having in person meetings. Still masked. Still in as much distance as we can. But ... and outside when we can. When it's a nice day. But that just brings up ... It's just bringing back a little more of what used to be normal. What we used to really enjoy about working together on the teams. And doing those in person is just bringing us back a little bit more.

I'm pretty long-winded, so you'll have to let me know, "Okay, Susan, and wrap that one up." [chuckles].

Donnis: No, no, this is all good. This all, I think, super interesting for me, and I think it will really interesting to other people who listen to this in the future.

So, you ... the next question you've already touched upon, but I want to raise it specifically just to see if you have anything to add. Which is, taking us back to the spring of 2020, when the pandemic first really arrived in Vermont, what was your role in the College's decision to close, and what were some of the critical decisions that you and your staff made at that point?

Waryck: So in the spring of 2020, even before the College made the decision to close, there was a team of people who were meeting, because we knew this, this pandemic thing was out there. And myself and Ted Winokur [Champlain College's Contract and Risk Management Director] sort of chaired that group. And it involved people across the campus. So we had folks from Physical Plant, folks from Finance, folks from Student Engagement. I'm trying to remember who all else. Bruce Bovat from CPS [Director of Campus Public Safety] was on the committee. Folks from academics. And just really trying to wrap our heads around "Okay, what would we do if we had to close?" And it really was a place where we were all just bringing in reports of information that we understood, and then ... I can't even really remember. Our role on that committee was essentially to just provide guidance if you will. As much we could to say, "Okay ..." I can't even ...

It's hard for me to go back to the pre-pandemic times. And remember what the things were that we were most worried about. You know, I don't think any of us expected that we would have to send everybody home. Nobody, I don't think anybody expected that. I think that was in the back of our minds but that wasn't where our heads were, were spending our time. We ... I think we were sort of thinking about how do we separate a student if they do get sick. We had no understanding of the, of the way that the virus would spread to people and ... Oh, I forgot to mention that Annike Hawkins-Hilke, our Medical Director, would have been on that COVID team to begin with too. And a lot of the information was coming from what she was hearing in the medical community.

[telephone rings in background] Excuse me.

But ... So my role in helping, to make the decision to close the College. I feel, you know, I ... We, we continued to present options and to say, "Okay..." Oh gosh, it's so hard for me to think back even ... I had less of a role. Let me put it that way. I don't think I had as strong of a role in the decision to close campus. That would have been the Cabinet [President's Cabinet] and the President, the Interim President at that time, Laurie Quinn. And that COVID team, sort of talking through all of the challenges. And I think there was a lot of consideration of what other colleges were doing in the State of Vermont. Because I don't recall really the State of Vermont Department of Health coming and saying "You have to close your colleges." And quite frankly. Maybe that ... I can't remember if that ... But that very well could have been something that was, the early communication had been started with those entities.

But you know, the biggest, the biggest concern for everybody was how do we keep our community safe. How do we keep our students healthy? How do we keep our faculty and staff healthy? And knowing that we, we ... as students had been traveling for spring break their return to campus was going to create, them coming from so many different places, coming back was going to create such an enormous level of risk. And we didn't have the same, we didn't have the same opportunity to quarantine students as we did when we opened in the fall because we decreased housing and the density. We were in full occupancy in our residence halls, so there ... It would have been really hard to keep the students safe.

And so I still don't even know, I think it was pretty ... I won't say easy, but I think it was a pretty clear decision to close when we did. Just because we, the number of students who might have back testing positive for COVID was just really concerning. As to how we would manage them and how quickly hospitals would get overwhelmed and that kind of thing. So my role early on, in that spring decision was limited, I will say.

When we did close, we, there was a small group of us. Myself, Annike, Katherine Birrow [former Chief of Staff to the President] at the time, Laurie Quinn, Angela Batista [former Vice President of Student Affairs and Institutional Diversity & Inclusion. And that might have been it. It was a core group who would meet on a continuing basis. I want to say it was three times a week. Early, early mornings. Maybe Shelley Navari [Vice President of Finance] was in those meetings every now and again. And we just started, we just started sort of problem solving and thinking about, you know, all of the questions that were, all the problems that were developed.

