

Reminiscences of Stephen Robinson

April 26, 2021

Narrator: Stephen Robinson, the Director of Champlain College's Dublin, Ireland campus

Interviewer: Erica Donnis, Champlain College Special Collections Director

Location: This interview was conducted virtually, via Zoom

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Transcriptionist: Erica Donnis, Champlain College Special Collections Director

Introduction

The following oral history is the result of a recorded interview with Stephen Robinson, the Director of Champlain College's Dublin, Ireland campus, conducted by Erica Donnis, Champlain College Special Collections Director, on April 26, 2021. This interview is part of the Champlain College Archives COVID-19 Oral History Project. Readers are asked to bear in mind that they are reading a transcript of the spoken word, rather than written prose. This interview is transcribed in full in this document; an ellipsis [...] indicates a pause in the conversation. The following transcript has been reviewed, edited, and approved by the narrator.

Interview Transcription

[Start of recording]

Donnis: Hi, I'm Erica Donnis. I'm the Special Collections Director at Champlain College. And today I am conducting an Archives oral history interview with Stephen Robinson. Today is April 26th, 2021. Stephen, could I ask you to introduce yourself please?

Robinson: Hello, my name is Stephen Robinson. I am the Director of Champlain College's Dublin, Ireland campus.

Donnis: So just to start out, I'm wondering if you could give us a little background on your role at Champlain College. How long have you worked in your current position? What department do you work in, and who do you report to?

Robinson: Okay. So my role at Champlain College is to oversee all aspects of our Dublin, Ireland study abroad campus. I have been doing that for almost thirteen years, twelve and a half years. I've been living in Ireland, working for Champlain College. This is the only job I've ever had with Champlain. I was recruited in 2008 to come over to Ireland and set up the campus and develop it and run it, and everything that is to do with running a mini campus abroad, that's my role. I guess we can go into the minutia a bit later. So I work in ... well, I did work in the Office of International Education. That office has seen some job losses recently because of the pandemic. So I think we are in the process of renaming the international education branch of Champlain College. So for now I guess I say I work for the Office of International Education with a little asterisk beside it saying, you know, not sure where that's going.

Donnis: So could you ...

Robinson: And who do I report to. Sorry, my direct supervisor is David Mills, who is the Dean of the Core [Division] and also the Interim Dean of International Education at Champlain.

Donnis: Thank you. Could you give us, kind of an overview of Champlain College's study abroad programs in Dublin, at least prior to the arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic?

Robinson: Sure. Absolutely. So Champlain College in 2008 decided to open an abroad campus in Ireland to compliment the one they had opened the year before in Montreal. So we bring on average between 45 and 50 students from Champlain Burlington, and they come to Ireland for a semester. And in that semester we do a series of courses that would apply to both the CORE classes, that would generally focus on Ireland: Irish art, Irish music, Irish history, Irish film history, literature, all those types of things. And then we would have a series of courses on offer here that would be more major-specific. So we would have courses in professional writing, courses in marketing, cyber security, all those types of things. So students can come here for a semester, and they can immerse themselves in Ireland and all things Irish, and they can also progress towards their full degree completion. So it doesn't take them away from their degree. It complements their degree by giving them that international exposure.

So over the past twelve years, I guess it's probably eleven years if we don't count the COVID year, we've hosted over a thousand students in Dublin. We also do internships with our students. Where they want to, they can work at an internship in a local Irish company or a community organization, or a school. They can teach in a school, for example.

We do lots of things like community immersion with the students. We don't want them just to come over and hang out with Americans, so we have some pretty rigid and rigorous programs in a place called The Liberties, which is a community which our students live in when they're here. And so they get to become members of The Liberties community for a semester.

In terms of physical facilities, we have an academic center on Leeson Street in Dublin which is fairly city center. It is a five story, what we call a Georgian. That is the time period the building was built. It's about two hundred years old. You could equate it to a New York City brownstone. It's about four and a half thousand square feet. It has classrooms, offices, student lounges, computer labs, all those types of things you need for a mini academic home away from home.

We also rent a wing of a purpose ... what they call a purpose-built student accommodation, so it's owned by another company, and we rent a wing of that for our students to be housed in. That is about a twenty-five-minute walk across the city center from the academic center.

Some of the things that we do here that we take great pride in is, you know, we use the city as a classroom. There's a lot of opportunities culturally and academically and professionally in Dublin that we get our students involved in. So for example, the art history class that we run they sort of barely spend any time in the classroom. They would be out at galleries and studios and places like that. Actually seeing the art and talking about it as opposed to seeing it on a screen. So we have that great opportunity.

The other thing that we take great pride in here is the amount of the pastoral support we provide to our students. These students are quite often first time overseas, first time away from home, other than going to college, where, you know, in Burlington there's that huge student life component, and there's counseling services and academic services. So we provide those in Dublin, for a smaller group of students, but we also have far fewer staff here. So we would do a lot of the pastoral care, and that includes, you know, student support services. We have relationships with doctors and counselors and things like that here.

In short we are Champlain College. You know, I work for Champlain College. I just happen to be three thousand miles away. So there's a lot of communication back and forth between Dublin and Burlington to make sure things run smoothly. You know, we've had a thousand students over here, and it's the opportunity of a lifetime for them. There's very, very few students who regret spending a semester with us in Ireland. It really is an amazing experience for them.

