

An Interview with DeRionne Pollard

Perspectives from the COVID-19 Pandemic: Leadership and Learning in Nevada

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Each interviewee had the opportunity to review their transcript. All measures have been taken to preserve the style and language of the interviewee. This interview features DeRionne Pollard, President of Nevada State University, and was conducted on 10/13/22 by Magdalena Martinez and Taylor Cummings. This interview covers topics including reflections on leadership, organizational challenges, and opportunities for collaboration.

Education: Interview with DeRionne Pollard

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Magdalena Martinez [00:02]

All right. So we are here today, October 13th, 2022, with Dr. Pollard from Nevada State College. Joining me also is Taylor Cummings. And I'm just going to ask Dr. Pollard, again, if it's okay to record you.

DeRionne Pollard [00:15]

Yes.

Magdalena Martinez [00:18]

And if it's okay to attribute any quotes that we may include in publications to you.

DeRionne Pollard [00:22]

Yes.

Magdalena Martinez [00:23]

All right, great, thank you. So we'll jump right into it. So if you could describe your role throughout the pandemic, and the role of Nevada State College as a whole.

DeRionne Pollard [00:33]

Certainly. So, I happened to serve as the president of the institution, but arrived in the midst of the pandemic, right when the institution was having to grapple with how it wanted to start a re-opening process. There had been decisions made regarding the previous year. We had operated primarily remotely. We were currently back into the fall semester, primarily remotely, about 60:40, if I'm really thinking about this, throughout that year. Sixty percent, face-to-face, maybe even in the fall, almost up to probably 80% face-to-face. And then by the spring, our goal had been 60:40, with the very clear move toward a "back and bold" was our theme of how to bring both students and employees back to campus.

So that was the role I had in shepherding that. Previous to that, obviously, having led another organization in the midst of COVID, having to do a lot of work around strategy. And then also, thinking deliberately about messaging, and what leadership looks like in these times as a result of that.

Magdalena Martinez [01:36]

Could you talk a little bit about what you think leadership needed to look like at a time like this?

DeRionne Pollard [01:42]

Yeah. I really appreciate that, and I've given a lot of thought to this as I conceptually thought about our time together today. I think a couple of things. I think leadership in this moment, there

were institutions, either thrived or failed, or had significant problems during COVID – came from a seasoned leadership who may or may not have been thinking about one grappling with ambiguity, first of all. Because at this particular point there were so many things that were changing rapidly around us. And in higher ed, we tend to be fairly prescriptive about how we approach problem-solving. This is something that we had never experienced before, so there was nothing else for us to recall. So I think this idea of comfort, or ability to navigate in ambiguity is, I think, a key leadership trait that was necessary.

I think secondly, how to interpret data, and if you didn't know how to, have trusted capacity within the organization, to understand what the data was telling you about who students were, what their experiences were, how to deploy supports rapidly for them based on how they were showing up, I think was particularly important.

And the third one, which I think is a core competency, that I think those of us who were leading during COVID, where you saw the strongest institutions were not – were those who understood what highly-effective communication looked like. Both in terms of doing that face-to-face, where possible, although we could not unless we were doing it virtually. How to use social media. How to compose a written communication to the institutions in ways that were meaningful and would be read. A lot of more technical writing. My background is obviously in composition and literature, so I tend to spend a lot of time thinking about how messages are designed, and the frequency of those messages. How to use different rhetorical strategies to convey messages.

So that, for me, I think will be the top three competencies that come to mind immediately. And maybe, if I could add a fourth – and this one, I think, is scenario planning. Again – and maybe that goes back to the first one about ambiguity. One of the things you had to do is to anticipate, and not just simply think about, well, if it happens this way – but you had to have all these variables that would indicate that the scenario is going – you had multiple scenarios for any particular variable that was coming in. So those are the things that I think were particularly core competencies leaders need to have during COVID.

Magdalena Martinez [04:11]

Very helpful. Now, in terms of the role of Nevada State College within your community, what did you see [as] the role of the institution?