So as I told you students left during spring break. All of their belongings were here. So our first thought was "How do we get belongings back to the student?" And, and then, you know, obviously during that time it was, "We've got to continue classes." So luckily Champlain was in a very different place than probably other colleges and universities in having a really robust ... Being a Google campus and having access to Google Meet and then Zoom, Zoom licenses, as the time went on. I mean, that was, that ... My previous institution that I came from, there's no way that we would have been able to pivot to online virtual classes over a week. And I think we extended spring break. That's right, we extended spring break for an additional week, really to get faculty to a point where they could do these online classes, or these virtual classes. So that was a lot of the initial, and I wouldn't have been a part of those conversations and those ...

I was more focused on how do we get the students connected with their ... Because they wanted, they wanted their stuff. I mean, some of them had only, had left the campus with a bag of enough clothes for five to seven days. They weren't planning on being gone as long as they were. Most took their computers with them but some didn't. Some didn't take their textbooks. Some didn't, you know. It's spring break. Why would you take all those things? Textbooks, for sure. So those were things that we did a lot of actually shipping things home to students because they would call and say "I have to have XYZ." So we collected those things and mailed them home to them.

And so that small group, that five or six people that I named, were meeting on a pretty consistent basis. Trying to just raise issues, and then, and then ... I mean, it was a short meeting, so we weren't necessarily solving the problems in that, that morning meeting, but we would go away and work with our staff and then come back and say "Okay, here's what we think. And here's what we know and ..." So yeah. From the initial ... or from my decision, or my part in that decision to close the College was, was, I would say, more limited than my continued involvement after. After the pandemic, and after we were closed. And then trying to bring students back.

Donnis: Well, that's a good lead-in to the next question, which is, you know, the same kind of thing. If you could speak to the decision-making process and the critical decisions for reopening the College for the fall of 2020.

Waryck: That I can absolutely speak to. So we, we relied heavily on our Medical Director, Annike Hawkins-Hilke for a lot of decisions. And, and, you know, she would, she had ... I don't remember when her meetings with the state department of health started, but they started meeting with the department of health and all the medical directors of Vermont colleges. And I think you've already talked with Annike, so I won't belabor that. But she would bring information to us to say, "Okay the, you know, obviously the most conservative approach is to stay virtual for the fall semester." But, you know, understanding that a lot of students struggled with virtual learning in the spring semester [of 2020]. And yes, we could do things, we learned a lot, and we could do things slightly different in the fall. But still it would be such a different experience for so many of our, our students to start their fall semester, start their fall year, their first year, in a virtual setting. We really wanted to be able to bring back to campus primarily students who were starting in their first year, and any seniors who were trying to round out capstone projects, or trying to round out internships. So, so our priority for housing ended up being first year students and seniors who wanted to come back and live with us who weren't already established in the community in an apartment.

[fire truck siren heard in the background]

And that was very difficult for the sophomores and juniors who essentially got pushed out because of the decision to go ... [siren grows louder]. A little loud here in Burlington! But, you know, when we made the decision to go to a primarily singles model in our residence hall, because that was a, that was the, the most conservative, or close to the most conservative approach, to be able to keep our students healthy. And for our staff to be able to manage any, any students who got sick. Because, you know, again, we didn't know how to predict how fast it might spread. Obviously the decision to do weekly testing had a huge financial component, but it also ... We knew that if we didn't test students on a

weekly basis, we could end up with a situation with a non, with an asymptomatic student could spread in such a quick way, we wouldn't identify the sickness until, you know, we were way deep in, in positive cases.

So you know, we, we followed the guidance of Annike and just tried to tackle the next, the next question of okay, how many students can we have in housing? How many beds do we need to maintain for quarantine isolation? What's it going to look like when we do move a student to quarantine isolation. How do we manage their, their meals? Are they going to be allowed to leave and go pick up a meal? No. You know, that [laughs] ... No. And so, we just ... Every one of those decisions and issues that came along, again it was that small group that started the conversations and then would, would spread back out to their teams and then come back and ... and we just kept moving on.

You know and, I think communication with the community was something that we strived very ... strived very much to do, to be, as I said before, to be as transparent as we could, but so many things were changing so quickly. And sometimes we were waiting on guidance from the state that would prohibit us from sending out information because it would, because it could possibly change. And so that got to be a little bit of a sticking point sometimes.

