

Merrimack College COVID-19 Oral History Project

Interview Subject: Diane Shaw

Interviewer: Mike Abdoo

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Location/s: Lawrence (Abdoo) and Merrimack College (Shaw)

Transcript edited by: Mike Abdoo

Additional editing by: Walker Robins

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MA: I think we're yeah we're all set. So a couple things I wanted to go over. I just want to remind you that um you know I sent you the two forms, in terms of informed consent and the CCL [Creative Commons license] and I just wanted to remind you of your rights—it's just a requirement so—. So this is my Zoom interview with Professor Shaw. It is November 22, 2021. And yeah would you like to say anything before we begin?

DS: Yeah, no, I guess not. I guess we'll just go—I'm assuming that the forms that you sent me I need to sign, also because you sent them to me, so I could read through them, but I will also sign those and send them back.

MA: Yes, yeah that's all handled as long as you, if I get the signatures, I will handle that. Thank you.

DS: Alright, okay cool.

MA: Awesome! So I guess this interview is supposed to be based around the pandemic, which it will be, but I think it's it's pretty important to ask, you know, how you started, because you are a teacher, how you started in the education field and, eventually, how did you get to Merrimack College as like where you are now—

DS: Yeah, okay, so that's a bizarre story. It wasn't—it wasn't a direct path, but it wasn't indirect either. I did my undergraduate work here, and then I went away to graduate school and my full intent at the time was to be a clinical psychologist—that was my goal.

But partway through graduate school—and I was in the doctoral program at Tufts University—part of the way through that I had this weird kind of, oh, boy, I don't know if I want to do psych. I don't know if I want to do clinical—and because I had been in school for my whole life and it had been one to the next to the next, and so I thought I don't know if I may be late. So I took a little time, instead of just going to do something else I need to be a human being, now, but not always in school, I need to kind of have you know, a life outside of school and I hadn't had that so my plan was to take some time off and do some work and figure things out and think it through and there was—I was doing adjunct work here, because the chair of the psych department at the time was my mentor, my undergraduate mentor, and while I was in graduate school he got in touch and said that that the evening program needed somebody to teach a particular course in psychology. And I said, “Did you want me to tell my colleagues here at Tufts about that?” and he said, “No, I want you to do it.” So accidentally part-time started to do that and then, while I was taking some time to think through whether I wanted to continue after my master's degree, because I was in a PhD Program, a position opened for assistant dean and director of summer session here at Merrimack and I thought, ooh, that—I don't even know what a Dean does, but that sounds like fun. So I applied for that and the big huge search happened and it took a while and I got that and then I just sort of settled in and I've done three different careers here, all of them at Merrimack for a really long time so none of it led to one thing—I mean I just started the teaching—again it was part time, it was great, I was in graduate school and teaching at the same time and the assistant dean thing was really kind of fun, because you—I didn't even know what that was but I learned what it was while I was doing it—and then 10 years or so into that an opportunity in academic support and advising and coaching and counseling kind of opened up as a director over here in the library and that fits really nicely with a psych background, so I was recruited to do that I did that and—I don't know, it just keeps kind of changing and meandering around and so. Education has been a huge part of my life forever. I mean I was playing school when I was—when I was like in first grade I was playing school, I was always the teacher. But how it ended up here has just been sort of a little sideways dance, and, this looks fun and I'll try that—maybe this, maybe that? So that makes sense?

MA: Oh, yeah, no, so basically what you're trying to do is just like see what you really like in like, yeah, yeah—

DS: And I liked it. I liked a lot of things that go along with this particular being an associate dean and a part time professor is really cool because I get to direct things and manage things and create programs and develop ideas, and I also get to teach so it's really kind of a nice way of both of those things coming together and that's sort of where I am right now.

MA: Awesome. So now we're at the point—how long have you been teaching at Merrimack College?

DS: A long time. I think I told you, I was still in graduate school when I got recruited so it's been like 30 years. It's been a long time. Yeah I was still a grad student. In fact, my students, for the first couple of years I was teaching—because I was teaching in the evening program—my students were older than me because they were adult learners who had started college at one point in their lives and returned to school to finish up the degree, so I was doing the graduate thing and still a student and they were returning again, returning adults to finish their undergraduate degree so it's been a long time well.

MA: So leading off of that, you know you're teaching for almost 30 years and I don't think, I mean I you've you've been teaching longer than I've been living so—

DS: Yeah, I know.

MA: Neither, neither of us have seen something like we just had back—2020. Now so let's go back to March 2020, or even before that, when you started to really find out like news overseas about the whole pandemic. What were your—this is before the shutdown happened—but what were your thoughts about like—the initial thoughts about the pandemic and how it would affect your everyday life?