Donnis: Thank you. Could you talk about, you know, your regular job responsibilities. Kind of, prior to the arrival of the pandemic, what did you do in a typical day?

Robinson: So, there's actually an article that I was quoted in. A study abroad article that I was quoted in. I'm not named, but I'm the person who gave the quote. It said, "You know, I could be changing light bulbs in the morning and meeting the Minister for Education for lunch." You know, it's one of these jobs that you do a little bit of everything. Because, you know, we have a building. So myself and my staff are responsible for the upkeep of that building. So I really am changing light bulbs. We don't have a Physical Plant [department] here. We don't have a staff that does that. It's us on the ground here. So it can be a little bit of everything, and that's why I love this position. No two days are the same.

But overall I'm in charge of all things academic relating to the study abroad curriculum. So that includes hiring and working with faculty. We have about eighteen faculty that teach for us on a regular basis here. All locally hired in Ireland. I'm responsible for all things finance, so the budget that we have here. And that also includes dealing with Irish accountants, auditors, tax ... you know, corporation tax, all those sorts of things. I'm responsible for maintaining Champlain College Dublin, Ltd. as a business in Ireland. We are an incorporated Irish company. Obviously we have lawyers and people but there's a lot of things that I have to keep an eye on in terms of, in terms of our legal position, and especially in terms of immigration for students. That's a big one. Ever changing in Ireland, the immigration status, so I have to keep an eye on that kind of thing.

Human resources. I hire, fire, deal with all those kinds of things for our staff and for our faculty. And I oversee all things to do with student life. We have staff that would be ... you know, we had a student life manager, who was the main person to be in contact with the students for activities and for support and things like that. But of course I oversaw that person as well.

Also there's the intangibles, that you never know what's going to throw at you. You know, we do trips with students, so I go on the weekend trips and lead those. I also teach. I'm a geoscientist by training, so

I also hold the rank of professor with Champlain. So I am ... I teach Global Environmental Earth Sciences on our campus here.

So no two days are the same. I could be teaching, I could be hiring a new faculty member, or I could be working with a student who needs some support with academics, or with some personal issues. I could be dealing with lawyers. It's an amazingly diverse job that keeps me on my toes and keeps me ... keeps me entertained as well. I need that ...

So I came to Champlain from a faculty position. I was an associate professor of geology at St. Lawrence University, and one of the reasons I left that position was because I didn't have the variety. I was teaching geology to a small group of students in a liberal arts college. Very nice college, loved the job there, but it was the same sort of thing day in, day out. And I needed the challenge. So when Champlain came looking for someone to run this campus, I had spent a year running St. Lawrence's campus in London, so I had the experience, a little bit of the experience, I had the academic background, because I think you need an academic in this role, because you are supervising eighteen faculty members.

So as far as typical day, gosh. You know, I could send you a checklist, and twenty of those things on the checklist will happen every day. And then the wild card things that come in. You never know.

Donnis: So how has COVID-19 impacted Champlain's programs and operations in Dublin?

Robinson: Well. Massive impact. So we obviously have not had students of our own, in either the fall or the spring semester, fall of 2020 and spring of 2021. So that's a massive impact. There's a whole group of graduating students that have not had the opportunity to study abroad. And that's ... in many cases, that's what they came to Champlain for. I think Champlain advertises and markets study abroad as an opportunity to get outside your comfort zone but still stay within the Champlain family. And the students were sold that and potentially even came to Champlain because of that. So it's a big loss for the students to not have had the opportunity.

In terms of operations, well, gosh, in Ireland here, we have been for the last twelve months, I think seven of those months we've been in lockdown. Where you're not allowed to move either outside of your county, or more recently – it only ended two weeks ago – you were not allowed to go more than five kilometers from your home. So I mean, I live twenty-five kilometers away from the office, so technically I can't even go in there to check on the building. Of course I do, but technically I'm not supposed to, because it's outside of my radius I've been allowed to go in.

So we shut down our campus in March of 2020. And then, you know we had ... we were holding out hope that we would be able to open again for fall. And the decision was made in July of – in June of 2020 that that wasn't going to be possible. Both ... based both upon conditions in Ireland and the conditions in the United States. And that was a very wise choice, because soon into September Ireland's COVID cases went back through the roof. And the country was shut down again. In about October of 2020 we made the decision that we couldn't open for the spring. And that meant that a whole academic year of no students in Ireland.

So that then had the unfortunate impact of ... Champlain's administration made the decision to make several [employee] positions in Burlington, Montreal, and Dublin redundant. Meaning, you know, those people lost their jobs. In Burlington, three people lost their positions. In Dublin, two people lost their positions, and same in Montreal. So I am pretty much the only remaining staff member in Ireland keeping things ticking over and planning for the future. And we are doing a lot of planning for the future. But that has made it particularly tough because those people who lost their jobs were my colleagues, my friends, my support team. You know, I'm not sure how we're supposed to open for this coming fall, which is the plan, without that team in place. It's taking a lot ... a lot more of my time that I would hoped, would've hoped, because these were roles that other people were doing. Course planning, schedule planning, student recruitment. I've had to work on student recruitment from 3,000 miles away, and that's challenging.