DeRionne Pollard [04:19]

I think one is, what we found is that those students who were most vulnerable were maybe even more vulnerable during the COVID pandemic. So, as a result of that, we oftentimes were providing basic needs and security, in ways that we were underprepared to do. That meant we had to be convenors with communities and government in order to respond to students in that space. Many of our students, and employees, for that matter, were in crisis. So how do we begin to deploy equipment to them, food to them, and gas money? With the economy being so dramatically impacted with the shutdown, our students particularly needed access to equipment that they may have been able to have found in other places. They couldn't go to a library. They didn't get to do it at lunch, at work, and use a computer. We had to figure out how to deploy equipment to them.

I think we also had to help students start to understand and develop language around what they were feeling and experiencing at that time. Mental health was the significant one. How do we make sure that they are feeling and responding to isolation in a very thoughtful and deliberate manner? And this is something that we'd been thinking about, but to have it done at that scale, and the immediacy of it, I think became very important, both for students and employees. I think one of the – interestingly, the *Chronicle of Higher Ed*, – I just got an advertisement for a forum they're doing on the stress of faculty and students right now. And I think that's important, but what I find somewhat egregious is that they don't talk about the impact on staff. And oftentimes staff who are on the frontline of these types of issues, and triaging the students and faculty, and on the receiving end of a lot of their frustration and pain, they're still grappling with what that looks like.

So those types of things, I think, were things that Nevada State – basic needs and security, continuity of instruction – how do you plan around instruction when it is so challenged right now? And then also, how do you make sure you build these robust support services for students and employees to help them navigate a very uncertain environment?

Magdalena Martinez [06:34]

Mm-hmm. Now, you started to address some of this, but let me ask it again, in case there's something else you'd like to add; as you walk through the timeline, as you remember it. Were there certain pivotal moments that shaped your response and/or leadership?

DeRionne Pollard [06:49]

I think that's a phenomenal question. I was literally talking with someone about this before. When COVID was first announced, those of us who were in these leadership roles, and we immediately responded, there was a lot of new ritual making we had to do about – most of the institutions where the leadership are meeting every day, for multiple hours a day in this type of environment. And then you had to figure out how you triage and get those communications out.

But we developed, I think, our own ritual and rhythm fairly quickly, and these were things that we could control, right? We literally had to figure out what was happening within our institutions. But, as you suggest in this question when exterior or external forces started to impact us, we lost that control. So when there was a vaccine made available; when we started to receive federal or state dollars to help support us and had different strategies and benchmarks about the deployment of that. When there were decisions having to be made about requirements for vaccines. When we had to make decisions about reopening and not reopening, how that played itself out. How we had to make decisions about – and in some of the institutions across the country I know of – who was going to get paid and who wasn't going to get paid? And how you took care of students, and staff, and those part-time faculty.

So those exterior stimuli, when they came into the system, are the moments when we lost control. And that's when we really, I think, added additional stress in ways that were inevitable, but we really taxed the system even more.

Magdalena Martinez [08:34]

Right. And by "taxed the system even more," do you mean the external economic contraction?

DeRionne Pollard [08:43]

Yeah. Economic contraction, decision making, politics. I mean if you look at that irony about this moment, as I tell people, there are two master narratives about how COVID-19 was being experienced.

Magdalena Martinez [08:55]

Mm-hmm.

DeRionne Pollard [08:56]

You had some families who were doing learning pods, and traveling someplace, and living someplace else for months at a time to avoid – they could have Uber Eats deliver them, and they engaged in Instacart and all that. And for a lot of families, they will tell you that COVID was a good time for them. That's one narrative.

The other narrative of COVID was COVID funerals. Food lines and banks. Tragedy on top of compounding tragedy. And then you add that with the intersection that we were seeing. In October, we were facing multiple pandemics at the same time: We had COVID. We were having a racial reckoning happening in this. And we were watching it all on TV right in front of our faces.

Magdalena Martinez [09:42]

Mm-hmm.