DS: I sadly, I think, from a point from a position of privilege for lack of a better word I mean, I think when we—this isn't the first pandemic the world has seen— it's the first pandemic that we've seen here in the United States right so whether I mean I—before the Spanish flu in the early 1900s right, I mean it was just it was always someplace else, right? You hear about a plague or a pandemic and it's not here. So I think however long any of us has been doing what we're doing I just I don't know—I mean, I think you obviously feel a strong sense of concern and sadness for things happening and something that can—that was so sort of misunderstood and highly contagious at the same time creates this terrible situation where things can bloom and blossom and really blow up exponentially before people can even get a handle on what is happening here. So I think my sensibilities around the same thing was not—certainly not, oh that could never happen here, but it didn't feel like it would, I guess, in the beginning. It certainly had all the markings of something that could happen here but it's always had that, right—every time there's a there's an outbreak of something or a pandemic starts, we think, gee, that could get here—I wonder what we would do—but until now, it hadn't, so I think I was, I was concerned for the people who were experiencing it. As it became—as numbers ticked upward really, really quickly every day and countries were added, and it

was just like, whoa, and then when it hit here, it was just—I don't even know, I didn't even know where to go with that, so I think that you know—I think anybody alive today—it's reasonable, I think, to say that anybody alive today really wasn't equipped, because there is no frame of reference really except what happened outside somewhere else. Which isn't the same as you experiencing it, you know, so now that it's happening right here in your home like, what do you do now? So that was, yeah, that was a big one.

MA: Yeah, I know I completely agree, so now we're in the same time period, I think I believe we closed—the shutdown really started in the second week of March—when Merrimack College emailed not only you, but the rest of the community, what was your reaction, like your raw reaction to the shutdown of the college and just like transitioning everything online during that spring semester?

DS: Um. I think the reaction—there's no way for the reaction to not be professional and logistical and deeply deeply personal at the same time right, so it isn't, well, we have to pivot everything that we do professionally, it's like we also have to figure out how to get groceries because the stores are empty and we also have to— what does it mean to actually go to go inside your house and not leave your house, unless you need food, you know for however long it's going to take? And I think—so I think the initial reaction was overwhelming—“Wait, what?” I mean it was just sort of like—how do we even? Where do we start? What do we do? The announcement for Merrimack saying okay, we need to pivot, we need to, you know, we extended spring break by a week and said everybody figure out how to do what you do virtually so we in academic support and advising, where I'm the director, and the academic success center, where I'm the associate dean, we work with students on a one to one basis all the time. We have committees, we meet we have—you know, we meet individually as professionals with each other, one to one and in small groups, and then the whole floor and everything and we—everything that we do is in consultation and relationships So how do you take virtual and put it on top of interpersonal and do all that and I think to figure all of that out was, okay, where do we start? And you know Zoom was like, what? And the whole vocabulary there's a whole vocabulary that we weren't talking about a year and a half ago that we don't even know what that was. Like, “You're muted.” Like so, “Hi, you're muted.” Or, you know, or which colors work best when you're on Zoom and which ones don't and teaching to students who I'm asking, “Could you please turn on your cameras?” and people are telling me they don't want to so teaching to one dimensional screens and little black rectangles with people's names in them is just is flabbergasting, so I think all of that, when we first heard it all has to change, and it all has to pivot was overwhelming but, at the end of a week, I have still no idea how most of it—we pretty figured, we figured out it—a ton of it, at least, so that we could keep things going, and then, and then there was a wonderful sense of collegiality and

understanding, where everybody sort of said, okay we'll iron out whatever little bumps and kinks there are—we'll figure this out as we go. And I think that's kind of what we did, so the initial reaction was, what is it—how do you—what's Zoom? I mean like that. And by the way, what do you mean I can't go?—again this kind of very blessed, and privileged world that we live in, in this side of the of the world right in this part of the world, we—if I run out of something, I go to Market Basket and I get it. And now it's like—order on Amazon and almost by the you know, sometimes even by the time I'm done hitting the order there's somebody at the front door delivering it so—. To have to change all of that was—was just “shoosh” and eye opening and a serious wake up call in a lot of ways, so I think the original—the original part was, I don't even know where to begin. And then, as we progressed, it was like, okay, we can—we did a lot of stuff that we did pull off, so I kind of think that.

MA: No, so I mean you were just talking about kind of like the confusion—“Oh what?” moment. So what were your main—because I mean I think all of us were frustrated or fed up at one point just with the entire initial shutdown what like, what was the most frustrating part for you? I know you kind of got a little bit into depth about the confusion.