I will say, you know, all of the emails that went out to the whole campus community, most emails were reviewed ... Written, reviewed, reviewed again by a team of people throughout the whole, throughout the whole pandemic. And you know, because we were so concerned about how something would land, or how a student or parent or faculty member would take that information and ... It was a challenge to get messages out. I mean, you know, I still now, even when we're communicating with just students who live in campus housing ... In the past, pre-pandemic, we're not running those emails through any channels. I mean, we're, we're writing the email, we're sending it. And, and still now we are, we are still reviewing those communications and making sure that they are consistent with what we're saying in other, in other areas as we're, as we're trying to communicate with students about what the fall [of 2021] will look like, and, and what kind of vaccination requirements will be out there, and health pledge, and all that other kind of stuff.

So there was a small group of people that met to try to manage the problems that developed. And again, we weren't the decision-making bodies. Because certainly the Cabinet, the President were a part of those. It got a little tricky, you now, as Laurie Quinn was the Interim President, and Benjamin Akande joined us and started joining our meetings, I want to say it was like April [of 2020]. I want to, I want to, I feel like April was the first time that he started. And it was appropriate for him to be a part of those, even though he didn't technically start his contract until July, we were needing to make decisions. We, the College, were needing to make decisions that would have huge financial impact. And he was going to be taking over that responsibility, so ... So now we were kind of reporting to two presidents. So that got to be a little tricky.

But, you know, my ... I would just continue to try to support Annike, because she was being overwhelmed by requests and, and, and asked to be a part of different things, and asked to give her ... to weigh in on different things. Totally appropriate, but overwhelming for one person. And Annike, I can't say enough about how ... She just set herself a really high bar, and met it. Every time. You know,

and it meant working into the wee hours. I can remember multiple video meetings with her and Katherine Birrow and Angela Batista after, after 5 [5:00 pm]. Way after 5. You know, and typically we would work around bedtimes, and mealtimes for kids, and, and families and such. And so we might be on a call at 8 o'clock, 9 o'clock, and I would often get emails from Annike, or Katherine, Angela, late into the night. I mean that's, that's just when they had the time to do the work.

And so, it was, and again, we kept sort of looking at the calendar thinking "Okay." Here we were in April and May thinking, "Okay, it will be better once students get all their stuff and they're gone." "It will be better in June." Nope. In June, now we're looking at fall [semester 2020], and we're trying to figure out how we're going to house these students. So, so we're working through June, and nobody took any vacation, and everybody's thinking about how we're going to plan for the fall. And then the fall came, and we didn't know what we were going to get into, really, with all the students coming back. And even though we tried to put as many plans in place, you didn't know. And we ended up having to create more protocols and more systems and ... And then it was, "Okay, let's just get to ..." We knew we were closing the residence halls [at Thanksgiving], so getting to Thanksgiving was a huge hurdle. And we did that.

And then we made the decision ... There was a different decision that was made about the residents who lived at 194 Saint Paul Street, which is typically an eleven-and-a-half-month contract. But we made the decision, knowing that many of those students would be leaving the building to go to other states, and then potentially returning, to finish their finals and to stay over the winter break. We couldn't manage it. We couldn't manage the quarantine that would be required, and then any potential positives [positive COVID test results] that might have come out from them traveling home.

So we made the decision to say only hardship students would be able to stay. Whether or not they didn't have a home to go to, it was a toxic home environment. Maybe they didn't have internet at home. That was a reason that maybe students were able to stay with us. And that was hard. That was really ... Hard decisions, and hard communicating with students and families, because they had been told from the beginning that our intention, which again, our intention was that they would be able to stay with us for the whole year. So many students relied on that. Many students who lived down at 194 Saint Paul Street, that is their only housing. They don't have other housing. And so it was really disruptive for those students, and hard messages to deliver, and hard messages for them to hear. But, but, you know, we had to make those messages, or we had to make those decisions, based on the best, the best that we knew as far as how we could support them. Support all the students that would be coming back.

I'm, I'm way off topic. I can't remember [laughs]

[crosstalk]

So the decision ... Okay, sorry.

Donnis: Go ahead, go ahead.