DeRionne Pollard [09:43]

Opioid, that pandemic which we never addressed, is back at us right now. And then you add to us the mental health. So, all of this was an exponentiating moment, and I think I made up a word right there. But there is a real pressure cooker that was happening, and these external stimuli that were affecting – decision-makers couldn't make up their minds to say "We're going to require a vaccine" or not. If we're trying to make a decision about who's going to get in line first to get it, and then we have – debating the legitimacy of all of this, those were things I had no control over. If I could figure out how to get a laptop to a student and get them a Wi-Fi connection and keep a faculty member's resources to them, that's very different. This other stuff started to really compromise the ability to deliver the mission, and that's the problem.

Magdalena Martinez [10:31]

Mmm. So how do you continue with a mission when you have those external stimuli pulling, and inserting new challenges to the work that you need to do to the leading that you need to do?

DeRionne Pollard [10:47]

I can remember, I think it was March 20th, or like 13th or whatever, and I was in Maryland. And it was announced and we – everything started shutting down. I sat down in my office at home and wrote down a set of assumptions. And it was important, I thought, to ground myself in terms of what was going to be happening. And the first assumption I put on that list is that this will become very real for us, the moment we lose our first student or employee to COVID.

Magdalena Martinez [11:16]

Mm-hmm.

DeRionne Pollard [11:18]

It's very difficult because it's all esoteric. It's otherwise. That the minute it became internal, that would be an issue. That we would have to think deliberately about how we approach our educational philosophy around face-to-face and hybrid learning, which has been a powerful conversation here at Nevada State. Half of our students are first-generation college students. We know the literature and the data tell us that these students are best served initially by having a tight coupling with the institution early on. So how do we then design an educational experience, so we know our deep competency is supporting those students face-to-face? How do we do that in an online – how do we build community there? And I think, to be quite frank to my teams, it's about acknowledging upfront what the issues are.

Magdalena Martinez [12:03]

Mm-hmm.

DeRionne Pollard [12:05]

And then, scenario planning. So if I can't get you on campus for advising, and you don't have this, and you don't have that, how do we plan accordingly for that? It reminds me oftentimes when you heard of mass shootings at college campuses, and you saw for several years, one of the most powerful exercises I had was – the president at that time, who was the acting president of Umpqua Community College in Washington or Oregon, and they had a mass shooting on campus and there were 15-20 people who died. And she said, "You call your senior leadership team together and you say, 'let's come together and start triaging the situation. Then you realize – she had us write a list of "who would you call?" And she said "Okay, so cross off number one because that person was killed. They were the first responder. Cross this person off because they're traumatized, and their child was – I mean they literally went down this list.

So your 20 people, who you convened, of that, seven or eight of them couldn't be there. This is the same thing with COVID. In that type of scenario – we had to learn how to transfer these experiences into different scenarios to know, how do we begin to respond. And that's where you get to ensure that mission gets delivered. That's a different leadership competency than many of us have been, quite frankly, raised and trained for.

Magdalena Martinez [13:20]

Right. A different type of crisis.

DeRionne Pollard [13:23]

Yes.

Magdalena Martinez [13:24]

A very different type of crisis. You talked a little bit about your student population that you served there, and then faculty and staff. In thinking about that, who was the hardest hit by the pandemic in your opinion?

DeRionne Pollard [13:42]

I would say, students who are attending typically part-time because they're working. And they are what we might call seasonal workers, or they are frontline workers. And when that income dried up, they were the most significantly impacted. And we're still seeing that, because now, while work is here, the cost of living has gone up so much, where they're making choices between coming to school and having to work. Because now, they've got to pay for gas, or their rent went up exponentially.

The other one that I see a lot, the second group, is working parents – college-attending parents. Twenty percent of the students at Nevada State are parenting. So if you think about during COVID, many of them were trying to figure out how to [make] ends meet. If they stayed in school, how to deliver on their own education? Oh, by the way, many of them were having to parent and educate their school-aged children at home. How do you begin to respond to that in that environment?

So I think that the second group are the silent ones. This is just what parents do. You just kind of "man up."

Magdalena Martinez [14:52]

Mm-hmm.

DeRionne Pollard [14:53]

This is what women do. That's not honestly the expectation.

And then the third group that I see, I'm actually going to do a little writing about this – I'm thinking about an op-ed on it – are our classified employees. So I think a lot of the attention, appropriately so, has been placed on those students, and students who were living in poverty who were Pell Grant recipients. But we started to see some of the money trickle in to help those students, whether it be HEERF and other things, right? Our staff, who are oftentimes – and I look at my own institution – staff; 85% of them are women.

