



Radio Free CSU: CFA and COVID-19

Episode 1 – The Onset of COVID-19

INTRO TO PODCAST

Audrena Redmond: So where do we begin?

Charles Toombs: Something horrible was happening in the country, in the CSU and with our members.

Audrena Redmond: COVID-19 is changing our lives. The virus is altering the CSU.

Kevin Wehr: This crisis, this pandemic has really brought out and shown us shown of the weaknesses and vulnerabilities in our system and our way of life.

Audrena Redmond: But how we let it affect us past this semester, how we let it affected our anti-racism and social justice work is up to us.

Meghan O'Donnell: And we are up to the task. We are doing that work. The fight continues.

START OF PODCAST

Audrena Redmond: Hello and welcome to Radio Free CSU, the official podcast of the California Faculty Association. I'm your host Audrena Redmond.

Friends, let me take you back to a simpler time. It was January 1, 2020. COVID-19 wasn't yet embedded in our lexicon, at least not for most of us, anyway. It was a new year, a fresh start. Another year to grow our anti-racism and social justice advocacy. A year to prepare and begin our bargaining battle. A year to unite as one union. Then, the full reality of COVID-19: the corona virus hit. Thousands of lives lost. Social distancing. An economic downturn. 17+ million Americans filing for unemployment. And for those of us in the CSU, huge changes in how we are teaching, learning and organizing. Our lives have been turned upside down the past three weeks.

Over the next few months, we will examine the ways in which the reality of COVID-19 necessitated faculty and student adaptation to changes in teaching and learning, the ways in which vulnerable CSU populations are affected, what's happening with bargaining, checking in with our educational partners, and of course, preparing for the fall.

In this episode, we take you to what COVID-19 has meant for CFA, our members and the CSU.



Joining me: CFA President Charles Toombs, CFA Vice President Kevin Wehr and CFA Associate Vice President of Lecturers Meghan O'Donnell. Thank you all for joining me.

Audrena Redmond: Charles, let's begin with you. Take us back to three weeks ago when the CSU response to COVID-19 was to move immediately toward virtual modalities and away from in-class teaching. What was the focused work of CFA at that time and with the call from the Chancellor's Office what became CFA's immediate responsibility to our membership?

Charles Toombs: It was on Sunday, March 8 that CSU vice chancellor Evelyn Nazario wanted a call with me, Kevin Wehr and Kathy Sheffield, our director of representation and bargaining. And during that call, we were informed that the move was going to be to go virtual. We, of course, had a lot of questions about virtual meant – and, I think, on that first call the CSU administration was not quite clear on what it meant either. The next day, we normally have Monday morning planning call every week with CFA member leaders and staff. On that call, we knew that we had to change with how we were communicating with each other as leaders, but also with our members. And we decided immediately that our calls would have to be every day.

And as things escalated so quickly after that first call, events, it seemed, were just changing by the hour. Our immediate concern was really for the well-being of our members and our students. So we were concerned about the health and safety of our members. We knew there were a lot of questions that they would have, so we were trying to make sure that we were communicating to faculty in that way.

My first reaction was that something horrible had happened in the country, in the CSU and with our members. It's a lot of uncertainty that was occurring. And I knew that our leadership team, our member leaders and our staff that we had to be on top as all the events were unfolding.

Audrena Redmond: Kevin, even with infections in California, the change came slowly for our faculty. It started out as updates every few days in March. Then every day. Then every few hours once we knew of infections in California. Talk a bit about the slow roll through the stages of shut down and shift to online instruction for 23 different CSU campuses.

Kevin Wehr: Yeah, absolutely. It was in some ways as slow roll as you say, but for a lot of our faculty, it felt like a very sudden and jarring transition. It did move across the campuses in different ways. The East Bay, San Jose and San Francisco campuses were the first ones to shut down completely and move to an entirely virtual environment. But even in the Bay Area, it was uneven. The Sonoma campus took a little bit longer and then the Maritime campus in Vallejo was one of the very last to shut down completely. So, just in the Bay Area, you could see how uneven it was. Of course, Sacramento was pretty close behind. Then, Los Angeles, others in the Los Angeles region, and then all of a sudden, the Governor puts forward the shelter-in-place order and everything came to a stop on the campuses. And it's, it's actually still uneven if you can believe it. Charles just mentioned there are some difficulties in librarians and counselors and coaches in having them move to a virtual environment. In some ways, especially with the librarians,



that's quite ironic given that they are often the ones that are most advanced in terms of digital literacy and who are teaching the rest of the faculty how to move to an online environment or virtual modality. So, the libraries eventually were shut down. We still have some counselors that are still going to campus on a rotating basis to meet one-on-one with students who are – many of them remain on campus in the dorms, because they have nowhere else to go.