Waryck: Yeah. So the decision to, to reopen, you know ... And that's ... This is kind of, this is almost a prime example of how sometimes these conversations would go. We start talking about one thing, it leads you down a path to another thing. It leads you down a rabbit trail, and you're just like, "Here I am, now projecting what things might look like, but we don't know, and, and we've got to plan for this." And trying to put things in, in motion. And, you know, it did feel a lot like ... It ... I would It felt a lot like decisions were made at the last possible minute. And, and I will say, I know that was frustrating for students and families. But the reality was that we were weighing all the options, and weighing all the different outcomes, and trying to make the best decision. And then we just had to make it. You know, we just had to make the call. And, you know, students wouldn't have known that we were thinking about all these things, whether or not we close 194 [194 Saint Paul Street], how we were going to manage anyone who didn't have a place to go. They wouldn't have known that. You know, and it might not have only ... It would have only been a week or two prior to the actual decision, but still. That's, that's important information to have as early as they could have it, that we're telling them that they can't come back and live with us. They have to, they have to find someplace else to live. But, but there was really just no other way around it. I mean, making decisions with the best information you had at the most appropriate time you had to make those decisions was, was something that we were faced with the whole pandemic. For sure.

Donnis: I want to go back and ask you a little bit more about the hardship cases. I know that both in the spring of 2020, when the College officially closed the residence halls, and then again, as you just spoke to this period between Thanksgiving of 2020 and the, the start of the spring semester in late January of 2021, we did have, as I understand it, quite a few students who remained on campus.

Waryck: And so what was the process to make that, to make those decisions as to who was able to stay?

Donnis: Right. What was the process? Could you give us a sense of kind of the number of students? Maybe a couple of theoretical examples of what their particular situation might have been?

Waryck: Sure. So in the, in the spring of 2020, when students were not on ... It was spring break. We closed the campus. We, again, we knew that there were some population of students who had no place to go, wouldn't be able to continue their classes virtually because they were in places like the Northeast Kingdom [of Vermont] where they didn't have great access to internet. Maybe they didn't have a, they didn't have their own laptop, or they didn't have their own method of doing that. So, let me think back to that. So as we were working with students to try and identify if they qualified for a hardship [gestures with air quotes] we, we created like a, it was a Google Sheet, or it was through our housing software, I can't really remember. But an opportunity for them to tell us "I can't go home." Or "I won't be able to continue studying." And, and then we had to make the, you know, we had some dropdown [form options] have to choose "I don't have internet," "I don't have a home to go to," "I ..." What would some of the other things be? "I don't have access to mental health support." "I don't have any space to go at my home. My parents, you know, they moved since we, we, since I lived with them, and there isn't a space for me." And so at first, when we first started doing those in the spring, I would say we were a little bit more ... less conservative. I wouldn't say we were more, more open, but less conservative than we were, like later on in November [of 2020]. And we worked with students who said, "You know, I can't ... Home is Colorado for me. I can't, I can't just take everything and go, and I can't, it's too expensive."

You know, if I'm going to go and you're going to turn around and open the College back up, then I have to turn around and come back." And again, we didn't, we didn't know that we were going to be closed for the whole rest of the spring. So we worked with students through the Angel Fund to get them sent home. And that process really was, they filled out the form, told us what their issue was, a team of people evaluated the issue, and then had to make phone calls to these students to say yes or no, you're able to stay or you're not. Or you're able to come back, because at that point most of them were gone for spring break. And you know, we didn't really have, there wasn't a rubric. We just tried to, we tried to identify particular students that really just had, had to stay with us.

And I'm going to try, let me try to remember. In the spring ... At that point, the 194 Saint Paul Street facility housed, houses around 300 students. And at that point we weren't telling those students that they had to depart, if I recall. Not in the spring. So we would have about 300 students in that facility coming back with us. On main campus though, I want to say we got down to around 100 students. That's what my memory is, is coming back to. About 100 students who needed to stay with us.

And as we moved into summer months, that was another where we had to really look and say ... Because we ... Last summer, I don't think we offered classes at all. Virtually or in person. I think, I don't think we, and I might be ... I don't think we offered classes at all. So the reason of staying on campus because you needed internet to be able to do classes, I mean, that didn't exist. And so for the summer months, we sent a lot of, a lot of students home. A lot of the hardship students who, who could go home. And we probably had around, I want to say, it was between thirty and fifty students stay with us for a hardship reason over the summer months. Not, not including the Saint Paul Street apartments, because again those were students that, again, it was their, it was their primary residence for many of them. And we weren't at a point where we felt like we needed to, to empty that building.

So then it was November [of 2020]. And the November closing, at Thanksgiving ... You know we had told the students living on main campus when they moved in, prior to them moving in, we communicated to them to say "Plan to go home at Thanksgiving. You're not going to stay with us past Thanksgiving." Because we already predicted that the return with the quarantine was not something that we could manage. So the plan all along was "You have to go home at Thanksgiving."