So it's been a significant impact, a very, very significant impact. I know, I'm very well connected with study abroad communities both in Ireland and across Europe, and it's the same for everyone. I know programs that have closed permanently. I know people who have lost their jobs. I know people who are temporarily unemployed with the expectation [that] they get their job back when all this is over. But I would think that if any sort of sector within U.S. education, international education, has been impacted the most by this pandemic, because it has been completely shut down. And that's not just for outgoing study abroad students, that's for incoming international students coming, who were hoping to study in the United States.

That's a huge financial challenge. It's a huge cultural challenge. I don't know how we're going to recover from this as a sector. People are reporting that student numbers for the ... hoped for reopening in the fall are low. They're about fifty percent. People are still nervous. Certainly our numbers coming, hopefully coming in the fall, are about half what we usually would expect. So the recovery is going to take some time. People are still nervous. And you know I had a conversation with someone the other day and they commented that you don't realize that, study abroad is usually geared towards juniors, and the coming year's rising juniors have only ever had one real proper semester of education. That was their fall of their freshman year. They've been remote for much of the rest of the time. Studying abroad may not be high on their mind right now. You know, it's going to take a while to get back to the point.

I will say other than the job losses, which were significant, Champlain has expressed to me an ongoing dedication to making sure this continues and works for the future. So I'm quite pleased with that. There were some nervous times over November and December, when colleagues of mine had lost their jobs, and I was pretty convinced I was next. So the dedication has been put out there, we are reopening, we are rebuilding. So that's what's ... so that's what's going to happen.

Donnis: That's great news. So you've already touched on this a little bit, but I'm going to pose the question specifically to see if you have anything to add. How has the pandemic affected your job responsibilities?

Robinson: So yeah, it's been quite a dramatic shift. Because we relied on people in Burlington to do a lot of recruiting of students and the planning on the Burlington end, and those people have now lost their positions. With one exception. One person has come back. And so here I am told that I'm to be prepared

to be reopening in the fall but there's no one over in Burlington recruiting students. So you know, I've done it through email campaigns. I've worked a lot more with faculty than I usually would. Getting them to talk to their advisees and their classes. I have ... I have joined Zoom calls into Core classes to promote Dublin as a study abroad destination. You know, that never fell to me before. I've had to dig in and do all those things. And that's fine, but it's not an efficient way moving forward. We need dedicated recruiting staff back in Burlington to get the students prepared to come abroad.

There's a few things that have also changed. I mean, I'm teaching now, back to students in Burlington, and that's never happened before. I'm co-teaching a class with Valerie Esposito in environmental policy, on place-based environmental issues. And so we're doing a comparative look at Vermont and Ireland in terms of various environmental issues. Renewable energy, climate change, all those ... forestry, agriculture. All those types of things. And that's been really interesting for me to talk to students about Ireland and they ... You've really gotta do it carefully because they don't ... they've never been here, they don't know the lay of the land. But we can talk about environmental policies and compare and contrast them, things like that, with things that happen in Vermont. So that's been really quite interesting for me.

In terms of ... in terms of Dublin specific things, not all that much has changed because we don't have students on the ground. Although a lot of the planning, the logistics for the upcoming semester in terms of scheduling courses and writing faculty contracts and things like that. That formerly fell to our assistant director, who no longer works for us, so that now falls to me. So I'm sitting there juggling all these schedules of ... all these students need these courses and I've gotta fit them in, but the professor can only teach on this day. So we do our own scheduling here, so that's fallen to me.

I'm a lot more hands-on now in recruiting internship hosts in Ireland. So we do have a group of students who are coming over to do internships when they're studying abroad with us, so I've become much more hand-on about finding those internships, places for the students. Formerly that was another staff member.

Yeah. I have also been quite proactive in making myself useful, or at least in offering up my services across campus. Now, you know one thing that is really interesting with this is now everyone is remote, so people can see how I've been working for the past twelve years. You know, I've been doing Zoom calls, not Zoom but Skype or whatever it is, for twelve years to talk to my bosses and my colleagues back in the states. And now it's become commonplace for everyone else. So they have sort of, have got up to where my level of comfort with this was.

So I've done ... I've done things making myself useful. I'm now on the Faculty Senate Executive [Committee], which wasn't possible before because they met in a room with no video link. So now that there's a video link and it's all done remotely, I'm on Faculty Senate Executive. And that's great.

I have also used the time ... I'm officially an administrator with Champlain College, but I also ... I come from an academic background, and I'm constantly curious. I've also used the time to work on some things that would be less in my job description but more in my interest in terms of academics. And I'm formerly a geoscientist. You get pretty stale in the geosciences if you haven't done it for twelve years, so I've had to reinvent myself as sort of a, a bit of an expert in international education, and sort of, study

abroad, and things like that. And how it works in Europe and best practices within the study abroad community. So I have been very busy doing that. I've finally found the time to publish a study that I ran that was looking at about 220 people across Europe that do my job, that run U.S. programs in Europe. And looking at their job descriptions, looking at their salaries, looking at their, you know, their responsibilities. And also asking some pretty personal questions about how do you find a job, what are the positives, what are the negatives, all this, these kinds of things. Because there's a commonly held feeling amongst people who are out there doing these kinds of remote study abroad jobs that we're not always considered in the study abroad community. You know, a lot of the study abroad community is still very U.S. – based. And then they sent the students off and then they kind of forget about them until they come back. That four-month period that students are with us is an amazing growth period. And I quite often feel, and I don't mean Champlain does this, but in the sector, those people don't get enough credit for all they do. I'm lucky, I've always said Champlain treats me incredibly well, but my colleagues across Europe feel left out of the conversation about international education. So we did this big study, 220 resident directors, people who lead programs across Europe, so that was interesting. And I've also gotten back to writing. You know, I've got two book chapters coming out, a few other things that are, that are ... had always been in the back of my mind but I never had time for.

