

**Interviewee:** Colleen Marchwick

**Interviewer:** Brian Dombrowski

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**Abstract:** Colleen Marchwick lives in Eau Claire, Wisconsin and is the Director for the Center of International Education. She explains the difficulties she faced with the international students during the COVID-19 pandemic. She also discusses the experiences of the students, especially those from China, as they faced insecurities being from the country the pandemic stemmed from. She also explains the procedures and how they brought US students home as well as international students back to their home countries.

**BD:** Okay, so current numbers are 68.1 million cases with 1.5 million deaths. In the United States, there are 15 million cases with 285,351 deaths. And in the state of Wisconsin, there are currently 448,009 cases with 69 deaths. Today is December 10 of 2020. To start off, what is your name? And do you mind sharing demographic information for the study such as race, ethnicity, gender, age?

**CM:** Sure, so my name is Colleen Marchwick, and um sorry, ages 51 gender identity is female. and I guess we were raised, race is, white, Caucasian. Is there any Was there another one?

**BD:** Um, no that's it. And then, where do you live in? What is it like there?

**CM:** So I live in Eau Claire, Wisconsin. And it's a lovely community in western Wisconsin population, I would estimate is about 66,000. And I work at the University of Wisconsin, Eau Claire, which is a Regional Comprehensive institution that's been in existence since 1916. And about 10,000 students, primarily undergraduate.

**BD:** Great. um, So when you first learned about COVID-19, what were your initial thoughts about it? And how have your thoughts changed since then?

**CM:** Yeah, that's a great question. Because I feel like we in international education, were really on the forefront of COVID-19 because I first was involved with it when we had a large group of international students coming for the first time from China in spring 2020. So they arrived at the end of January. And, you know, some of our students were affected when President Trump initiated the first COVID related travel restriction, the ban of entry from China, so some of them had to change their tickets are continuing students I should say. So that they could come back in spring. So it was a bit of a stressful in time for those students who were continuing and who had gone home for the holidays. And then there was this notice that, you know, what, on this day, at this time, if somebody had been in China, they weren't allowed entry. So...

**BD:** Um, what do you remember some of their reactions to that at all?

**CM:** I'm always impressed with our international students about how flexible they are. So of course, they, they just did what they had to do and made it back in time. You know, it didn't. It came at some, you know, cost to them and their family. Right. So change of ticket last minute is not inexpensive. But, you know, I think they valued the continuation of their education. So they just made it happen. But I think it was quite stressful for those who had to do it.

**BD:** Okay, and what would you, what issues have most concerned about the covid 19? pandemic?

**CM:** Yeah, so what I would say is within international education, obviously, we had the first intake of this was new students, were starting under a dual degree program from China that entered the US in January. So there are circumstances was a little bit different than those that were continuing students. So they had never been to United States before. And they came, I think, under great scrutiny, right, because they arrived right as the story exploded in the United States. And, um, I think they were looked upon with some suspicion about being possible vehicles for transmitting the illness to members of the community. So obviously, initially, when they arrived, I think the US was still kind of grappling with our understanding. And I think there were like comparisons like, Oh, it's like the flu, and, you know, healthy people don't need to worry. And then I think there was. So I think that's a big change, right, like the understanding of what the illness is as it spread around the world. And you know, when it first started, there was the general consensus was that it wasn't transmittable if when people were asymptomatic, and I think we know that, is that correct? So I think when students first came, you know, obviously there was kind of some concern about it, but like the guidance we got from public health wasn't bad. We had to quarantine the students, or do anything of that nature, which I think was made some families that have the US students uncomfortable. And I would say that overall, I think things were okay. But I know like housing and as a dean of students, in that January, February time frame to get calls from primarily domestic constituencies about the decision making, allowing the students into the residence halls, and not quarantining them, but at that time, you know, we were following public health guidance. So we were kind of on, I would say, pins and needles until that fourteen day period passed, and we didn't have a positive COVID infection. So...

**BD:** How would you say that personally affected your job?

**CM:** Um, for me, you know, I just was, you know, meeting regularly with people, I mean, it adds stress, right? [laughs] I don't want to deny that it didn't add stress because, um, you know, just it's difficult for like a student who might come here without their family, and you are kind of take the place of the caregiver in some ways. And so just like, I wouldn't want an Eau Claire student who has limited, you know, family support to find themselves in this, whether they're domestic or international, I just these new students who just arrived and don't really yet understand, you know, US culture are still working on their language skills, it's a very kind of stressful time, just minus COVID. making that transition from your family and friends in China, in this case, or Malaysia and then building your life in the US. And to have that added scrutiny placed on top of you like, Oh, you could be bringing COVID to our community, or I might get quarantined or I might get sick. So I think the students anytime they had a cough, during that,