The question was, originally we had said "Don't bring a whole lot of belongings, because when you leave at Thanksgiving you may have to take everything with you." And I think we left it as ... I think at first we started with "You will have to take everything with you." That's gonna be, that's a definite. And then at some point it kind of softened to "You may." And our, and our ... We just want to keep ourselves, give ourselves some flexibility because if we were able to bring more students back in the spring semester [of 2021], we, we would have to figure out how we were going to allow those students to move on campus. And we might have to do a new housing assignment process. And if students are here, all of their belongings are still here, it's virtually impossible for the domino of moving people around. So really the best decision was, "Plan to take all your belongings with you, and then when you come back in the spring ... So don't pack a lot. You'll bring everything home. Just bring what you need. And that you can take home with you when you leave at Thanksgiving."

As we moved closer to Thanksgiving, we had identified that [in] the spring we wouldn't ... there was not going to be the opportunity to bring back more students back to live with us. We still needed to maintain as much distancing as we could. And putting students in doubles and triples was not going to be sustainable for us if they tested positive. So at that point we were able to make the, to make the decision that they could leave their things in housing. So, so main campus students, not a big issue with them departing at Thanksgiving. That was the plan all along. The, the bonus is that they were able to leave their things with us.

But then we really started getting worried about, again, the return of students back from holidays, to the 194 Saint Paul Street. And having gone ... traveled across state, and having to quarantine and that kind of stuff. And again we weren't, we didn't think we could manage it. And so we made ... And, and all of the projections about the virus were that it was going to be, you know, we were going to have a surge. And so that's when we made the difficult decision that was pretty quick turnaround, to tell these students "You're going to, you've got to go. We can't let you stay past Thanksgiving. We can't let you stay, you know, you have to depart." Essentially when everybody else on main campus is departing. And, and truly that ... They only ... They received that decision and then forty-eight hours later is when we were asking them to depart. So they had a very, very short window.

And there were a lot of concerns that we dealt with, and students appealing, and parents appealing, and ... Some, same reasons that they were appealing to try to stay for the summer or try to stay on campus for the spring semester. You know, "I live in Colorado." Or "I live in Texas, and it's too hard for me to take all my stuff or travel home," and "I don't have internet." And so we went through the hardship process again, and we were, and we were a little bit more conservative this time. Essentially to say "Do you have a home to go home to? We understand that might not be comfortable for a variety of reasons, but do you have a place to go?" And, you know, some of the students who would respond back with, "It's just a toxic environment. My family doesn't support ... Maybe doesn't support my identity, doesn't support me just at all." And so we would, we worked heavily with our counseling team, who would advise us and say, "Truly, this student needs to stay."

But ... And, and for those students who didn't have internet, they were, many were ... those were allowed to stay through the end of the semester, but then when classes ended and finals were over, they were required to go home too.

So then at Christmastime, for that December break, I feel like we were down to about thirty students that stayed. Thirty to fifty again, back at 194 [Saint Paul Street] who stayed with us with severe ... It feels like it was less than that. Whatever the number was, it wasn't zero. It was somewhere between twenty and fifty, I would say, that stayed with us until the January return.

And then in January, we didn't do a new housing process because we weren't able to bring more students back. So students were able to go back into their same rooms. And then we had more strict protocols based on guest policy and, and that kind of thing.

Donnis: How has Champlain College as an institution handled the pandemic?

Waryck: That's a hard question to answer because I only know the way Champlain has handled it. You know, I do have colleagues that work at other institutions, and they're in other states. And Vermont had just such a strict ... strict guidance for higher education that other states just did not have. And, so, you know, I think we handled it well. I mean our positivity rate was so incredibly low. Our ability to provide for those students when they were testing positive, or when they were contacts, was, was, was good. It was stretched. Because, you know, we don't, we just didn't have a lot of staff that could, could do the delivery of meals or the checking in with those students the way that we would hope to.

And we had to ... We had to support students. Excuse me, students who lived off campus, who maybe tested positive or needed to quarantine. If they couldn't quarantine safely in their off-campus apartment, they came to campus. So we had, we had a good number of off-campus students who came to us. And you know, we supported them with meals and supported them in their, in their individual spaces, just as we did with on-campus students. So if we talk about supported, or how we managed through managing students with positivity or contact tracing, I think we, we managed very well.

