

**Interview Transcription: Brian Williams**

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**ANDREW KAUFMAN:** What do you do in the class? What are the student learning goals?

**BRIAN WILLIAMS:** I taught two courses: one course was on co-creation and co-production of public policies and services; the other course was a capstone course on equity, social justice, and social policy. Both courses really tried to get students to really focus in on those various topical areas. When you think about the co-creation of policies, the co-production of services, inclusive of programs, of practices, and engagement was a big part of that course much like in the second course, the equity, social justice, and social policy course. I try to get students to really appreciate how the past impacts the present but allows you to plan for the future. So, we would oftentimes think about some historical things that impacted programs, policy, services, but also impacted social policies.

**ANDREW KAUFMAN:** Can you say a little bit more about the community engagement component of those courses?

**BRIAN WILLIAMS:** Yes, with the co-creation and co-production piece, cooperation is really big because it's all about this notion of power with versus power over, which requires a level of engagement. With the co-creation, co-production piece, initially the students decided to engage with the University of Virginia Police Department, but also get in contact with some of their peers and students at UVA to get a sense of their different lived realities around police-community relations.

The other course—the equity, social justice, and social policy course—allowed students to focus in on a particular place, domain to think about reviewing some of the past practices but with an equity lens and really appreciate how some of those policies led to a lot of injustices. That required a level of engagement, both with policymakers but also those who implement policies. Those are the engagement pieces of both of those courses.

**ANDREW KAUFMAN:** In mid-March you got the news that you had to transition your course online with a week's notice. What was your reaction? What was the reaction of your students? What was the reaction of your community partner?

**BRIAN WILLIAMS:** So, what was my reaction, reaction of my students, the reaction of my community partners. My reaction initially was trepidation and a little bit of fear but then I thought about the IT professionals within the Batten School and that really helped me a great deal because we have some great people within Batten, much like across Grounds. That really smoothed out that transition.

My students initially had some concerns, but they seemed to be extremely resilient. I think I had much more of a concern than they did regarding that whole situation. The community partners really could appreciate what was going on, especially those with the co-creation and co-production course, because we dealt with a lot of first responders, those in law enforcement, who had a new normal. We often think

about policing as public safety and public order. Within COVID-19, that is a real reality when we couple that with public health. The equity, social justice, and social policy course, those partners were dispersed, diffused a bit across my different students. And they had some initial concerns, too, in terms of how do you make it happen within a virtual environment.

So, we had to make some changes on the fly. We really tried to apply co-creation and co-production across both courses. I asked students to think about and say, okay, what can we co-produce in spite of the COVID-19 pandemic that achieves those objectives for both courses?

**ANDREW KAUFMAN:** Can you say a little bit more about what they actually did then. What kinds of co-creation and co-production were they engaged in?

**BRIAN WILLIAMS:** One thing they did, for example, let's take a look at the co-creation and co-production course. What they did at beginning, the process of identifying potential partners in the learning process, some have been waiting to connect with some on a superficial level but not an in-depth level. What I asked them to do is to think about what if you had the opportunity to engage on a much deeper level, who would you engage with? What would be some of the information you'd like to receive from them? They basically brainstormed that whole process in terms of these are the folks I spoke with. These are the folks I interviewed, but these are the folks that I wanted to speak with and I want to interview and that helped them think about those potential partners, their potential contributions, to understanding and appreciating the problems that impacted that co-creation, co-production space.

They also decided to think about producing what's called a case-based learning exercise where here's a problem and oftentimes they looked at it from a COVID-19 perspective. So, they seized the moment and said, okay, here's a problem. This is how COVID-19 impacts that problem. These are partners that we would have that if I get more information on how do we manage this problem and help hopefully address this problem, then they think about some of the implications of that.

In the equity, social justice, and social policy course, a very similar approach but a little different. They had an end-of-term deliverable where they wrapped in COVID-19 into that equation. Students who might have had an interest in housing issues, a delay of COVID-19, what are the implications of COVID-19 on employment? It was really, really fascinating how they were able to take advantage of the opportunity to apply real time some of the issues that are confronting not only the students, but also this broader community which we live in.