When we have students on the ground here, it's all-encompassing. You know, it's ... I'm on call all the time. So there could be an emergency on a Sunday night, and I gotta go. So it's full-on. I'm not sure that's understood by everyone.

But yeah, so my role has changed. Picking up things that I didn't used to. Making myself useful in other ways, and then also doing stuff that the academic in me has always wanted to do and never found time.

Donnis: A little bit of a silver lining there. That's great.

Robinson: There is, there is, yeah.

Donnis: So I'm wondering if you could speak about, you know, what then and now, still feels like pretty momentous decisions in the spring of 2020 when the pandemic first hit us, and the college was grappling with what to do. What was our response going to be on multiple levels? So I'm curious about, you know, what were some of the critical decisions that you and your colleagues made in that time? What were, kind of, some of the factors involved, and what was that decision-making process like?

Robinson: Yeah. So, I think I had a pretty front seat view of what was going on. Like I mentioned earlier, I'm very well connected across Europe. I'm actually the chair of an organization called European Association of Study Abroad. So in that role, I know a lot of people across Europe who do what I do. And we saw this COVID wave rolling across Europe. It hit Italy in late February, and we started getting messages from colleagues in Rome and Florence and Milan, that "Oh my God, we're shut down. They're shutting us down." And, you know, then we'd write back and say "well how long for?" And they'd say, "No, they're ... students are going home." So it was late February that we started noticing in Europe that these decisions were being made. And the decisions were being made primarily based upon Centers for Disease Control or State Department warning levels. Which for Italy went to the highest level in late February. And many ... many colleges sort of lost their appetite for continuing programs when that level

of risk was laid out for them. And they obviously made the right decision to shut down in hindsight, but we all ... at the time, in late February, we thought they were overreacting. And then we saw it coming into, you know, other countries a little bit closer, and then the UK [United Kingdom] got a few cases, and all the resident directors in Ireland started chatting amongst ourselves. We have a very active WhatsApp group going. And then, you know, we started getting cases in Ireland. And then, I think it was the 12th, it was a Thursday, I think it was the 12th of March, and the few days leading up to that, I knew, I knew what was going to happen. And the students knew that I knew.

That's one of the things ... we get a very close relationship with students here. We see them every single day. We see the same students. We get to know them incredibly well. They get to know us as staff. It's a small group. And you know, we're all in this together. So ... so they knew I was troubled. There were ... we put out a warning I think the week before saying no one is allowed to travel to Italy or Spain. Because students do a lot of weekend trips here. So Italy and Spain were off the table, because of COVID warnings.

And then all at once four things happened. Ireland went to State Department Level 3, which at the time was their highest warning level, and CDC Level 4. And then immediately after that the Irish government shut down all Irish universities. Now we're not technically an Irish university, but I kind of follow their regulations, and I knew that was, that was it. You know, we, in all good conscience, couldn't continue when the Irish universities were not continuing.

And then President Trump decided to close the United States to non-U.S. citizens or permanent residents. That happened right around the 11th or 12th of March. I had been sending updates back to Burlington, and everyone was getting more and more nervous. And we had updates in The View, the Champlain View. And I remember when I woke up, it was that Thursday, I think it was the 12th of March. And I was taking the bus to work. And WhatsApp starts exploding from all my colleagues around Ireland, just saying, "Look. It's come to this point. We're going to have to shut down and send our students home."

And Ireland was going into a lockdown. So there were challenges then. The students were going to be on one side of the city, and I was supposed to be locked down at my home, you know, twenty-five kilometers away. All the other staff members live a distance away. We couldn't respond to emergencies. We didn't have a protocol in place for what happens if a student gets ill with COVID. The Irish medical system was starting to be under pressure. So I remember on that Thursday I sent an email to Interim President Laurie Quinn and David Mills [Core Division Dean and Interim Dean for International Education] and Noah Goldblatt [Senior Director of International Education], who were part of the decision-making team. And I just said, you know, "This is it. We've got to shut, because otherwise we won't get them home." Because I think you also have to realize that this ended up being the biggest mass evacuation of Americans from Europe since World War II. There are 197,000 U.S. students who study abroad in Europe every year. So if you figure, maybe, 40% of them were here at the time, you know, you're talking 80,000 people. Just students, trying to get home. And airspace is being limited and all these things. So I finally got the message back from Laurie Quinn saying, "Yup. Go ahead and start the process of shutting down." And I think it was within 12 or 24 hours that Burlington [Champlain College's Burlington campus] shut down as well.

And then once that decision was made it wasn't all that difficult. We didn't get a lot of input from Burlington, because they were grappling with their own shutdown. That's one thing, one thing I think Champlain Burlington has done really, really well is trust myself and my team to get it done and do it right. So we just said, "Yup, okay. We'll let you know when we've got them all on planes."