This crisis, this pandemic, has really brought out and shown us the weaknesses and vulnerabilities in our system, our way of life and it has really put a fine point on housing insecurity and food insecurity amongst members of the CSU community, at large. So, we see students who don't have access to technology and real challenges of moving to a virtual modality of instruction when they don't have internet at home and maybe they need to use a hotspot that some campuses are lending out, or laptops that some campuses have been lending out. And this is as true for our faculty as it is for our students. We have a lot of faculty, particularly low time-based or part-time lecturers, who don't have access to laptops themselves. So there was a mad scramble on many of our campuses to provide as many laptop loaners to students and faculty as possible. But it was impossible to cover all of the gaps.

Audrena Redmond: Meghan, given what Charles and Kevin described I'm wondering how our most vulnerable faculty, CSU lecturers, who make up over 60% of the teaching faculty, are feeling in this time of uncertainty.

Meghan O'Donnell: Thank you for that Audrena. You know, as Kevin kind of mentioned, the moment the shelter-in-place rules went into effect, it wasn't just our vulnerable students but a lot of our faculty who – it became clear were not equipped with the necessary resources and tools to successfully, you know, to move things to virtual modalities. So, a lot of faculty were panicked about not having internet at home. Some of our faculty live in rural parts of the state where the internet is terrible and they can't do very much without the internet crashing. We even had faculty that first week of virtual instruction teaching in their cars outside of Starbucks because it was the only way they could get access to strong enough Wi-Fi to run a Zoom class online. So, you know, I think at the campus level our leaders have been really amazing to responding to those anxieties and those real concerns fighting for things like Wi-Fi hotspots for faculty, making sure they have access to quality computers where they can do this work and then making sure that they are not being unduly punished for what these courses actually look like. You know, you only four days to transition courses to an entirely different modality than what you were prepared for. Faculty were really concerned about how that would impact things like student evaluations or performance evaluations. And for contingent faculty, those evaluations really have an impact in things like promotions and personnel decisions.

I don't think a lot of people realize how much of our curriculum in the CSU is taught by contingent faculty. I think for general education it is close to 80 percent. And we have some lecturers, in particular, who are trying to virtually teach upwards of four, five classes and in some cases manage childcare and home school at their own home. For a lot of our faculty, they teach on multiple campuses – the only way to make a



decent enough living to survive in the state of California. So we even have some lecturers who are trying to transition and teach seven classes online. I mean, it's a really, really herculean task that has been given to them and overwhelmingly, I think they have faced it with unbelievable strength and resiliency. But I think it is a huge concern and it's a huge challenge.

Audrena Redmond: Yeah, I, I have thought a lot about lecturers and managing that many classes and potentially managing that many classes, potentially in different CSU campuses who are moving at different paces with this virtual modality. And the many changes coming and still the many changes that are coming. But that makes me wonder Kevin if you could paint me the picture of life on the virtual campus.

Kevin Wehr: We're hearing a lot. But it's coming in a really strange way, right, because now we're Zooming and using these different video chat platforms and we're having phone conference calls, but we don't have that face-to-face interaction. So things are really, in many ways, quite different. We are such deeply social beings, you know, having this isolate-in-place order can be really difficult, really stressful. And of course, there's just this generalized anxiety, which can sometimes even be panic-inducing. So, there's a lot to balance.

So one of the things that we've been doing on all of the campuses is making sure that we have the ability to put a pause on the tenure clock so that people are not harmed in the promotion process because of this. And it's, you know, it's true for all of the different areas. It's true in the library. The NCAA cancelled all of the sporting events. Very prudently they did that fairly early on. So the coaching duties have shifted. They are having trouble, of course, doing recruiting, because they can't travel to see student-athletes perform. So things are changing pretty dramatically throughout the entire CSU community as we make these adjustments. You know, I think the most important thing to hold on to – and this is something that in our union that we have been saying to one another and have been communicating to our members quite consistently – is that we need to focus on staying safe, staying healthy, being kind to one another, because those are the things that are going to battle the stress and the anxiety.