I think the students who were in individual rooms by themselves across campus, their isolation level was really high. And, and, so mental health, we struggled with. And, and we knew that. And, and continued to try to create ways to, to have safe interactions, was something we did all year long. And we still heard people, students and their parents, suggest, you know, that their student didn't know anybody, wasn't, wasn't interacting with anybody, didn't have an opportunity to, to meet people. And, you know, we would deploy RA's [resident assistants], and we would deploy area coordinators to those students to, to help them understand ways to engage and ways to, to come out of their shell and ... For some students, they would find their way out. Other students ... that was what they felt uncomfortable. They felt worried about contracting the, the virus, so they wanted to stay as safe as they could, but they knew it was challenging them around their mental health.

But you know, I am, I am really happy that, with, with the vaccination availability for the whole nation, really, that fall [2021] will look a lot different for students. That when they come back, it will be more, more like it was before. I'm not going to call it normal, because there are still going to be some things that we have to do, but it will definitely be a, a more similar college experience than, to what they've typically expected.

Donnis: What do you feel like has been your greatest achievement during the pandemic, at least to the point that we've gotten?

Waryck: The first thing that comes to mind is just, surviving. I mean I ... It was, it was hard. You know, and just supporting the staff through the hours of work that they were putting in. And just trying to encourage staff to take time away. But like, you just felt like you couldn't. You know, there wasn't an opportunity to take the rest, and you knew you needed it. I mean I'm tearing up now, because there were times that I just, I really needed my staff to take breaks, but they, they didn't, they didn't feel like they could take the break. And I also knew, without this person here this is going to be a, a challenge. And truly, at this point, we've gotten to the point where we're just like, cannot sustain, *cannot* sustain this same pace. Couldn't sustain, shouldn't have been able to sustain it the way we did, but absolutely knowing, can't sustain it now.

And you know, certainly, there's been support, there was support from Angela before she departed, and now from Danelle and Leslie Averill [Interim Provost and Chief Operating Officer] now, to say, take the time, take the time. And, you know, we've heard the message, and so we just are. So myself, Annike, Skip Harris in Counseling [Director of Counseling and Accommodation Center and the Student Health and Wellness Center at Champlain College], housing staff. People are taking vacations. And life will go on. You know, we will, we will just have to manage as we can and expect that some things may get dropped, and that's just going to be the best that we ... the reality that we are faced with.

But, so I don't know, my biggest achievement ... that we made it through. And we learned a lot. You know, we ... [tears up] And I just keep trying to say to students, draw ... especially to the graduates, you know, I said, "Draw on your ability to adapt, your ability to bounce back, your ability to learn how to do things differently. Those are going to be skills that are going to serve you well as you move into the rest of your, you know, lives and careers." And, and those are the same kinds of things that I keep trying to tell myself. And tell the other staff. Because if you focus on the challenges, you're going to end up like me crying [laughs]. And it's just, there just were so many different things that nobody expected to have to face. And, and so I think that just, just making it through is really the biggest [laughs], the biggest achievement.

Donnis: My next question, you've already at least partially addressed. But I will, I will ask, I will pose the question to see if you would like to add anything. Which is, how has the pandemic affected you personally?

Waryck: Let me just respond to a message really quick.

Donnis: Of course.

Waryck: I'm going to probably have to jump off here in about fifteen minutes.

[pause]

Waryck: How has it affected me personally. [Sighs]. I, I will say that there were multiple times throughout this experience, this pandemic, that I was thankful that the only folks that I was sort of personally worried about in my household were myself and my husband. If I had small children, I don't know, I don't know how I would have been able to, to move through. Because so much of the, so much of the ... So much of my headspace was on work stuff. And, and, you know, I knew that my husband was capable of managing, you know, whatever he needed to manage at the house, the home front. And then he, you know, he has a lot of concerns about health. And he, he was worried. I mean, his job was one that he couldn't do virtually. He had to go in every day. And, and, you know, he was really worried about getting sick. Because that would mean that he would, he would have to take sick time, and he wouldn't be able to help his team that he was working with. So just managing that little bit of anxiety was, was a challenge. And I just, I continue to say, if I had children, or, or elderly parents that I was really trying to have to take care of, I would be really, really worried. I was, I was blessed. My mother is healthy, and, and stayed safe. She lives in Georgia, and she ... You know, we did a lot of video calls with her, and with

my, my siblings to keep us connected. And my husband's daughter is, is an adult in Tennessee, and she, she had her own struggles, and we were able to try to, try to support her as best we could.