So we called a student meeting that afternoon. And it was the ... the other reason we had to do it then was because our March break was coming up the following week, and if we didn't do it then, and students got stuck in Germany or Spain or wherever they were going to be, we had far more problems on our hands. So we actually had a couple of students who had already left and gone to, I think they were in London. So we immediately phoned them and said, "You've gotta get back." And we held a student meeting in our residence, and we basically said, "You know, we're very sorry, but this is incredibly serious, and we are shutting the program down. And I mean we did it in the nicest terms possible, and there were a lot of tears and frustrations and questions. And then we ordered a whole bunch of pizza and said, "Okay everyone, go get your laptops, let's start rebooking flights." And I think by about 8 p.m. that night every student had a flight home within the next three days. So that was the Thursday, and the last student left on a Monday.

We had two students who we in particular had to get out that day, because they were international students who did not have citizenship or permanent residency in the United States. They were residing in the United States but they had no right to reenter once, once President Trump's thing came into effect. So we got them out that day. We just said, "Just go for the first flight. Just leave." And one of them even left her bags behind and we had to ship them to her. That's how quick it was.

So yeah, I mean, that was, that was what happened, and then Ireland went into lockdown. And we were basically left trying to figure out ... We had to pivot to remote learning. Now I'm going to say some of our faculty were absolutely ready for that, and some needed a lot of help. I spent a couple of days delivering computers to faculty members' homes, because they didn't have good enough computers to do remote learning. So I raided the ones in our computer lab at the academic center, delivered them. And then we had to get on with the remote learning for the final six weeks. So my role then turned into, one, I was teaching my class, and then, turned into coaching for the other faculty members. Now, I mean, they did an amazing, amazing job, all things considered. Where it's like, one day you're teaching in front of the classroom and your plan is to go to the National Gallery and show, show the students all these great paintings in the National Gallery, and next class is remote. They're back in the states. You've got time zones to figure out. Yeah, wow, it was quite something.

And then at the end of six weeks, we all sort of heaved a big sigh of relief, and thought, "Oh, okay, they'll be back in the fall." And of course they haven't been back since. So yeah, and you know, Montreal [Champlain's Montreal campus] shut down at the exact same time, and they were lucky they did, because the Canadian border closed soon afterwards. And then, and then, throughout the summer and the fall, early summer into the fall, there was this great sort of mourning amongst, amongst people who run these programs on the ground in Europe. You know, this is what we do for a living. This is what we love doing is showing American students Florence or Paris or wherever. And so we had a whole series of workshops and mental health for faculty and for staff. Best practices for when we reopen. We had

sessions that were just a general, let's just talk. You know, so we were all sort over on this side of the Atlantic in the same boat, commiserating with each other, and trying to figure it all out. That was, that was really quite, quite something. And to be a part of. It was very ... very interesting.

But I think, I think one of the biggest challenges was, this was global. So most challenges that we expect to face on an abroad program would be things like terrorism, natural disasters, you know, major accidents, that are, that are local. And I know that if that happened I could rely on my colleagues in Burlington to help support me, right? But this was global, and they sort of probably went "Oh, I kind of think Robinson's got it under control over there, let's, you know, we're dealing with Burlington, he's dealing with that, we'll compare notes later." So it was, it was quite the, quite the independent endeavor, but you know, we got it done. We got it done, students were grateful for the support during the process. Still stay in touch with all of them. So it was quite the, quite the unexpected end to a semester, and now a year. So, interesting. Nobody could have predicted.

Donnis: Sounds like quite the experience for sure.

Robinson: It has been. See all these gray hairs? [smiles].

Donnis: So at this point in the pandemic, what are the factors that are going through your mind as far as bringing students, college students, bringing Champlain College students back to Dublin?

Robinson: Ah, great question. So, we've got to worry about both conditions in the United States and in Ireland. What is COVID looking like, and projecting into the future. So it is today the 26th of April, and within three weeks we will be making a decision as to whether the fall is going ahead or not. I'd love to have a crystal ball, to know a little bit more about what Ireland is going to look like on the 24th of August when students are supposed to land. In terms of COVID restrictions.

I mean, right now, we only just two weeks ago today came out of this lockdown where we were restricted to five kilometers from our own home. So if that kind of restriction is in place in August, this won't work. Right now we are restricted to our own county. So it's, it's a little bit more open. As of today, outdoor activity such as golf or tennis are now allowed. So things are lifting here. So we need to ensure that they continue along that path. Things are looking good for us, but I'd love to see a little bit more progress on restrictions.

Vaccines. About 25% of the Irish adult population has so far received the first dose. It's been slower to roll out than it has been in the United States. We do not have the same level of vaccine hesitancy here. People are waiting with baited breath to get this jab in their arm, okay? We don't have that hesitancy. We rely on the European Union for the vaccine supply, and that has been a holdup. So you may have seen in the news that in the U.K. the vaccine supply is, is going gangbusters. That is not the case here. So every single vaccine that has come into Ireland has gone into someone's arm, and they are now vaccinating the over-sixties. Okay, so ... so, the, the Taoiseach, which is the name for the Prime Minister of Ireland, has said that by the end of June, 82% of all adults in Ireland will have the vaccine. First dose, okay? I'm not sure that's good enough for us to reopen. I certainly want to have my second dose before I go back mingling with students and the general public. Faculty members have expressed to me that

they wouldn't be comfortable, unless they had their second dose, of going back into the classroom. So we'll see where that gets us. We are making progress on vaccines, but we need to make more.