Audrena Redmond: Charles, we at CFA have come to things of ourselves as a strong social justice organization. We were working on getting AB1460 – the ethnic studies requirement bill – passed. And then, what felt like a blink-of-the-eye that work halted as the state capitol because of the shutdown. Has COVID-19 changed how we are engaging in our anti-racism and social justice work?

Charles Toombs: Well, it has changed in how we are doing it right now since we are doing it virtually. What has not changed though is the central role that anti-racism and social justice plays in the organization. As early as March 4, CFA issued a statement in support of Asian and Pacific Islander communities and we have since issued additional statements in support of those communities. We certainly know now of the impact that COVID-19 is having on many communities of color, particularly of the African American community, Native American and Indigenous populations in the United States. So, COVID-19 actually assures us that the work that we are doing in terms of anti-racism and social justice is what we should be doing.



Audrena, you mentioned our work on AB-1460 – the ethnic studies requirement bill – and as you said, the legislature, they're staying at home. At this point, the bill is where it was before they left and that is that it will come before the Senate. We don't know what the impact of that is going to be, whether the Governor will sign it even if it passes the Senate, but we will put our energy there.

Anti-racism and social justice means that we need to be concerned about the total human being. And so CFA is continuing that work and I'm so proud that we are doing it. We can still continue our process of educating folks and sometimes that's what our anti-racism and social justice work is. We have to educate folks. We have to let them know that some folks do not have the same opportunities as others and that we're there to support all of members. And so, our work continues and it actually makes us stronger.

Audrena Redmond: Meghan, what's next? What happens next? Where are we in this whole thing? Can we say with any definition where we are?

Meghan O'Donnell: You know, I think that's a very good question. I know there's still a lot of growing concerns and uncertainties about what the future is going to hold. There's a lot of anxiety, as Kevin mentioned, around the future, around the CSU budget, around fall enrollment. And these are real human concerns and particularly, for the most vulnerable of us, for contingent faculty, they know these things directly impact their ability to have food on their table and pay their bills and maintain healthcare. So those are real concerns that our faculty are feeling, but as Kevin mentioned, CFA's path forward is for fighting for our faculty based on the information that we have, good information – not rumors and speculation – we are up to that task. We are doing that work and the fight continues. We are going to lead on behalf of our members regardless of the new challenges that arise as a result of COVID-19. You know, I mean, unions are built for this moment and this is what we are here to do. And I have to say that CFA, in particular, has shown such amazing courage and leadership really in how we have fought for our faculty already. Whether it's centering the work of anti-racism and social justice, ensuring that our advocacy is about protecting all of our faculty: coaches, librarians, lecturers, counselors, you know, we are well-equipped to continue to do this work on behalf of our members and the fight continues. I mean, the fight is never ending and we're up to the challenge. We're going to be in it for the long haul really regardless of what COVID-19 or whatever challenges may arise in the future.

Audrena Redmond: Charles, what are your biggest concerns we should, are on your mind for someone who is in the midst of this on a daily basis?

Charles Toombs: I have a concern for the continuing health and safety of our faculty and students and our staff. I am concerned about what the economic impact is going to be nationally, in the state of California and our local communities.

And related to that is my concern and my and CFA's fight to make sure that we are not losing job losses. It is a time for austerity but it is not going to be a time for the CSU impose austerity measures when they have rainy day funds and we're going to fight, demand as we should as a union for our members to have



jobs so they can provide for their families. I am also concerned that we must continue that the CSU is honoring our collective bargaining agreement. I know our chapter leaders have during their meetings with campus administration have been emphasizing that. You can't make these decisions if they're in violation of our collective bargaining agreement.

I want to be hopeful. I know that as Meghan has said we are a courageous faculty. We have stepped up to the plate with little preparation to continue to provide quality education for our students. We know that we make a significant contribution to the state. When you think about nurses and teachers and firefighters and police, they're all educated in the CSU. So we certainly want the Governor and the legislature to continue to support and maintain the CSU. We know we all may have to make a few small sacrifices – and we're making those – but we know the health of the CSU system is going to lead to the health of the state of California. So we have a big fight in the sense that we have to be clear to the CSU that we have demands that we continue to support faculty, students and staff. We want the CSU to be aware that this move to virtual instruction has had impact on faculty, students and staff and they should work with us to make the system as whole as we can as we look to the fall term.

Audrena Redmond: Charles Toombs, Kevin Wehr, Meghan O'Donnell – thank you.

Next time on Radio Free CSU, we examine the great adaption and changes to teaching and learning, the lessons that emerged from the emergency virtual teaching.

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