DS: Yeah um, the most frustrating part—ah gee I don't know. Um. I don't know if I would, if I was frustrated, I think—I don't know that I was frustrated, I was, I think it was, it was—it was the most serious thing we've ever heard—I mean it was worldwide, it was like wildfire and it was increasingly serious every day. You'd hear more and more reports on the news and it just became more and more. You know reality sinks in, too. I think there's a—whenever there's a massive thing that goes on in an individual person's life, whether that person is alone or in a group the initial reaction psychologically and emotionally is shocked and then it takes a while for reality and all the implications of that to sink in right the ripple effect of what does this actually mean in the beginning, it meant get in your house and lock the door and be safe and hope that you have enough canned goods to make it through right to make it work so I think that I was, I don't know that I was frustrated, I think it was just, it was challenged, it was the most challenging thing I think was again trying to balance a profession working in a profession that deals directly with impacting people, students, each other. I mean it's it's- we don't manufacture widgets right? We don't make things, we work with people, our product is people, our product is education, so the direct impact was a challenge. At the same time, oh, my gosh well, what about my family and how am I going to keep my family safe and how is everybody going to be okay? And I think all of that, so I think the challenge became learning how to do what we got very used to very differently, and balancing that with real life threats mean none of this was drama, you know, nobody was just being, oh, stop being so dramatic, I mean you don't get more dramatic than a global pandemic, right? So I think those two bumping into each other on a regular basis

was, was the toughest part, just a challenging, how do we- what do we do here? You know?

MA: Yeah, some more challenging and frustrating, just like—

DS: Yeah, yeah, yeah, okay.

MA: I think, I think everyone really struggled with balance so it was tough.

DS: And I think it's still true, I think that we're trying to balance other things now, but I think I think it's just it's not a switch, right? It didn't turn on and turn—I guess it seems like it felt like it started like a switch went on, and the whole world said well look at this you know. But it certainly isn't coming to it's not like, okay we're all done now, you know people keep saying “post-pandemic” and I don't understand, don't quite understand that, because, I mean we're post spikes perhaps and we're post pre-vaccine stuff but we're not post-pandemic because we're still working on it so—.

MA: Speaking of balance you just set me up for this question, you know you talked about how he had to manage everything at Merrimack. And then you talked about the second half of the balance which is managing life at home and worrying about your family, right? How did the pandemic, switching from Merrimack now, how did the pandemic impact personal life? I don't want to ask something too personal, but how did it impact your personal life and like your family life?

DS: I'm impacted in a lot of ways. My mom is older. So we got instantly worried about her. My immediate family—I'm a New England person, so I've been here my whole life. This is where my roots are. This is where my immediate family is. This is where my extended- my brother and sister and their families, and my cousins were all here. And normally we get together, you know, for every—whenever there's a birthday, with my brother or sister and their families, whenever there's a birthday, we get together and have a cake and we had to suddenly like sort of, whoa, you know and we're singing “Happy Birthday” on Zoom and waving at each other and— so there's that. My husband, my extended family on my husband's side is all over the country and all over the place, so I have step-kids in Texas and in Hawaii right now. My in-laws my mother and father are in Arizona, and they too are little bit older so I've got my husband—again my husband's side of the family in Washington state, Arizona, California, and I'm just listing Texas, Hawaii, lots of different places, so so he's very active on social media he's very active on on Facebook and Instagram and stuff so that they are in touch. That's what got him interested in Facebook in the first place right? So they can, they can be in touch. I'm never on social media so that prompted my question when you said it's going

on the internet it's like what Internet and where's it going and why is this happening? Because I've never I just- I have a LinkedIn account and that's it, and it's not for reasons other than it's just like, it's not my thing. I'm a private person. I just don't—so I think the personal part and the family part was, is everybody going to be okay, and how do we stay connected with the disruption of the things that you take for granted sometimes. You know you just kind of assume that we'll all be together when it's a birthday, we'll all be together on Christmas Eve, and my stepkids, my step family, and my husband's family, extended family on my husband's side. We are not always together on the holidays, because they're everywhere but we stay in touch, so we were able to still stay in touch but worrying about their safety and their health and, as all the different states—so we're watching increased, you know we're watching daily cases in different states and crossing our fingers for where people are and that they're going to be all right and there's a helplessness that kind of comes with that. I think that is just, it can be really daunting, especially when you're a fixer, and a like a problem solver that's one of the things I like about the work that I do is that I get to look at issues and problems and try to tinker around with them and fix them, and this was not a tinker thing you can't—

[Interview cut out due to Zoom servers]

MA: Oh, oh, can you hear me?

DS: Yeah we disappeared from each other for a moment, but now we're back okay.

MA: Okay awesome. Yeah, sorry.