like, kind of initial period, they were just super anxious, like, not only for themselves like that, they might be sick, but you know, are they bringing something into the community? So it was just a very stressful time. But I think I think everybody had that fear every single time somebody coughed can look like they're crazy and maybe there are cultural differences. Because at that time, right, the US public health guidance when they came in, like January 22, February 22, is like, Oh, we don't need to worry about masks. All the students who are coming from Asia, like that's a tradition that predates COVID great people wear masks all the time, for all kinds of reasons, whether it be you know, pollution issues, or you know, communicable disease issues, so that I think some students kind of wanted to wear a mask, but they felt like know, that called attention to them. Right? What if they weren't? So? Okay.

**BD:** Okay, so let's see here. So we can kind of go personally here. Um, how's the outbreak affected? How you associate and communicate with friends and family?

**CM:** Yeah, well, um, I mean, obviously, I'm like, like living in the zoom world conferencing world like everybody is. So that's kind of been a challenge. I will say my mom has, she's in her late 70s. And she has upper respiratory problems. So we've been very cautious around her. So it's not to...so I haven't seen her for quite some time since this summer, really, because I stopped seeing her in person once we couldn't, you know, it became harder to be outside.

**BD:** And how do you think the outbreak affected the community as a whole?

**CM:** Well, I mean, I'm gonna just speak to the university community a little bit, just because I think, you know, I think it's affected us in a lot of different ways. I mean, I also work with the study abroad students. So I would say that, you know, in March, you know, when it started really kind of expanding into the European forefront. And then, you know, we had issues in Korea. So we have students in Korea, we brought home. And then we started bringing students from Europe home and went to other parts. So ultimately all the spring 2020 students came, excuse me back from abroad, which was a very stressful time. And I think when I look at that, I think there you really see like the difference in community like for me, like that was the first time that I saw, like the difference in how people perceive the illness, because, you know, obviously, parents who had a student abroad at that time were concerned, but then we were they were concerned for different reasons. So some people were like, I want my student who come home, I want you to cancel the program and get them home right away. And then we had other people who were like, please don't cancel the program. No, don't overreact. We want our students to be able to finish out their experience, you know. So for me, like that was really like the first experience of what I think became like this divergent view of the illness. That I mean, it's prominent here in the US, you know, and I think it is in other parts of the world, too, maybe in a less prominent way. But...

**BD:** How do you think was your most effective way to deal with the difference in opinions?

**CM:** That's a really good question. And I'm not really sure, you know, that I know the right answer, or that I successfully navigated the question with families. I mean, I guess I was just forthright with people saying, like, I understand your perspective. And we're also see receiving calls from families that have opposing views on this. And so we're trying to make the best decision. I think we did have a travel risk policy, like a lot of universities. So typically, what

happens is when countries hit like a certain level of advisory, whether it's through CDC or US State Department, those are typically triggers for bringing students back. So once we hit those markers, we brought the students back. You know, so I think part of what I did in communicating with students and parents was just to say, like, here is the kind of criteria that we use, and we're continuing to follow that, you know, once we would hit that level of advisory, you know, we would discuss as a committee and then make recommendations to the Provost about, you know, bringing the students home. So, and that resulted, that resulted, you know, that kind of resulted in the cancellation of summer and fall, winter, autumn and spring. So, like that academic travel has been suspended. And my hope is that maybe in summer 2021, there could be some resumption at a smaller scale. But I think that's still undetermined, right? We're still watching closely, because right now, we're the problem in the world. Nobody wants us.[laughs]

**BD:** Okay, so then how are our how, how are offices and people around you responding to the pandemic?

**CM:** Yeah, so like, as you can see, I'm here in my university office. So I have actually worked in my university office since the pandemic, because our staff went all remote except me. But I'm not a risk to anybody. So I just think like, for me working at the university, I think everybody is trying to thread the needle of providing high quality services to the students, as well as to respect the risk tolerance of staff, whether it's because they have, you know, underlying health conditions or family members with underlying health conditions. And I think, for me, where I think it's a much more challenging dynamic is when you have individuals for whatever reason, their work isn't conducive to remote work. You know, a lot of service work that way. So I know it's caused a lot of hardship. I think, you know, when we look overseas, you know, to some of our university partners overseas, they're all at a similar stage of what we're encountering, you know, like our partners. In China, they're back to in person instruction. Where it's like they had like their spring 2020. You know, they were remote ways. Um, And, you know, I think other university partners are [unintelligible], I think working remotely like we are. I'm not sure if that answered your question.