Flights across the Atlantic is another concern. Usually there are about 16 to 20 flights from the U.S. direct to Dublin every day. And we're going to have to stick with direct flights. No student can come next semester on a connecting flight in Europe, because we have no idea, if you connect like in Paris, we have no idea what the situation in France is going to be like in August, so we're demanding that they take a direct flight to Dublin, and that going to cut down the number of flights they can take. So as of right now there's five or six per day. Two out of Boston, I think one out of JFK, one out of Newark. I think we need to see more flights coming online. Otherwise we're going to have to stagger the arrivals. So that's, that's a concern.

Quarantine is another concern. Right now an unvaccinated person from the United States must go into two weeks' quarantine at an airport hotel at their own expense. And it's about \$2,000. A vaccinated person, they can prove their vaccination status, doesn't have to quarantine in a hotel but they must quarantine in another location, and our student residence will be fine for that. They're all single bedrooms, so we can do the quarantine in the student residence if it's still in place. We just don't know what it's going to be like.

So yeah, those things. Conditions, flights, quarantine, general restrictions around here. I mean, restaurants and pubs are not open here. I'm not sure what kind of semester they would have if, if they were here under today's conditions. We certainly wouldn't be doing weekend trips, because hotels and hostels are not open. So all that's got to change over the summer.

I'm confident, but it's not going to be a normal semester. So that's, that's a challenge. And then we have to, we have to get our building to a situation where we can have classes that are socially distanced. Put in hand wash stations, all those things that we need to do. Right now, for example, all schools in Ireland that are open – and universities here are not open yet but primary and secondary schools are open – they must have their windows open at all times, for example. So we've got to figure that one out. So it's, it's ... We've got three months, though. Three and a half months, almost four.

And I'm quite confident ... So Ireland, Ireland had a really nasty spike in coronavirus in January. What they did is that they had a tough lockdown from October to December, and they got the number of cases down to, you know, a hundred a day for the whole county, which is pretty good. Five million people, a hundred a day, not bad. And then the government decided to give people what they called a normal Christmas, and by the 26th of December they had to lock down again because normal Christmas involved a little bit too much of meeting your friends, shopping in shopping malls, they all reopened in time for Christmas. So they then paid the price in January, and we went up to the highest case rate in all of Europe. And we went into the biggest, strongest, lockdown yet. And that only ended, or started to be relaxed, two weeks ago.

Nobody here wants to go back into any kind of lockdown. So they are reopening very, very gradually. Schools went back about a month ago. My son is in what you would call grade five. So he went back a month ago. You know, hand wash stations in the school, windows open, all those types of things.

And so we've got the summer to figure this out. Unfortunately we have to make a decision in mid-May. So I'm quietly confident. Quietly confident.

Donnis: Well, good luck with that.

Robinson: Thank you.

Donnis: So how has Champlain College as an institution handled operating?

[crosstalk]

Donnis: Sorry, let me rephrase that. How has Champlain College as an institution handled the pandemic?

Robinson: Well, of course my view is from 3,000 miles away. But, I am in more contact with people in Burlington now, because of Zoom, than I ever have been. So I've got, I've got, you know, a pretty good feeling as to how they've managed, managed it. And I think they've done a fantastic job. The pivot to remote learning last March was tough. A lot of people worked very hard over the summer to make it a better experience for the fall. Reopening the residences [residence halls] and having some in-class experiences, and mandatory testing, and all that kind of thing, they just seemed to do it right when so many other colleges did not. Or, so many other colleges' student bodies didn't take it as seriously. So I think there's a, there's a big round of applause for Champlain College's students in making sure that this didn't get messed up. You know, cutting down on their social activities, staying out of restaurants and bars – I don't even know if they were open, actually, in Burlington, but you know – minimizing their risk. So I think, I think college administration, faculty, staff did a great job, and the students played their part as well. That's my view from 3,000 miles away. And I think their strategy has shown to have paid off. You know, very few COVID cases in the Champlain College community. Students are still learning. I'm not the biggest fan of remote learning. It can be a challenge to teach. But in most cases it seems to have worked. So I think, I think Champlain gets two thumbs up for the way they've handled this.

Donnis: How has the pandemic affected you personally?

Robinson: I think I've been in a pretty fortunate situation. Compared to some of my colleagues who lost their jobs. I've been able to spend a lot more time with family. Some would say too much time. My wife and son and myself have spent more time together in the past thirteen months than we ever have, and it's, it's been pretty nice. We have spent a lot of time outdoors. I almost daily go play soccer with my son. He's ten, and he just loves kicking the ball about. You know, most of the time when I was working I'd get home at 7:00 and too tired to do that. Or it was dark, right? Lots and lots of hiking. So physical activity has been, has been higher now than it ever has been. Although, there is a, there is a COVID fatigue setting in. Absolutely. This just needs to be over with. I don't want to rush things, but I'm ready to get back.