DS: That's okay, that's all right. So yeah, so it was- the personal part was just was deep deep concern and worry for my c—you know my cousins are in the area, my family's in the area, I mean it's just it was that the personal impact was, it's very it's it's humbling in a really upsetting kind of way, I mean to realize how quickly, you know, things that you take for granted, sometimes can be just flipped upside down and how quickly, relatively speaking, things that you think are okay become not okay so that's was a real—I don't think that's I don't think that impact is ever going to go away. I think that's probably changed us permanently. At least I almost hope that it changes us permanently because I think some of the grounding that has happened in some of the—again, I don't go to Market Basket now and look at the shelves in the same way that I did a year ago. I go, wow—I mean I look now and I, and I really I've always been a person- I live a life of gratitude, so I'm starting in my days with what I'm grateful for and that's just been me forever, but to have it right in your face when you turn a corner and go down an aisle and say, oh my gosh they have soup you know I'm gonna go get some soup, because they have cans of soup, I mean that that's that's unprecedented in this in this abundant

civilization that we live in right? So it--I don't want to lose--that's another personal impact. I don't want to lose the gratitude for, good grief, look what we have, you know, look at what we have. And I don't want to take it for granted, I don't want to do that. That's a personal change too, I think that's a personal- I don't think I did before, but now I know for sure. I don't and I want- I hope that we stay that way if we if we if it did change us it did, I mean it's--I didn't get, you know, cranky because there was there was like no, so I didn't get cranky, I got scared, I got sad, I got scared, I got like, wait, what do you mean, so there's always soup? And then you go, no there's not. And, and always again, this is a different part of the world. There are people who live without soup every single day without anything every single day, so you know that's, that brings that into very sharp focus as well.

MA: Yeah, I mean it's like it's almost like you don't really know what you have until it's gone right and--right and at the example with Market Basket and a whole like the soup example, you know, I think everyone was kind of just in shock that you know, like that isn't there anymore, and it wasn't even just like tangible goods there's also like the intangible stuff like seeing people, yeah, yeah, it was just-- it was kind of mind blowing, yeah, you put it perfectly so.

DS: Thank you, and you know Market Basket is just a wonderful little microcosm of an example because it's also--it's a grocery store, like every other grocery store but it's also got a culture of its own, so normally under normal times which we're not back to yet, but Market Basket is kind of not quite a free for all but it's really doesn't--it's got a rhythm of its own and it's just like if I'm halfway down an aisle and I forgot something and I'll--before at Market Basket you just turn around and swing your car around in other stores kind of go, oh I go to the end and then I'll go back up and do all that, so even the disruption of the seemingly chaotic flow right when when there's arrows on the floor and we're going up, and you know working up one aisle and down the [aisle?] and you know you went each aisle was one way, and people with masks and trying to make sure that if you're--you know when you saw somebody coming, quote unquote, the wrong way down a one way aisle, suddenly it became noticeable that there was a person there and you're not doing what you're supposed to do. And so this, yeah, this this being away from people and then being really edgy when you're near somebody in a way that you wouldn't even think twice about standing in line at the grocery store, right? Especially on a busy day you never think about how far away you are from the person in front of you or behind you. You almost even don't even notice that there and now we're very aware of the fact that they're there and for good and for and for not so good right we're jumping in we're still scared but we're also having--it's really cool you're a person you're you are it's like nice to see a person so- yeah it's a lot I think we're still I think we're going to be processing this stuff for quite some time, I think I think we're going to have to really,

really figure out a lot and adjust a lot and think about what to keep and hopefully not to keep and notice the differences, because we went from zero to 60 in a heartbeat and now we're kind of plateauing and doing that and trying to figure out what do we do with all this and it's a lot. And I think it's going to be a lot, even as, even as things I do think things are much better, obviously I think if you look at numbers this year from numbers last year and stuff it's much, much better. And in this corner of the country we're also pretty fortunate to have a lot of people who are doing well. But we're still not done, people still check numbers, people still worried, right here we come the winter holidays and it's inside and you know we don't have a climate where we can go have a Thanksgiving dinner out on a lanai so yeah, so I think we'll we'll see I think this, I think the impact of this is going to be a pretty, pretty long haul I think.

MA: Yeah, I mean in speaking of long hauls right we're gonna get back to the education part of everything for you. What, like what did COVID, I know this is a very general question, but what did COVID change about your perspective on teaching?

DS: That's a good question. It really, really reinforced—I used to have this thing hanging on my door that, a few years ago when Merrimack redid the third floor of the library where our offices are and when that happened the doors we now have have big glass panels inside, so that people can see in and out. So that minimizes what you could tape up to your door but prior to that I had a big solid wooden door and people tape all kinds of stuff all over my door. So in the process of cleaning up our offices, so that the renovation could take place, I took down this little thing that I had on my door that was this little graphic of the words teach and learn, and they were mirror images of each other right, so it said it said teach and then the bottom half was an exact mirror images, if you took the word and split it in half, and it said teach and learn, and you could read both. I have always seen teaching and learning as a two way street, I don't think it's one directional. I learn from my students. My students learn from me. I think they learn from each other. I think that the dynamic in a classroom is really, really part of the learning process, and I think the pandemic demonstrated that in- every fashion possible possible I told my students, one of the reasons I wanted students to keep their cameras on, with all due respect to whatever they were doing, I mean there was some kids who said, like there are four people in my house, everybody's on Zoom because my mom and dad are working from home, and I have a brother in the eighth grade and he's in the other room and my—I'm in my room and my room is a mess—and you totally understand and respect why you don't want to have your camera on so we tried to find a balance there, right? But when the cameras are not on—when I'm teaching I get a sense from the room whether people are getting what I'm saying or not, right? And you can feel it. You can see it, there's a vibe in the space and there's—in addition to facial expressions and body language and movement. There's just a something in the air, I don't know what you