But it ... You know, I, I I think the way I managed stress is ... used to be, that I would go to my craft room and sew and do crafts and that kind of thing. Well, my craft room turned into my home office, so on weekends I wasn't interested in going back into that same space and doing anything creative. And so I, I stopped doing some of the things that I really enjoyed, that gave me stress release. And, and so when I finally realized that, I tried to incorporate other things that I could do that took me out, out of that home office. And, you know, the winter months were hard. Some of the things I like to do are kayak, and hard to do that in the summer, in the winter months. So it was a little bit of a challenge, managing our own, my own stress.

And you know, like I said, I had just moved to Champlain, or moved to Vermont two years ago. So still trying to get used to and learn things to do in Vermont, was something that ... And we didn't have a whole lot of close friends in the area. My husband has gotten really close with a neighbor, and so that's ... I'm happy for that, because he's got an outlet. When I was working a lot, there was an opportunity for him to, to be with this neighbor and such.

But you know, it was isolating, I would say. For ... and I know, I'm not alone in that, and it was for a lot of people. But I live in North Hero, and so that's an isolating place as it is, and then that's ... We live there because of that. My husband enjoys that type of, of life. But you know, it was, it was ... I feel blessed that I was able to get out on good days and go for a walk by the lake, and that would certainly call me, and that's how I would try to relieve some stress. But, but it was, it was ... I don't ever want to do it again [laughs]. I don't ever want to be quarantined again. I will say that.

Donnis: Thank you for sharing that. So I know we're at the top of the hour, and I want, I just wanted to check in and be respectful of your time. I do have a couple other questions, but if you need to, to log off at this point I will certainly understand.

Waryck: I could probably do one more question. I texted my eleven o'clock meeting and said, "Give me some time." So I probably have time for one more question.

Donnis: Okay, thank you for that. Thanks for your flexibility. How do you think the pandemic will affect higher education moving forward? Either in general or at Champlain College in particular.

Waryck: You know, I, I ... We've been thinking about this, and, and I think that colleges that were able to shift to remote virtual learning, and then are able to capitalize on that. Capitalize on the ability to offer learning in a virtual setting from here on, with, you know, with their in-person opportunities and in-person option, I think, I think that those colleges will do well. I think colleges who struggled with the, with the virtual learning, and, and planned to go back to whatever their in-person experience was, I, I feel like those colleges may struggle. Because we know that enrollment ... Just the demographics of college-age eighteen to twenty-two [age] students has decreased and will continue to decrease over the next several decades. And, so it's going to be harder for students, or for colleges to meet their enrollment numbers. And, you know, certainly colleges who can, again, capitalize on the virtual

component. You know, I, I value the in-person experience for a residential campus for students. I think there's a lot of learning that happens outside of the classroom in that, in that arena.

But there are so many students who are, are, on the autism spectrum or are neuro diverse in some way, and, and don't find, find those to be very anxious things for them to have to live with somebody else and interact with people. And so being, having the opportunity to get a college degree in a different format, where they wouldn't live in a residential community, is, is, something that, I think that they're very excited about. And so if, if that population of students ... Because if Champlain College doesn't figure out a way ... I mean we have CCO online, but that's primarily for adult learners to finish degrees. So it's not, it's not designed for undergraduate, an undergraduate program. Or traditional college-age student program. But I think that, I think that a lot of students and parents are going to be looking for that.

And so, I think the pandemic has, has sort of pushed that question for colleges at the forefront, of, of how are we going to meet this demand? Because I think the schools that, that have an undergraduate program that is, that is completely virtual, could certainly thrive after this pandemic. Because, because some students found that that was the best way that they, they liked to learn, or to get their information. And so, I don't know. Time will tell, I guess. [laughs]. So.

Donnis: Well, thank you. Thank you so much. I so appreciate your conversation today. And it's definitely, definitely a valuable perspective. So I'm really glad to capture it for the Archives.

Waryck: Great. Thank you for the opportunity, Erica. It was nice to chat with you.

Donnis: Same here.

Waryck: Bye, now.

Donnis: Bye, bye.

[end of recording]