I had to, I had to set up a whole office at home, which I didn't have before. I just sort of put my laptop on the kitchen table. One absolutely fortunate thing. We live out in the country, and we had terrible,

terrible internet. The worst internet. I could not have done Zoom on the internet I had before February 2020, when they ran a fiber optic cable down my street. And I got hooked up to fiber optic internet about three weeks before the pandemic hit. Now Zoom is wonderful. You know, it works for me.

Yeah, I don't know. I think there's a sense of loss personally. Loss of the opportunity to show a whole year of Champlain College students a wonderful country. A sense of optimism going forward. There were some challenging personal times when my staff were let go. Because they're my friends as well, you know? So that, that hurt. That hit hard. So yeah, it's, it's been up and down personally. I'm ready for it to end.

Donnis: What do you feel has been your greatest achievement during the pandemic, at least so far?

Robinson: Greatest achievement. I'm a person who always needs to keep busy, and I've managed to do that by finding things to do, finding things of interest and making plans for the future. I'm a ... I'm constantly ... This would be a very lonely job, being the only employee of a college 3,000 miles away, if you didn't reach out and make connections and networks. So I have spent a long time networking with people who do the same job as me across Europe. About five years ago we sent up this association, European Association for Study Abroad. And I'm very proud of what we've done during the pandemic in terms of, in terms of the workshops, conference presentations, the listening sessions, mental health counseling sessions. All on zero budget, just a bunch of people who were concerned and want the sort of on the ground study abroad community to raise their profile. So I've done a lot of that.

I've also been very involved in an organization called Climate Action Network for International Educators. I mentioned that I'm a geoscientist by training. My background was in carbon cycling in natural landscapes and links to climate changes and things like that. So climate change has always been on my mind. I've always been conscious that these study abroad opportunities, students use up a lot of carbon by flying around the world to study abroad. Three hundred fifty thousand U.S. students every year leave the country to go and study abroad somewhere. That's a lot of carbon. It's a big carbon footprint. So I've been quite heavily involved in working with this group – and they're all over the world – at ways that we can make this sector of international education more carbon friendly. Carbon offsetting or even getting to carbon neutrality for the study abroad sector. So that's, that's work in progress, but I'm kind of pleased with myself that I used the opportunity, the time constructively. Writing a few book chapters, always keeping myself active. That's the academic in me, always sort of moving on to the next project, probably before I finish the previous one.

Yeah, you said greatest achievement. I don't know. Staying, staying optimistic, I think, could be considered an achievement.

Donnis: Absolutely.

Robinson: Let me just add, I think I said it earlier, but I want to reinforce this. I feel more connected to Champlain now, than I have in the twelve years that I've worked for Champlain. Simply because of this pandemic. Because now I can be involved in these conversations, because all the conversations are online. Previously they were in a classroom or an office somewhere, and I've offered up my expertise, and put in time, you know, Faculty Senate, things like that, and I found that to be very rewarding

personally, and I made more ... I mean, I knew all these people, like, I come to Burlington every now and then, and people come to Ireland, but this was just sort of a reconnection. I want to see where it's going to go, once, once everyone in Burlington is back in the classroom or back in the office, are they still going to do meetings on Zoom? Because, you know, I'm still over here, you know? I hope I don't get cut off from all the, all the social that I've become involved in. It's been quite, quite rewarding. Keeping me sane.

Donnis: That's great. When you look back on the years 2020 and 2021, at least so far as we've gotten into 2021, what do you think you'll remember the most, and why?

Robinson: Just the strangeness of it all. I remember very soon after the first lockdown came. And, you know I said we live in a rural area, you know there's cows looking over my back fence. And I remember my son said to me, he said, "Dad, you can really hear the birds chirping now." It was like nature took over for a while. The birds were chirping, and you know, there was no ambient noise anymore. You know, no noise of cars going past or planes in the sky. It was, it was a return to nature. This is sort of, last summer. Early summer. May. June. That was, that was really strange but kind of nice. And I feel that I've reconnected with nature a lot more. I mean, we live in some pretty amazing hiking areas, and so, you know, within my five kilometer radius -- which is now county wide thank goodness -- but I was able to do some really excellent hiking. And it just was the opportunity to do that. And then bring my family along, and bond with them. And show my son, you know, the ways of the forest or whatever, whatever you know, talk about, talk about nature with my son. I was even teaching him geology. And he even paid attention. Things like that.

But I also know, that everyone was obviously impacted very, very differently. And we've been fortunate, you know. We don't, for example, live in an apartment. Many Dublin people live in apartments, and they don't have outside space. We've got a backyard. I can go out in the backyard and kick the soccer ball with my son and go to the field, the soccer field just down the street. Lots of people couldn't do that. Lots of people have had a much, much harder time than we've had.

I also look back on it as a time where I probably paid too much attention to COVID. You know, every day, in Ireland, every day at 6 p.m. they'd release the previous day's case numbers and deaths. And every day, pretty much, I would log in and see where it's going. I was hyper aware of where this was going.

So that, that ... looking back on it, those are the things that stick in my mind. And it's been a momentous year for other places too, you know, in the United States you had a presidential election that occupied your country and the rest of the world. And I think most ... I can speak for the Irish people that they were quite pleased with the result. So that has occupied a lot of, sort of, the news coverage, and things like that.