want to call it, but there's a feeling, there's an energy, that is feeding back and forth that feeds off itself, both of them feed off each other, right? And when you're one dimensional on a screen, with or without faces—but without faces for sure—that gets lost, so I said to my students, we have to find other ways you got to let me know if you're getting it, because your silence, if it's silence in the classroom.

I don't know whether that silence means we got it, you can move on, or I've no idea what you're talking about. And that fine tuning was not there, so it impacted for me for sure, it absolutely reinforced my idea and my understanding that I'm teaching and learning and classrooms are—it's a community environment and everybody's in it, everybody's in this together, and it isn't it isn't just one person pushing things out in one direction it's really a reciprocal relationship and it's about relationships, and so I think the camaraderie that came about with everybody saying like look, this is really, really hard to do this stuff online, but it's hard for all of us and we're doing it together that stuck around because we found a way to say look, this is weird for everybody, so the lack of experience we had with it was helpful in understanding like, yeah, but we're all in the same weird boat so let's figure it out. But the other part was it really, really drove home the relationship between teaching and learning and everybody in the room is sort of in the same space and we work on it together and that definitely was driven home by this by this thing for sure.

MA: No, no, I'm nothing but agreement here, for me, I think I mean we saw on our— like the class that you had last year and I was in, you know, I I think I learned a lot of things, but also that experience was taken away and it wasn't just by either, it was also my other classes and, you know, like the one on ones we had yeah the ones with Irene, then you, I think. You know, we were—it was really good, but it was also you know it was Zoom and it wasn't a true one-on-one confrontation that people have an environment like that, yeah yeah— I think I think the point of the whole vibe and feeling that that's actually the best way to put it so yeah— . Now, and once again staying with the teaching part, we talked about how we had to basically—it felt like flipping a switch and we're like there was things before the pandemic that either you don't do now, or you do want some like in some sense, but like was there anything that seemed completely routine to you that feels weird now? Not even just teaching but outside of Merrimack as well.

DS: Sure! Okay, I do have a tendency- I- I tend to have a tendency to move around a lot when I'm teaching and and being mindful of where I am in the room, was brand new, right? Don't take, don't step too close, step back, watch out, where's the plexiglass? Don't forget that some are teaching with the masks on and all of those things so being very aware of the physical space and what I was doing in it was was lots of brack—was noise. I mean it's still kind of is. My students this semester—I'm teaching a section of

“Introduction to Psychology” and my students are in the classroom, everybody's in the classroom they have to wear masks. I, I do not, I asked them if they want me to, and they said no it's easier to hear me when there isn't one so they're okay. But there's plexiglass in the room, and I keep it up front and I stay and I stay behind because I want them to be safe and everybody's vaccinated as well. But all of the awareness of the chairs, the distance, are they far enough apart from each other? Is everybody okay? Are there enough masks over there for when they need them? And when i'm standing up—now, when I'm standing up teaching, it's a little bit easier to move around, when, during the big piece of it for when you and I were in class together and that part when it wasn't it was a mix, there were some people in the room, and some people on Zoom you you can't— you want to make sure that the people on Zoom, you know, you're not doing all this and you know disappearing and you're not flying around the room and— but you also don't want to just stand still, because the people in the room, are like you're not even moving I don't even know if you're there. So again being mindful of the equipment, the space, that camera the- the movement, anything, it changes a little bit about your style and your way of being and when you're in, you're in a teaching space and that's that was that's a weird thing that's kind of very, very strange. And it's something that you're—it's such an automatic thing in normal times that you don't even realize it's odd until you're not doing it again. It's in that heading that you just mentioned, you don't realize some of the stuff that you have until you don't. You know, it's like when you have an injury—I have a bad knee and you don't realize how important it is to have a knee that isn't bad until it gives you a hard time and then you go, wow, I'm so aware of this knee I don't want to be aware of it, I just want to use it. So I think a lot of impact happened in day to day life and in teaching that things that you simply do on a day to day basis. Whether that— again having conversations with students at— somebody walks into my office, especially when we started to transition back from fully remote to— we eased back in you know, two days on campus three days off and then three days on two days off and we kind of eased back in— the very awareness of the physical presence of another person, right, became okay, where are you? And where are you standing? Are we back far enough? And ventilation—is the vent blowing right? Is there enough air coming into the space? And there's a lot of that. I think some of the other things that were the personal things that you—again we've talked already about things you take for granted. Grabbing my keys and go—I gotta run I've got to run an errand. I'm just going to grab my keys on a Saturday and go or I'm going to bop around from here to here to here to here and go to five different places, at the same time, and then on Saturday just be done and bring this stuff home. Going to church on Sunday, we went completely to Zoom. My husband and I go to church on Sunday and we've got this—many of the people we go to church with are these lovely older people who are like, what what do we do now? So we figured it out—we've got a rector who again is doing her thing but also making sure that the—her Facebook is on because we were also live, you know