Magdalena Martinez [15:29]

Mm-hmm.

DeRionne Pollard [15:30]

Fifty-four percent, I believe, of them are folks of color. I'm actually pulling information on their educational attainment level staff. When you think about this, this might be, I think, one of the most profound equities and social justice issues of our time. Where we have not seen wages – and they're at the state level – keeping in touch with what's necessary to live right now. I'm worried about them. I've had staff making decisions about who they can ride with because they're trying to avoid gas. Selling plasma. I had employees tell me they're selling plasma. How do we, as an equitable institution – and we talk about this – how do we try to live these values out loud, particularly – like I don't have control over that. So I've got to figure out how to amplify their voices with my own.

Magdalena Martinez [16:25]

Mm-hmm. And you are leading a very racially-diverse institution. It's a minority-serving institution, a Hispanic-serving institution. The female majority, I think it's-

DeRionne Pollard [16:36]

Yes, it is.

Magdalena Martinez [16:37]

First 70%, I think, now.

DeRionne Pollard [16:38]

Yes.

Magdalena Martinez [16:41]

And what percentage is part-time? So can you talk about the part-time students?

DeRionne Pollard [16:45]

Yeah, that's very interesting. So very interesting – if we think of part-time as less than – max nine credits or less – about 50% of our students are part-time.

And when you think about the vulnerability of those populations of students, we sit in the – a lot of people say, "Who's the canary in the mine for higher ed in Nevada?" I'd offer to you that Nevada State really is it.

Magdalena Martinez [17:14]

Mm-hmm.

DeRionne Pollard [17:15]

These are the folks who are in this very unique space. We aren't [as a state] intentional about paying attention to who they are. And the fact that 80% of our graduates stay local, to me, is a clear indicator that we've got to be thinking differently about how this institution is viewed by the state.

Magdalena Martinez [17:33]

Mm-hmm. And you started to talk a little bit about the different levels of government. In reflecting back, is there anything you wish the government – at any level, whether it was federal, state, or local, would have done differently or could do differently in response to a pandemic and a crisis?

DeRionne Pollard [17:51]

Hmm... I think that they – the government, at all levels, I think had the unenviable task of trying to respond to something that most of us had never lived through before.

DeRionne Pollard [18:12]

So I want to first give them their kudos on that. And I think it's easy to be the critic – because I'm

going to be a critic right now. (laughs) But I think it's easy to do that. I think one of the things that would have been far more useful is to have convenings of – to hear from us what the needs were, versus their interpretation of what the needs were, and to figure out how to solicit that. So to understand that rapid response around certain issues was necessary because of certain populations of students that we served. To be thoughtful about what types of things could be used as a part of the federal – what we could use federal dollars for. Versus, later on, trying to come back and clean that up for us.

Decision-making around – and speaking with a collective voice - around vaccines. I felt that depending on the state and having come here, I missed out on some of that decision-making. It was very mired, and no one wanted to take full authority in decision – and they weren't singing from the same hymn though, at all. So when I have conversations with our regions and have conversations with elected officials at the state level, what's the prime directive? And there did not seem to be a consensus around what the prime directive was. If public health, and returning to a sense of normality, and trying to protect us from the consequences of these pandemics were the prime directive, then acting in accord with that is important in decision-making metrics quickly in that space, are important.

I think also, more guidance in some spaces. When I arrived here – and I say this to the system – I'm accustomed to some type of dashboard – and you have to make those decisions upfront, so that you're not coming back later. And the dashboard – red, yellow, orange, green – whatever the case may be. These are the five indices we're tracking. If it gets to this point, here's the action that's already – and that you've educated everybody about that along the way, so they don't have to say, "Oh, DeRionne, you made this up." No. We agreed upon this early on, and if there's a change – an upswing or a downswing – we already know what the actions are going to be as a result of that.

DeRionne Pollard [20:49]

I think that type of forethought, and again, scenario planning, the critique I offer of higher ed, that we may not do it well. We need to amplify the roles of government, where they have people who do that. And if we weren't listening to them, or we didn't put them in a space where they could be heard, that was a problem.