**BD:** Yeah, it did, [laughs] yeah, so in dealing with, with a lot of people, especially with those from different countries and with families and such from the United States, have you seen any of those people change their opinions from day to day activities?

**CM:** I think what I've seen, especially with the international students, you know, if I kind of go back to that spring semester, I think what happened is a lot of people were really concerned about things that were occurring in the US. So then, you know, we saw a departure of a lot of international students from the US at that time. So just to give you perspective, we had, I think, around 300 international students on campus physically present in spring 2020. This fall, we have like 125. And, you know, some of them are our students are able to take courses from their home country. But overall enrollment is, like 200, so about 30%, enrollment, reduction in international students, just from spring 2020, to fall 2020. Um...and I think, you know, for me what I think international partners have seen in just some of the revelations about, you know, American capacity to manage something of this nature, I think you have, it's not really painting us in a very flattering light. So I think some people are worried, but will be US continuing to be

one of the top destinations for international students in the future. Seeing the world that kind of seeing the many flaws in our health system. And you see much smaller countries with much less resources who've done a lot better job in managing. They talk about places like Vietnam, which I think most people would view as having significantly less resources and less has had very few deaths and has done a relatively good job of managing it or look at Taiwan, or China or New Zealand. Other places I have not had the level of depth that we have here. I think this morning, I can't remember was like close to 290,000 [people?] have died in the beginning of the pandemic. Um, you know, I just don't think that necessarily shows the US light.

**BD:** Alright, yeah, me neither, um, does the does the government in any way have any kind of, I guess, agency over, um, what you do? Or like, I'm talking like local government, like city or state government?

**CM:** Yeah. So I'm just gonna bring it in the international student side of things. So most of those immigration rules come at the federal level. So so all of the rules. So for example, you know, a federal rule that has affected international students is that typically international students who's studying in the US institution is required to attend coursework physically. You know, and that's the reason they get to be in the US, right. So if they were taking 100% online courses, they could do that from their home country. So there have been a loosening on the requirements for online participation in courses by international students. Which is, you know, a positive thing and started in March. And it's continuing now, we just got noticed yesterday from student Exchange Visitor program, which is like a part of Department of Homeland Security that that special exception will continue. But no new students can come in so they are continuing students, they can have this exception, but no new students can come in to take primarily online program of study in the US.

**BD:** Okay. So then with that aspect in mind you think they responded, well, our government leaders to that?

**CM:** Um, well, that's probably a bigger issue. I mean, there's been a lot of I think, I don't, I don't think I've seen anything overtly political here. But I think there has been a lot of immigration changes under the Trump administration that have sought to limits. Even non immigrants, because I think that's something that sometimes people forget about international students is that they are considered a non immigrant visa holder, they come here with intent to pursue their studies and then returned to their home country, and they have to when they receive their visa, they have to show ties to their home country to get the non immigrant visa. So, even non immigrant visa holders have been subjected to some of the immigration restrictions. With the Muslim ban, that was one of the first things that happened. And there's some other changes related to the calculation of status. Even some of what I talked about the involve, there was this moment where they weren't sure that we're going to let students continue online. And there was a lot of back and forth and some institutions, you know, filed legal action. Because it was quite a...what I would say like, unrealistic expectation. So at the time, they were looking to say that, you know, students had to be at either institution that was in person or hybrid, and that if for whatever reason, during the course of fall 2020, an institution would go 100% online, and students would have to either go back to their home country, or find a new institution, which to

transfer to, but who's going to take a transfer student in the middle of 2020 pandemic, right?. So unfortunately, that action was withdrawn, and it didn't move forward in that format. But it caused a lot of stress for the students. Right?. And I think this is another thing that is typical for the international student is some of the immigration rules related to COVID have not been just consistent. And, and so they're always a little bit on edge about, like, what that's going to be. And you know, and like I said, right now, our students who left the travel ban from China still continues. So those students who left can't come back. And, um, you know, many US consulates and embassies are closed abroad. So, you know, students who needed to [unitelligable] and get an appointment, to be able to return to the US even if their country isn't under like a travel ban. So just a lot of barriers to mobility, which is difficult for students who are just wanting to finish their degree program. Just a lot of jerry rigging a system to make sure that they can have some continued progress in their degrees.

**BD:** Okay, do you think that as soon as the travel bans get lifted, are gonna be bringing students back right away? Or you think it'd be a wait?

**CM:** I think it'll depend, right? Because right now, there's multiple factors, right, like now there's these like, logistical barriers and immigration barriers. But there's also I think parents are scared to send their kids to the United States right now, based on you know, risk of infection. And the risk of you know, I guess the hospital capacity is the other risk. So if a student would find themselves falling ill and not be in that category of people who can do home care, or even if they were a student who would have some other type of healthcare issue, just an accident, right? Like what is the capacity to serve them when all the hospitals are full with COVID patients? So I think it's just unnerving for parents to look at what's going on in the US.