**ANDREW KAUFMAN:** How did it change the class when you added this new dimension?

**BRIAN WILLIAMS:** I start off the semester saying something that I always share with my students. I said, when life happens, you got to live it, because oftentimes it's a bit, my experience in teaching for nearly a quarter of a century that life happens and once life happens you can't control it. You manage it. So, literally this was an opportunity for them to learn a life lesson. How do you manage those things that you can't control?

And COVID-19 prior to spring break was not a reality, but during spring break it became reality, and I thought they did a really good job of managing life. I got to live it. This is the best way I'm going to do it. I'm going to stay focused on my academics, on these deliverables, but I'm going to have to tweak it a little bit. And I think that was something that I would have never imagined them really, really learning at the beginning of the semester that they truly learned at the end of the semester and even with their

presentations of their projects or their papers. They dressed up because I said let's use this as a moment because this might be the new normal where you have to be persuasive. You have to be engaging with others who will evaluate you through technology. That's why I said the students were really resilient, too. They're young. They can bounce back and they did a much better job than I think I would have done by far.

**ANDREW KAUFMAN:** Is that one of the things that you would say actually changed, that you thought differently about some of the learning outcomes or were the learning outcomes the same it's just that you shifted the way they're being delivered?

**BRIAN WILLIAMS:** One of the things when I think about, reflect upon this experience is how do we engage in this new world that we now live in. What does virtual engagement look like? What does it feel like? How can it be as effective if possible as this face-to-face engagement? And I think that's the great thing that comes out of this. It forces us to think differently, to be innovative, to be creative but also somewhat experiment and learn from those experiments. So, I'm looking forward to that.

What I'm hoping to maybe do is to really encourage my students in the fall to really embrace this and to advise me on how to do it. I think they're much more familiar with this virtual space. I'm not really a social media type, I think that's much more my generation, but I think their generation, they're accustomed to connecting with technology and maybe they can teach us a lot in terms of how do we engage. And what I'm hoping maybe we could do is to create a network or process where they're teaching me, they're teaching each other, but they're also connecting with the younger generation. I'm hoping to be able to find a way so we can possibly partner with secondary students within the city school system here in Charlottesville or the private schools here to think about how do we build an infrastructure that allows engagement to happen in spite of social distance and regulations.

**ANDREW KAUFMAN:** It sounds to me like a lot of the core principles of your class as I understand them were deepened or reinforced and expanded as a result of this crisis. Is that a fair assessment, would you say?

**BRIAN WILLIAMS:** It is a fair assessment. I think I really relied more on this whole notion of co-creation and co-production in that particular course early in the semester. We talked about the guinea worm epidemic that at one point impacted Africa, parts of Southeast Asia, and I share with them our reading about super wicked problems, but also the potential that co-creation and co-production has in terms of addressing understanding, addressing those super wicked problems. It was just, well, it wasn't coincidental but by the midpoint we were facing a real super wicked problem, but I think they were able to appreciate that. When we think about the guinea worm epidemic and this model that reflected, it's co-creation of practices and policies and co-production of services that were really addressed to mitigate the guinea worm problem, that it's basically been eradicated, but it really required this whole change in mindset—this power with instead of power over—to really address those things and I think there's some lessons that I think we will learn from the guinea worm epidemic that will allow us to eventually deal with COVID-19.

**ANDREW KAUFMAN:** You were talking about the idea of co-creation and co-production, or power with versus power over. As you think about your teaching in general, are there any other paradigm shifts that you went through as a result of this experience?

**BRIAN WILLIAMS:** I don't know if there was a paradigm shift, but it just reinforced my understanding, appreciation that iron sharpens iron. And what I mean by that, I try to create the environment within my classroom, but also as I engage with those in the public that no one has property rights, if you will, over knowledge or understanding or appreciation, but it's something that so oftentimes within academic settings credentials really matter, but I think lived experiences matter just as much. So, I try to tap into that tacit knowledge that exists within the community, but also the knowledge that exists within our students. What I'm hoping to be able to do over the course of the summer, too, is to tap back into that tacit knowledge within those partners that engage with my class, to think about how can we think collectively about projects, deliverables that we could still have students explore and produce within the guidelines that might impact us if a second wave occurs. I'm just hoping for the best, but planning for the worst, but taking much more of a co-creation/co-production approach to that hoping and planning.