Magdalena Martinez [21:07]

And I think what I hear you saying too is, being grounded in a consensus-based directive, or mission, or principles, versus being reactive to anything new that came through. So we knew it was an ambiguous time. There was new information being thrown at us, new data, and then it's like, you had to recalibrate. But if you have a strong foundation, the principles that guide – whether it's a system, an institution, or a state, then the decisions should be based on those principles.

DeRionne Pollard [21:45]

I completely – you made me sound far more intelligent than what I was in that moment.

And the other thing that I think is compelling about what you say is that we can't wait to “crisis” to start planning for a crisis. And that's what I find to be oftentimes we are so reactionary. It

reminds me of passive language. And I used to get in trouble as an undergraduate, when I would write and have this professor tell me, "DeRionne, get out the passive voice," and I didn't know what he meant. And then finally, one day, I went to the writing center, and I said, "Our teacher keeps telling me to get out of the passive voice," and they said, "You are being acted upon, versus doing the acting."

So I went back, and I said, "Neil, I know what you mean by that." He said, "And you're the person I know least – the most in the world who hates to be acted upon." And that's part of the problem here. We were all being acted upon. But what are we doing right now to plan for the next pandemic?

Magdalena Martinez [22:39]

Right.

DeRionne Pollard [22:41]

It will come. How are we capturing the major learnings from this moment? How are we being planful about what we will do when we have to respond to "COVID-26?"

Magdalena Martinez [22:54]

Mm-hmm. I'm going to turn it over to Taylor because she's going to ask you a little bit more in-depth about what you've started to foreshadow.

Taylor Cummings [23:04]

Yeah. Well, you've definitely hit on some of this, especially when you were talking about those external stimuli and how it really impacted leadership response. And you started to mention HEERF, but were there any specific policies at the state or the federal government – when we can think of things like the CARES Act or ARPA that they implemented, that you noticed impacted people? And if so, how either positively or negatively?

DeRionne Pollard [23:24]

Yeah. I think the first round of federal funding that came out was a game-changer, both for individuals that we served within our institutions and then for the institutions themselves. Starting off, for a lot of our students, when you think about this, when we first had that March and things started shutting down, this is nationwide. There were people whose immediate income just dissipated. And as a result of that, you literally – we were saving lives with that first set of money that came out. And institutions galvanized around their own emergency funding. They did private philanthropy. But until that first set of money came out – and if you think about institutions, like this institution, the one I was at before, where you could have – 70-80% of our students are PELL grant recipients. That means that they are the lowest economic strata. They are living, literally – paycheck to paycheck is being generous. They don't have enough in their paycheck, and they're trying to make a whole lot out of nothing. So I think that first round was groundbreaking.

And then I think, the subsequent rounds that helped – and I think it's the first and the second round; I lose track of which one – provided that a certain amount of money had to go directly to students, which I think was powerful, where it was just a passthrough. But then the second one

actually helped support institutions and backfill revenue that may not have come in or lost revenue, as a result of folks not being able to pay tuition, or state revenue not coming in the way it had been. So I think that those were game changers for institutions.

I think one of the drawbacks, though, has been some of the timelines that they've put in place. Because I think, to be quite frank, we're still feeling the repercussions of COVID. And yet – and some of the early dollars – and I get the student money, you want to get it out directly to them – but the time, you know, two years in some cases, to be able to claim against those dollars really became problematic because the institution was literally changing. And then this idea, where we're trying to bring people back; all of the money the institutions were having to spend, to be able to bring people back. Yet, they were trying to do it in these tight timeframes that may not have been conducive to what the reality is on the ground.

So I think those were game changers because we were able to push money directly to students. I think the federal government and the state government could have done a better job of explaining who was eligible for it and why, and that we couldn't give everybody \$10,000. What we could do is this, based on what the federal guidelines were, based on your financial aid and other types of things. But that literally, I know, saved lives.