broadcasting through Facebook and Zoom links and all these other things, and I think again, you take for granted the flow of anything every day. I hope I didn't take for granted how important my family is to me because I think that's always that's very much a hallmark of who I am and I hope I didn't take that for granted, but not being able to be together in the same physical space was, was definitely heartfelt. Still is, I think, to the extent I mean—I know the care that we have to pay to to where we are and how we are in stuff is there too, so I think that was a big deal, lots of stuff I think you take for granted that ,yeah, that you just go, oh wait, are we--leaving the House without a mask. What is that? What am I wear—I mean, wearing a mask. Right? I'm not a person comfortable with stuff on my face. Welcome to the pandemic. Right it's like it doesn't—who cares if you're comfortable or not? So like, oh, my gosh did I forget my mask? Wow, like hand sanitizer, making sure you have enough hand sanitizer in the car and everywhere, you go and things like that, not that you walk around with dirty hands, but it doesn't it's not forefront— like it is like it is now or was then and still is, I think it still is, so I think there's everything from the tiny little details of, oh good grief, I have to go back because I forgot my mask, all the way up to, when am I going to be able to see my family again? And you know and everything in between. How are we going to make that work? When are we going to be able to travel, get on a plane and go see my stepkids and my husband's family? You know and stuff like that. When can we do that? And everything in between, so I think there's a ton of stuff you take for granted that's, that's different. Is that too broad an answer?

MA: No, no it's perfect. So once again leading off that—well there's definitely a lot of things that not only you, but everyone here misses, not only at Merrimack but across the world. What—if you had to name one thing, in particular, what do you miss the most that you were either able to do or something that you had before March of 2020?

DS: One thing—

MA: And it can be multiple things. I'm just like- I'm trying to like, yeah—

DS: Yeah, I think family. They're still there and I—we still love each other and we're still there and, but I think the care and—we've got- yeah, we've got somebody immunocompromised we've got somebody who is very concerned and hasn't gotten a vaccination yet and we're trying to make sure that everybody's okay and I missed the, let's just anybody—you know, why don't you all come on over Sunday and we'll have something to eat together. I think that—just the casual nature that can happen—I miss that a lot. That's probably the biggest and again my my half of my family my husband's half of my family we can't just get together on Sunday and have you know have pasta,

we have to get on planes and find each other that way and that's came to a total screeching halt, so I think that definitely still is yeah.

MA: It's a great point, um. So now we're kind of going like chronological order I know we flashback couple times um what were the major changes that you had to make to your courses going into the fall semester of last year and what you know what kind of factored into your decision of teaching in person, because I know that there was teachers that went fully remote and there was asynchronous courses, but you chose to go in person. And I was really curious about, like, what was the main factor going into that decision?

DS: OK, so the fall—let me see, fall of 20 was when, OK. So my fall course, my “Intro to Psychology” course in the fall is taught to a group of students who are in a high achieving high school program in Lawrence called Abbott Lawrence Academy. They are—so they are high school seniors who are working on college courses while they're in their senior year in high school, so they're doing all kinds of stuff and doing all kinds of things and they're working on stuff like that. So in the fall of 20 I chose to be remote for them, because they came— Lawrence was entirely remote for a while. And my students, most of my students get here by school bus, they go to school in the morning and the bus drives them here as classes, Tuesday, Thursday, at 8am so they go to school at 7:15 or so and the bus picks them up at Lawrence High and brings them back here so that was more for them than anyone. That was entirely remote in the fall. In the spring, I went into the classroom for a couple of reasons. Lots of students were asking for, “Could we please be in the classroom?” And the class I teach for the psychology department was—everybody, well, I had 25 on the roster and I think 18 or so signed up for in person, if we could have it and six or seven had—needed to be remote. And, as it turned out, it really kind of flipped around the other way and other lots and lots of students were opting to do remote stuff without having declared they wanted to be remote. So, but being in the classroom was mostly because it was something that students really wanted and I thought it would be—yes it's again that contact in that relationship building that you have when you are in a classroom was missing so that was, that was the biggest thing, I think, that informed my decision. That, and the college was hopeful that enough people, if people could work in the classroom that would be much appreciated and many of my colleagues on the faculty either had medical issues of their own or they had medical circumstances at home that they had to be careful of. You know, somebody's elderly mother-in-law was living with them, and the more risk they took the more risk they took home, you know so and we didn't have anything like that so I was it was still it was still hard but mostly, it was because I missed it but also students were were asking for it, and it was helpful to the department.