**ANDREW KAUFMAN:** Did your definition of teaching “success” change this past semester?

**BRIAN WILLIAMS:** I got a much deeper appreciation for success. When I think about the type of work I do, I do a lot of work around community policing, which in and of itself is all about co-creation and co-production. That's my research area, and what I've done when I've spoken to officers but also to the public in different settings, I share with them a quote from Henry Ford and he says something to the effect that coming together is the beginning, keeping together is progress, working together is success. And that really, really fit with both courses. That fits with this time. That fits with this whole notion of co-creation and co-production. The beginning is just us coming together, keeping together is the progress, but true success is working together. And right now, to really address this problem, the super the problem that we face, the challenges it has, it impacts teaching and learning and engagement. I think Ford's quote fits perfectly with it. We have to work together in order to be successful and that's just been reaffirmed to me through this process, through these experiences.

**ANDREW KAUFMAN:** When I asked you about your discipline, I understand that you would describe your discipline as public policy and leadership?

**BRIAN WILLIAMS:** Well, I'm a tweener. My background's in public administration and part of the management. When we think about public administration, public management, it's much more about historically at one point in time, they try to limit it much more to the implementation or execution of public policies. But as we now know, public administrators, public managers are involved throughout policy-making process. I see what I do as covered, it spans the policy-making process a little bit when I think about public administration, public management, but it's really great to be within a school of leadership and public policy to allow me to fully appreciate it across that process.

**ANDREW KAUFMAN:** Did your students' understanding of the discipline change as a result of the crisis?

**BRIAN WILLIAMS:** I think they really gained a much better appreciation for the process of making really good public policy and how engagement is vital to that process. One thing I try to get them to appreciate is not only their lived experience, which shapes the notion of what is real, but also to fully appreciate the different lived experiences of others because I think what happens is there is a truth, but that truth is comprised of many, many different perspectives of lived experiences on that truth and I think for future leaders and public policymakers, it is vital for them to try to engage across that spectrum—policymakers, practitioners, those impacted, etc.—to really get a sense of what would good policy look like because you have to really appreciate how that could impact different populations that they are charged with serving.

**ANDREW KAUFMAN:** How about you? Did you gain any new insights about your discipline itself as a result of the recent crisis?

**BRIAN WILLIAMS:** One of the things in schools of public affairs and administration in public policy, I used to serve on the commission on peer-reviewed accreditation for National Association of Schools of Public Affairs and Administration and one of the things that we focused on trying to prepare especially those graduate students, those master's students, is how to lead and manage public governance. And that's one thing that I think is a tremendous concern right now. It's very, very relevant. How do you engage in a process where you can lead and manage this public governance effort? And I think it's important to have those students be engaged across that policy-making spectrum. How they really come to appreciate what it means to be someone involved as an intentional actor in producing policies, formulating policies, but also as a functional actor in implementing those policies, but also appreciate those who are impacted by those policies, too.

And right now, it's just another teachable moment for us, for students. That going to go out and to really engage beyond the average hours and get into communities, get into organizations, get into nonprofits, to really appreciate what's happening on the ground and to make things as best as they possibly can be in spite of some of the challenges that we now face.

**ANDREW KAUFMAN:** And how about you as a person, as a citizen? What sorts of personal insights have you had as a result of the crisis we're in?

**BRIAN WILLIAMS:** A couple of different things. I think one of the first things that popped into my head was "to whom much is given, much is expected." Right? And I think about the gifts that we've been given to teach at a really great university, to engage with students, to engage with those residents, to engage with those decision-makers, and how do we take full advantage of that opportunity is one of the things that I'm trying to really, really do because it fits.

Another thing is really humanizing people's suffering. Pain is real and right now in a time where there's a lot of pain, there's a lot of trepidation with a lot of despair and hopelessness, but I believe that during the darkest of times, that's when light shines the brightest. And we have an opportunity to let light shine and to allow our research and engagement, our teaching, just being part of this community, to bring about that hope, positive change to continue to encourage people to be resilient in spite of what things might look like. We can just look back to the past. We faced some other things and we can learn from what we've been able to accomplish in the past, but I think it's really important for us to come together with this governance approach and that's one of the things that's really sticking with me, that's really encouraging me, that's motivating me to continue to do what I've been trying to do.

**ANDREW KAUFMAN:** A number of faculty will be teaching community-engaged courses this summer and next academic year. What advice do you have for them?