Taylor Cummings [26:16]

Yeah, I think so – very helpful. And I think you also mentioned just how important the doing is in this, and our response to this. And so, what do you think have been the most innovative ways organizations and citizens have dealt with the challenges of the pandemic and recession? And these can be examples of collaboration, programs, or anything else that comes to mind.

DeRionne Pollard [26:36]

Yeah. I think one of the things that the pandemic showed us is that community is far more important than we even knew possible. And we saw that, where communities came together to either provide or meet emergency needs, to start developing long-term strategies around emerging issues that we were starting to talk about.

The best example I can give you about this is childcare. There are many communities across this country that are grappling with childcare and its impact, particularly on working families. But the pandemic accelerated those conversations because we had significant crises. The communities where I've lived – and I even observed some as I moved here – but we were reopening more. But how do you figure out how you use space differently? Where you had college campuses hosting the mass vaccination sites. Mass food distribution sites, where you were literally trying to figure out how to help support, on your campus, emergency workers and first responders in very different ways. You saw campuses initially producing PPE – wow, I had forgotten about that. So we were using our replicators and 3D printers to produce that type of thing. And I remember, I was trying to figure out how to get masks from different places across the globe.

So we also started to see how global we were. That this wasn't just the United States problem. This wasn't just a Canadian or Mexican problem. This wasn't just a European – this was a global pandemic. And I think that made us much more aware of our interconnectedness, which I think was an important thing to do.

One of the challenges that I see happening now is that we have forgotten some of that – already. Our memories are so short.

DeRionne Pollard [28:29]

So when you think about this whole conversation about gas prices and inflation, and I've watched the political rhetoric around it, I find it amazing – oh, we're blaming one person on this, (laughs) whether it be the current president or the former president. We're suggesting that the United States is so much more deficit in certain – the gas price issue. We don't even realize how insulated we have been about fuel costs, right? So now, it's like, yeah. We're mad because we're paying five-six dollars a gallon, but my friends who are living in Europe are paying eight-nine dollars a gallon. And they're worried about – you add a war on top of it. So we've forgotten the complexity of these dynamics so quickly, and that's the thing I worry about.

And my last comment in this space would be, having moved to this area, and maybe – I came here from Montgomery County, Maryland, which probably could be accused of being too far on the other end of the scale. They convene about everything. One of the things that I am very interested in helping to serve a role here as I've come in is, we need more convenings, as a community, to help us design collective impact models to solve community problems. The convening function – and I know, that may sound too lack of specificity. But there are entities within a community whose job, fortunately, or unfortunately, good or bad, is to serve as those convenors. And I am wondering where the convenors are in Southern Nevada? And I think there are some who want this, and I think some will play a role of – we've got to figure out, not just the convening function, but the convening impact.

DeRionne Pollard [30:18]

How do we put your little bit, with my little bit, and we understand roles, and we solve the problem?

And Dr. Martinez. To one of the questions, you asked earlier, where you made me sound far more eloquent in your summary of what I said. We also need clarity around roles. And that's something that I think is a deficit that became magnified. Who gets to make certain types of decisions and why? How do we begin to understand each other's lanes and respect those lanes? And at the same time, lean into them, where you think there's a land that isn't being fully occupied.

So I think that would also be useful when we start thinking about community problem-solving, and community convening, and community impact. It's about understanding roles and missions as well.

Taylor Cummings [31:11]

Thank you.

DeRionne Pollard [31:14]

You're welcome.

Taylor Cummings [31:15]

I'm also from that side of the town. I'm from Northern Virginia.

DeRionne Pollard [31:18]

Oh, then you understand, they convene all the time about everything.

Taylor Cummings [31:22]

I literally just had a meeting with the school. They're opening up a charter school in Maryland. It's 6:30 am, and they're talking about (laughs). But they talk, and they really do meet for every little thing.

DeRionne Pollard [31:31]

Yeah, everything. Every little thing.

Taylor Cummings [31:33]

I agree. And I do think a conversation is super, super-important. And our next question, you probably have the answer to this, because you've given us so many solutions and strategy-oriented insight. But it really is just a matter of, what do you feel like we've learned, or we need to learn, and we have learned from this, moving forward with other crises or future crises.