MA: Yeah, I didn't—I actually, I never knew that you did, because I'm from Lawrence, I never knew that you work with Abbott Lawrence.

DA: I do yeah, this is my fourth year teaching “Intro to Psychology” to Abbott Lawrence seniors. They are extraordinary. Yeah, and we are back in the classroom so that's good. Everybody here's like back in the classroom now but yeah they were last year again last fall was remote because they had all kinds of remote stuff going on and even when they weren't fully remote students had the option of staying remote and given that so many are 17, many of them don't have a license yet—I mean they're high school seniors, right? So getting here any other way was super challenging, if not impossible for some students and I thought, no let's just leave it remote and we'll live, but that led to the rectangles and the “I need to see your face!” But it worked out, I mean it worked out, it worked out everybody, they brought their best game, as they always do, and it worked okay.

MA: Awesome! Yeah I'm glad to hear that. We're hitting the homestretch here so I just have a couple more. I think this is once again anything revolving, not Merrimack and like, more personal. I want to ask you if it's okay—it's more of a general question. In terms of self improvement, how do you feel you've changed in that aspect, ever since March of 2020?

DS: Oh, um. I think, perspective is sharper? I mean I think it's really easy to say that you need to—when you live in a very busy chaotic world, and you have a busy chaotic job and a lot of thinking on your feet and life kind of goes buh buh buh buh buh. But when you have all of that going, on everybody says, you need to get grounded and, you know, pick and choose your battles and focus on the things that are most important and don't let everything get to you and you know it's not all huge it's like finally—let some of this stuff roll off your back because it isn't huge. And it's easy to say, it's really hard to do, and I am better at it than I used to be. I am better at it. I am better at—not that things don't matter, but things will—oh, come on this isn't this isn't a huge, really it's not that big a deal, you can make this work—and I'm a problem solver and I said, like I said, I—one of the things I do is take a lot of things with a lot of moving parts and try to put them together and make them work, so that's been there. But, also saying like, look, if you don't if I you know- if you're a very driven person, if I don't get everything off my list by the end of the day, over the years I've learned, you just can't—the list is too long. But now I don't completely freak out about it. I'm like, okay, what do I really need to get done? And then, once it's done, I can switch over and say okay now tomorrow, I can make this work, so I think perspective about what's most important. I mean you asked me what I miss most—family. Right, I don't miss convenience I don't miss coming and going as I please. I, you know, I don't miss not wearing a mask as a person who doesn't

like stuff on my face. I don't miss things like that as much as I missed the people who matter to me and that that's—those people have always mattered to me as much as they do. But realizing like really getting a hard, you know bump on the nose with like whoa this is this is really seriously important stuff I think is that that's probably the—one of the biggest changes and that's the part I think earlier, I alluded to, like, I hope that that's the stuff that you don't want to you don't want to lose. You know when somebody you love goes away or passes away or something like that right, we all get that moment of, we really need to realize how short life is and we really need to stop saying, “We should get together and have lunch,” and we need to stop seeing each other at weddings and funerals only and—everybody says it all the time. And so, this is like a big giant one of those This is like we have never been like this, so to say, like no seriously I'm trying desperately not to take for granted all that stuff we just listed that you take for granted, I think that's another— it's like it's just in your face it's just so real and, and so there and I think that's it.

MA: No, no, I think you know perspective is a huge thing. I know, like you probably know people as well, like— lot of stress, a lot of—not mental health, but just a lot of anxiety came out of this and you know I think perspective, not only just during the pandemic, but in general I think that's huge, and the factor—I know you didn't say this word, but I know, like the factor of perseverance, right? When you're faced with a problem [inaudible]. Just getting through it and putting it into perspective, using both tools and just knowing, yeah, you know, there's a light at the end of the tunnel so—

DS: Yeah and this kind of I mean, I think this- If there's anything that comes out of this—I mean this sharpened our ability, I think, to think on our feet, because it's not like we were asked to pivot, we did. We had to, and we did, right? An entire institution—students faculty, staff, buildings, technology—right? IT's all of a sudden got this, “Wait, what?” Students leave for spring break, leave their stuff in their rooms and they don't get to get it back again until June because right- because we were weren't- I mean the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, is that you can- here's what you cannot do. And we got through all of that, I mean that's that's that's a feather in the cap of perseverance that's a perfect word for it like—so it's very grounding to say like it's not that we imagine you had to like pivot in the middle of a semester like we did and all that that implies right personally professionally the logistics of teaching and learning and, and safety and being together and shopping and eating and all of it, and we did it and and maybe we smashed up a few things here and there, and made a bunch of dumb mistakes here and there, but we're still standing. I mean a lot of you know—we're dinged up a bit, but we're still standing and that's kind of cool in a weird sort of way, right? It's like, wow, look at this, so—

MA: Yeah, you know, when like you said after going through what has it, been like 17 months now, past 17 months—

DS: Yeah.