I just look back and just say this was a very, very strange, strange time. That nobody could have predicted, and hopefully we aren't going to have again. But in the end, I think, you know, myself and my family, we came through it okay. Lots of people didn't. Close friend of mine's father was in ICU in hospital for four months. Yeah. So four months. In hospital, with COVID.

So yeah, it's a, it's a, I don't know, I can't think of anything other than strange, unpredictable, not knowing when it was going to end. Seeing multiple lights at the end of multiple tunnels and then going back into another tunnel. You know, it was really, really draining, yet relaxing, you know?

The other thing is, because so much of the work that I've been doing is you know planning and researching and writing online, my schedule has been all over the place. I'm not doing a 9 to 5. I'll, I'll sit down at my computer at 9 once I've taken my son to school, and I'll take a break during the day. As soon as this is over, even though it's not quitting time, I'm going to the hardware store. You know, just things that I can do. I get all my work done, but it's now on my time. Except, except when I'm teaching remotely. But that's been unique and interesting to deal with. It also means then that sometimes on a Saturday I'll fire up my computer when I have some great ideas about a paper I'm writing or something like that. So it, it's not as rigidly structured as it used to be.

Donnis: So we have come to the end of my prepared questions for you, but I wanted to give you the chance to add anything you would like to.

Robinson: Oh, I don't know. I think we've, we've covered most bases. One, one thing that I would like to talk to is the boldness that Champlain has shown, not only twelve years ago, for a college that I would not consider to be a wealthy college, you know, to make the leap of faith to open a campus abroad. Two campuses abroad. And to keep them going. These are not cheap ventures, okay? And to embed them in students' degree programs and really encourage students to take this opportunity. Not many colleges of Champlain's sort of stature have done that. You know, you look around Ireland and there's, there's about fifteen or so U.S. universities with a base here. But they're, it's Notre Dame, Boston College, Boston University, you know, colleges with deep pockets, okay? Not only has Champlain succeeded here, we've thrived, you know?

And then, you know I did mention that in November, late November was when our, we were told that our staff was going to be let go, and I was convinced that I was being kept on temporarily to wind the place down. You know, because we have a business, we have a property, and all that kind of stuff. And that didn't happen. And then I, I look an opportunity to ask the question of some senior administrators, "So what's your vision for our future?" Like, what's going on here? Because I really hadn't had any message about what was going on. And the message that came back to me loud and clear was "Oh, I'm sorry, I didn't realize that you were thinking we would do that. No, we are absolutely dedicated to Dublin and Montreal continuing." And that was just like, wow! They really value what we do here and what an opportunity it is for our students. I know many programs across Europe that have not had that level of support. And that's really nice to feel, across the Atlantic, that we value what you're doing, start planning to reopen. And this is also an opportunity for us to do a whole bunch of different things. You know, what did we do while, you know ... Quite often in this role, we've got ideas coming out left, right, and center but no time to enact them. So this has been a time to sort of put these ideas down on paper. So, for example, my personal goal is to make Champlain Dublin, and all of its activities, carbon neutral by 2025. So I'm writing a plan for how we do that, okay? I would never have had that time in the past, to really sit down and figure that out.

So Champlain's dedication to the program for their students, and their trust in me to do it right here on the ground ... And in case you couldn't figure it out from the accent, I'm not Irish, I'm an import here. So they trusted me to figure it out twelve years ago. Let's send Robinson over there and see if he can make a go of this. And I think that's, that's, they have continued to allow me and the team that was in place here to run with it and do it how we felt best knowing the conditions on the ground. Knowing what kinds of things would go over well here. We do a lot of community work, and that is ... the community loves it. All these American students are shopping locally, or attending the local church, or, or the local cafes, and we encourage the students to, to shop locally and all those things. So you know, Champlain has really put a lot of trust in myself and the team, and now, you know, after a year and a half, it'll be a year and a half since we had students on the ground, they're continuing to show that trust. So that, I think, has been really heartwarming that what we're doing here has not gone unnoticed. So good on Champlain for sticking by.

Donnis: That's great. That's wonderful to hear. Well thank you so much, Stephen. It's been a real pleasure, and I really appreciate your allowing me to record and document your experience for the Archives.

Robinson: Absolutely. Can I just point out my background screen?

Donnis: Absolutely, yeah.

Robinson: [pointing up to the center of the background image]. So this is one of my favorite hiking spots. I live over that mountain there.

Donnis: Uh, huh.

Robinson: I live on the other side down on the coast. This up in the Wicklow Mountains. It's one of my favorite walking locations. It's called Kippure Mountain, and it is, it is an entire bog land with this road that goes through it. And the road goes up to a television mast on top of the mountain. And that's the only thing up there. It's this windswept bog, you know, with this three-meter-wide road for access to the television mast, and it's just this ... You get up to the top and there's views to the coast and the mountains, and it's one of my favorite spots. I was up there on Saturday, actually. So.

Donnis: That's great. It looks lovely.

Robinson: Yeah, it is. It's a pretty wonderful country over here. Lots of people have asked me when I'm going back, and I'm not. So I have ... we have established ourselves here. My son, who has Irish, British, and Canadian citizenship, refuses to call himself anything other than Irish. So we're kind of stuck here.

Donnis: Well thank you so much.

Robinson: Thank you.

Donnis: I'm going to stop the recording now.

[end of recording]