DeRionne Pollard [31:53]

Yeah. I think we are starting to learn about mutuality in our interconnectedness. I think that we're learning that the safety net is broken. It has big holes in it, and we need to start darning it very quickly, or we're going to have more and more people falling through it. I think that we are starting to recognize, but very few people articulate it, that the intersection of multiple pandemics is affecting us right now, and it's easy to say it's COVID-19. It's easy to say it's inflation. There is an interrelatedness to this, that if we are unwilling to acknowledge, we will never be able to design effective solutions for. You can't have a conversation around mental health without having a conversation about police relations in Black and brown communities. You can't have a conversation about economic mobility if you're not talking about childcare and talking about the effects of inadequate compensation adjustments for those who are the most vulnerable parts of our community. You can't have a conversation around economic diversity if you're not talking about the education pipeline. You can't talk about roles and mission if you're not willing to talk about what good governance looks like.

So there is an interrelatedness to this. And my fear is that we will all engage, or at least, and maybe my – because I moved across the county – but we all seemed to be engaged in it, and now we're like (gestures) we're tapping out because it's an inconvenient truth. So we're not talking about the environment now. We're talking about the inconvenient truth of the fact that there's a mutuality to our existence. I think we've got to design, and somebody's got to claim that space and make sure it's not forgotten.

And I think that we also – and I'll end on this – is that we have to figure out how to make ourselves – I heard somebody say, "pandemic-proof." And I didn't like that because "proof" means that we have control over it. We don't have control over this. But we need to find

ourselves more resilient as a community. And resiliency has a broader definition than simply, the act of bouncing back. It is the infrastructure that supports that. It is the systems, and the architecture, and the scaffolding that has to be there in order for a community – that's when you're in the midst of a crisis. It's not – the crisis is revealed about the lack of what you don't have or the strengths of what you do have.

So I think a lot about how do we start to think about resiliency, and healthy, and well communities. I would love – there needs to be a national study at some point. I don't know who could do this. And one of the big funders across – maybe several will come together. What communities seem to fare better during this moment? And maybe somebody's done this, and I just don't know. And what are the major learnings or the connective threads that we see from – and then, conversely, which communities were the most significantly impacted negatively, and what are the common threads that exist in those spaces? And then figure out, okay. How do we then design ourselves out of this in the future?

Magdalena Martinez [35:21]

Can I interject? I'm really curious that – I'm not curious, but I'm really glad you're using the word "resiliency" in defining it in a different way. Because we know that words matter right now, and there has been a movement around, particularly around communities of color – don't use resiliency, because then you're putting the responsibility on my shoulder. I have to pull myself up.

But what I heard you talking about is resilient infrastructure, and resilient policy structures, and resilience. So it's not so much about the individual. Of course, it is about the individual, but it's more about the people that are in decision-making positions. How do they think about – how do they allocate resources, to ensure that certain communities have the type of social-economic infrastructures that are necessary? Is that what I heard, or-

DeRionne Pollard [36:20]

That's exactly what you heard me say. And the part that I think is it, to me also, speaks to what you think the function of government is.

DeRionne Pollard [36:28]

It's what you believe the function of the community is. I believe all of us are a part of something. And if we're a part of that, to expect that I'm supposed to pull myself up by my bootstraps, and "Go West, Young Man," and save myself, and figure it out – that completely ignores the fact that I'm a part of something else. And, at the end of the day, if we aren't far more intentional about understanding mutuality and interdependence, we will be grappling with these same issues over and over again.

As you were talking, I was thinking about – I grew up in the Southside of Chicago, in a poor neighborhood, like many folks. I was always struck by – there was a girl across the street from us. She lived with her grandmother. Her name was Princess. I don't know if that was her real name but that's what we called her. It probably wasn't her real name. But Princess' grandmother died. And I remember, everybody was so worried about what was going to happen with Princess.

And that day, and how they were going to – the whole thing in our community, you've got to make sure that a family is taken care of in their moment of grief. And then, at the same time, you're going to help them after that moment.