MA: And up until now, you know with like you said perfectly it's not we're not back to normal, yet I don't think- there will be long lasting impacts that God knows how long they'll continue for but you know now that we're back here in the present time, or this present semester least. How emotionally and professionally how did you feel? And what was your reaction to like finally coming back this semester? You still have to wear masks but like there's a lot of things that were lifted. You know how—what was your professional and emotional reaction to it?

DS: To the question um. I think—so Academic Success Center, as I said, we were entirely 100% remote for quite some time and then we gradually started to come back to our offices, maybe one or two days a week, right and we we transition back over being you know, feet on the ground now everybody's sort of back in and when you're here when you're working you're here and there's not any working from home and all of that and teaching here, and so on, I think emotionally that's a lot, that's a lot. You don't realize how much either you get—you're very, very used to something being one particular way and then for just a year and a half it changes abruptly, and you get so used to that it's weird to say like, “No, what—what we did forever before was when you're working you're here. When you're teaching you're in a classroom.” Right? So this break should be the blip, it should be the weird part but so much changed in that blip, that that became like, wait a minute I have to go back and go—wow that's kind of weird how's that going to work? How are we going to do this thing in the classroom? So I think emotionally it's still that that that it's with you it's not gone, it's not done, it's better and I'm looking—we're always looking at the bright side and looking at numbers and it's getting better and more and more people are getting vaccinated and you, you know Pfizer and Merck have this this thing where they probably have some medications that will be great for people who get it right to minimize the symptoms and all that, so you get real hopeful about that. And I think emotionally that's still there. That's still, how are we going to make sure that everyone's okay? Professionally, I must say honestly I think I'm—a real thing that Merrimack did an extraordinary job, I think the senior administration at this college did a remarkable job at keeping us on top of everything staying in touch with the CDC on a daily basis staying in touch with the Commonwealth of Massachusetts on a daily basis, transitioning all of us back in as safe a manner as possible, and when you're running a business like this, or a corporation or an institution as as complicated as it as a college or university, that's a ton of moving parts in 1000 different ways, and I think Merrimack keeping safety and people at the top of its list as

they work through how are we going to make all this happen, made the professional transition back much more manageable than it might have been. I have colleagues at other institutions who are in higher education, who really didn't have the same input and the same feedback from from the administration that we have, right? So we had town meetings for students for staff or faculty on a very regular basis, and the college kept us informed of stuff. And so setting up testing in a way that works—it's convenient, setting up a guard shack so that you can get in and out of the campus and keeping people safe and just holding on to that, how do we first and foremost, how do we keep our people safe? Make the professional transition back. Even though it's challenging, it made it—there was this like strong sense of we are safe, it's still creepy and scary to step back in, but but we're safe and that's that's entirely because of the attitude, I think that the senior administration starting from the president on down brought to everything they did. Every decision they made started with what do we have? What did we—and they went with data. They went with facts and data and with truth and then said how does all this data help us understand our primary goal is to keep people safe. And, and that just created a feeling of, okay, whatever is going on here, people have our backs, and that was that's huge. That's still huge, I mean that's giant, so that made a big difference too.

MA: Awesome, yeah I think that's you know we're putting- I believe, I know other schools that you know aren't in the same spot that Merrimack's in because of the precautions they took and the choices they made- I think, like you said, Merrimack did an amazing job of rebounding from a very daunting situation, and you know I'm proud to be a part of the Community, so- . Yeah I'm- that is it! Yeah I first of all I want to say thank you so much for this, not only is it being a project I think it's it's always been a pleasure, having our one on one.

DS: It's nice to see you again. It's really nice to see you.

MA: It really was, it was really good to see you. I think I mean—that was, you know originally it seemed like a project, and I was like, oh boy, but like you know this actually you know I think this was really productive and I'm really thankful for your perspective.

DS: But do you know—it's funny I think I want to thank you, too, because again when when we—when you first ran this by me I thought, oh that'd be fun that's really cool and then I hear recording and Internet and you start getting nervous like, oh my gosh when I get it ah, I don't know, but you, you made this doable so I want to thank you for that and I thought, oh God—all the way through, not once did I say, “God did I just say something stupid or what am I going to say here because it's being recorded?” I kind of forgot that the recording was happening and that's because you just made it very conversational so thank you for that. I appreciate it. Of course that is seriously, as much as I love standing

in front of a room full of people and having discussion, which is another thing you miss in the classroom, right? Spontaneous discussion, right? Just chatting about what are people reacting to and– but you just made it more conversational than here's a canned answer that I think you might want to hear–it wasn't it didn't feel that way at all so that's great and I appreciate that very much.

MA: Thank you, I mean, likewise you made it very easy–

DS: Good! I'm glad!