**BRIAN WILLIAMS:** What advice would I give others due to what's taking place? To be committed. To be resilient. To be hopeful. I grew up in southwest Georgia, so I grew up in the Bible Belt. So, what's in you comes out of you, and I'm reminded of a passage that talks about remaining "joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer." And that's what keeps me grounded, too. How do I keep the joy that I have even in spite of the affliction that's impacted me and those surrounding me?

One of the things I try to do is try to stay positive, to reflect upon the past, and understand it. This too shall pass, but what are some of the lessons that we can learn as we go through this journey? And that's one of the things I'd encourage my colleagues to do: stay positive, stay hopeful, and try to express that to others, but be real about it. Acknowledge the pain that's going on both internally, but also those that we can connect it with.

As a father, I have three kids. One just wrapped up her second year of law school, another just wrapped up at the University of Georgia, and then one just wrapped up high school. Only one is at home with us; the other two are away from the state of Virginia. And as a father, that's concerning at times. What I try to do is try to stay as positive as I can and to share that positivity with them too, but also with those I connect with virtually, with other friends, and colleagues who also are experiencing that same thing. How do we build each other up? And that's one of the things that I think we have to do, both those that are connected with us professionally, but also those who might be connected with us across the different linkages within community, with engagement and partnership.

**ANDREW KAUFMAN:** How about the online piece? Maybe you don't have anything specific to address that, but a lot of community-engaged faculty believe this transition online is particularly difficult for our group because of the nature of what we do. What's your advice to them, what's your advice to community-engaged teachers as they're thinking specifically about transitioning their courses online?

**BRIAN WILLIAMS:** What advice do I have for community-engaged teachers who are challenged by transitioning their courses to online? Well, what I see as being the obstacle is also the opportunity. What I've tried to do, the work I do is really to try to facilitate these arrangements where you have these face-to-face interactions where you can fully appreciate that person, their reality, their lived experiences, so you get a sense of tapping into all of your senses: sight, sound, smell, feelings. But how do we do that across this new landscape? There will be some senses maybe we won't get a really good sense of or get an understanding of, but there might be an opportunity and I see the opportunities to possibly all histories. So, I've been thinking through how do I get my students and those who I'd like to engage with as a partner to consider all history as a way to connect? What people get a chance to tell their stories and people get a chance to hear their stories and appreciate their story and how do we create a repository if you will of these oral histories as it relates to the focal topics for my research and for what I teach. I see that as probably being a tremendous opportunity in spite of the obstacle that we have, but this is something of course I want to bounce off of both students, but also those that I engage and partner with because to make it happen even requires them playing a key role in getting prepared for that process and their willingness to share in that process.

Of course, one of the great challenges we face is this digital literacy, the digital divide situation that we're facing, but I'm hoping as we continue to make our way through this pandemic that what we see right now within a lot of the public school systems where these hotspots are available, these technologies are available, that will allow for connection and I'm hoping to be able to take advantage of those technologies to allow for connection, to humanize each other, and to really make the most of what we can have in the situation that we now face.

**ANDREW KAUFMAN:** What does it mean to you to be a community-engaged teacher in a time of trauma?

**BRIAN WILLIAMS:** What does it mean to me to be a community-engaged teacher in a time of trauma? It really means that I'm a part of the community, because we're all being traumatized by this and as being

a part of the community, I have an opportunity to be a part of the solution, right? But I'm a part of the problem and it's really encouraging me to step up to the plate and do the best that I can because this problem impacts all of us. There is not a distinction between whatever divide that we want to create, right? This is a global pandemic, and I was listening to a public health expert talk about the challenge and he said coming up with a vaccination is not the real problem. How do we disseminate it across this entire world that we live in? Because if we don't think about this from an equity perspective, if we fail to make that vaccine available to those with the least in our communities, least in countries, it will impact all of us. So, that's why I said I see myself as being part of the problem. Impacted by the problem, but also that encourages me to accept the role that I have to play in terms of trying to solve that problem. And I think that's one of the things that we all have to think about, too.

This is a life-changer and I think it can change life for the better if we take full advantage of the opportunity that's presented for us. I think all things work together for good. When we look back, we've had some challenges that we've overcome as a nation, as a community, but sometimes those instances really motivate us to do things better. To pause, to reset, and move forward to hopefully address the problems that we have.