And I can remember – I remember Tupperware back in the day. I still prize my Tupperware. But my father – I think we had made something, and he said, "Take this across the street, and put it on Princess' – on the family's front stoop so they have some food, today while they're going through all of this." And I remember saying, "Dad," I said, "we've got to get some masking tape and put our names on it, so we can get our Tupperware back," because that's what you did back then, right? And he said, "Baby," he said, "it'll come back to us if it's meant to be. Just go and take that over there because that family needs to eat."

But then I watched systemically how, somehow or another – and this was before cell phones, and sign up lists, and all of that. Every day, that family had three to four meals a day that was taken care of for them. And when they came back home from the burial, there was a meal that was there. And then, the family and the community were helping them figure out how to take care of the bills associated with that. How to get Princess in with her aunt, to take care – so that, to me, is what I think about community, right?

DeRionne Pollard [38:49]

And then, how the formal and the informal come together to strengthen, and that's this issue of resiliency. If we think of it as just one dimension, (gestures) yeah.

Taylor Cummings [39:02]

Mm-hmm. And I love that you brought up the role of the function of government. Because you were talking earlier about leadership, it made me think about the role that universities have to play in helping and assisting people. And it's like, is it the university's job to be making sure that their students are eating and that they're clothed? And that all these basic needs that people who are in control of these social systems should be doing. And so, it shows us how, when there is that misalignment, how a lot of these responsibilities, for the larger society, fall on our smaller institutions that are really here to support larger societies.

DeRionne Pollard [39:34]

Yeah. And there is a huge question – I'm sure you know – in the literature about, can we continue to be everything for everybody. I'm of the opinion that we may not be able to do all of what you just said, but our job is to make sure we bring other people to the table who can.

So, again, it goes back to that convening function. I may not be able to feed every student on my campus who's hungry. But I can bring – when I was in Maryland, the Washington area, the food bank on my campus, two times a week to distribute food. I could partner with X-Closet, and I could bring in members of the government and social services networks, to have them come and to deliver services. So the students applying for financial aid, they can also apply for food stamps, so they can get a rental subsidy. So there, again, the network works together. And that is the important part of the job.

Taylor Cummings [40:24]

Yes. Thank you. That's really nice and wonderful. And our last question is, are you hopeful? And, if so, for what?

DeRionne Pollard [40:34]

Oh, boy. I don't know if today is a good day to ask me that. (laughs) No, I'm just joking. I am hopeful because I have to be, in terms of what I think humanity is about. And about humans, they oftentimes can disappoint me. But more often than not, they make me joyful, and they remind me that I'm a part of something bigger. And as I've had a number of my – I love having friends up and down the age spectrum. And I was lamenting where we were politically in this country, a couple of years ago, and why we are seeing this morass that we're seemingly stuck in. And one of them said to me, "Oh, baby, you weren't around during the VietNam War." And another one said, "You weren't around, really, during the Civil Rights movement."

And it was interesting to kind of place a context around it. So I'm a literature teacher by profession, right, rhetoric, and literature composition. And I think we need a text; a text has a pretext, it has a post text, it has a subtext, it has a context. And when you're in the middle of a text, you don't often – as a reader, you can try to remember all of that. But if you are assuming the voice – the dominant voice, the main character's voice – you don't have all of that.

And I realize, I remain hopeful because there are these other parts of the text operating that I can't see yet. And I have to remember that, in the end, I'm hopeful of humanity, and our communities have persevered in other times when we have felt hopeless. So I have to remind myself that I'm a part of a larger narrative and that at the end of the day, my job is to remain hopeful. Realistic, but hopeful, about what our potential is, I think, collectively, as a community.

Taylor Cummings [42:36]

Thank you. That was a beautiful answer, even if your personal emotions aren't feeling that quite right now.

DeRionne Pollard [42:42]

Thank you. I woke up at three o'clock this morning, mentally spacing out about issues. So now I'm like okay, that part – but you actually helped me. So thank you for that. I'm grateful. You actually helped remind me about who I am and what I believe. And sometimes it's difficult to remember that when you're "in the cut."

Taylor Cummings [43:01]

Mm-hmm.

DeRionne Pollard [43:02]

Hard to remember that. But when you come out of the cut, you've got to remember it.

Taylor Cummings [43:03]

Mm-hmm.

End of audio: [43:06]