**BD:** Has anybody you know, personally gotten sick?

**CM:** Um, what I would say, yeah, I know some people who have been ill, both here at the university and then I have family members. I haven't had anybody. I shouldn't say that. I have one high school friend who was hospitalized. And my cousin's son was hospitalized. But I have not. It's not people that I have like real close, close, everyday contact with.

**BD:** Okay. Has your experience through all of the whole pandemic transform how you think about your family, friends and community? And in what ways do you think?

**CM:** Oh, I think, you know, for me, I think it's really interesting, because I feel like in some ways, this is like a weird social experience. I remember going to a conference once and somebody basically said to me, you know, why do we need international mobility anymore? Why do people need to study abroad? Because, you know, basically, we just all do video conferencing, we don't need to travel anymore. And I think, for me, the one thing that I appreciate from the pandemic, if I can say I appreciate something, is I think it has reinforced the importance of that person to person connection, right? Like, I think we've all come to realize that as much as technology has helped us in so many ways, and allows us to have this conversation allows courses to continue safely. It does not replace like that in person experience. Um, and I think that both from like, a learning perspective, experiential learning perspective is also from like a social emotional perspective. Like, we want that in person experience with other people.

**BD:** Okay, so I guess knowing what you know, now, what do you think that individuals, communities or even the government need to keep, keep in mind for the future?

**CM:** Oh, I do you think? I think it has revealed in the United States, I will just say like, I think that we have a very weak public health system, because much of the care that we get is through this private network. That is, in some ways, employer based, right. So if you have employer based health care, you access the private network of hospitals. But, you know, those private network of hospitals don't really, from what I can see, don't really work together as a system of public health. And I and I kind of like there's been, you know, I often think about the Eau Claire Public County and City Public Health, you know, go to their website, it looks like a staff of like, three people or four people, you know, and the expectations that have been placed upon them, during this pandemic, I mean, are quite extraordinary. And, you know, I have great sympathy for them, because I can't imagine how difficult the work is that they're doing. Given that, you know, public health just isn't typically a priority. And you may say, I don't know if that changes. You know, I think it also has revealed, you know, the kind of inequities in health care access. You know, when I think wealthy people, whether it's the president or the basketball players, NBA players, you know, they have access to the best treatment in the world. But, you know, many of the people who I think are dying, or people who don't have access to health care, or, you know, put up going to the hospital maybe when they should, or, you know, they have less resources, so they live in tighter quarters, right, more people in one house, so then it spreads more quickly, among family members. So I think that's another kind of sheet that's been pulled off America for the world to see really, and that doesn't put us in the greatest light

**BD:** Do you have any lasting last thoughts or anything like that, that you feel would be important for people looking at this in the future, for them to know, any lasting thoughts?

**CM:** I just hope that we learn from it. Right? ,we, like, you know, I'm sure as a historian, like that's one of the things that I would suspect rise into history, right like that, the possibility that we can learn from what has occurred in the past. You know, you know, for me, if we are fifty years in the future, I mean, we're doing the exact same thing. And words have the exact same thing happened to us. But for me, that would just be for heart breaking that we didn't learn anything, anything from this. Because I think a lot of people paid a price. And so I hope that our policymakers, you know, don't let those deaths go in vain or wasted, right? Like that we take that loss that everybody's been experiencing, and we learn something from it. And we apply it to the work we do you as to prevent such a thing from happening in the future.

**BD:** Yeah, I think 2020 could be an entire semester, for a course. [laughs]

**CM:** I know, I feel like we live like ten years and one year. I can't. It's weird, I, and I and I don't know, like with memory and stuff. And at the top of the passage of time, it just becomes so strange for me right now, because even stuff that happened a year ago, I can't really remember if that was a year ago, because it seems like that's two reasons, you know, like so much has happened in this one year. [Unintelligible]

**BD:** Well, if you don't have anything else, that I have any more questions for you? I don't think I can conjure anything up. We pretty much covered at all.

**CM:** So that's good. I I really am. I think this is a great project and I wish you and Dr. Jimenez-Frei a lot of success with the project because I think it's really important that you thought now and then I'm sure many historians will learn from it in the future policymakers in the future. So happy to be able to be a part of it. So...

**BD:** Yeah. Well, on behalf of the Chippewa Valley COVID-19 project and University of Eau Claire, we thank you for your time as a real pleasure talking with you.

**CM:** Yeah, you too, have a great day.

**BD:** You too.

**CM:** Stay safe, bye

**BD:** Bye