

Bob: Hello and welcome to The Illinois Professional, a campaign created by Illinois Human Resources to showcase the diverse ways that employees carry out and support the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign mission. "You are being audited" is rarely a phrase you want to hear. But if you're a student looking to graduate, I bet you'd be glad to know there are professionals working around the clock all year long helping ensure you are on track towards graduation.

I'm Bob Dignan and in this episode, we'll chat with Tina Harms with the graduate college. Tina's role and scope at the university is amazing. And it caught the attention of a co-workers as she was awarded the 2020 Chancellors Distinguished Staff Award. The award is designed to annually recognized civil service staff employees for their exceptional accomplishments and service to the university. Through this program, outstanding performance is encouraged in all civil service staff employees as they strive to win this prestigious award. Tina's work being closely tied with student success is extremely vital and her outlook is equally inspirational. Enjoy this conversation with Tina.

Bob: Well, Tina, thank you so much for joining the podcast.

Tina: Thank you so much for inviting me. I'm really excited about this.

Bob: Yeah. So we want to congratulate you on being a Chancellor's Distinguished Staff Award winner who doing a little remote applause as we talk here through zoom.

Tina: Thank you so much.

Bob: Yeah, it was such an honor. And we want to kinda get into and find out what you do and you're the expert on that. So what do you do, your role at the university and how long have you been here?

Tina: So I have been at the University of Illinois for four years. I am a degree certification auditor for the Graduate College, which is one of the best units on campus to work for. I work in academic affairs and we look at student records and audit them for their masters degrees and their PhDs. So that there's a lot of details that go into that, that I don't think people know on the on the backend side like we have to go in, look at all of their requirements and make sure that they have met those requirements to be awarded their degree. On top of that, we reach out to students if we find something after the audit that we see that they're missing or that would help them to complete their degree to meet the deadlines for each degree period. On top of that, I also deal degree certification letters for students. So say they've met all the requirements and they're just waiting for their degree to be awarded. We can supply them with a degree certification letter to lead an employer know that, yes, they will be receiving their degree on this date. And that is very helpful to them. I also run all kinds of reports for departments and individuals for data, you know, regarding their programs. And that's a lot of my job right there.

Bob: Well, I mean, it would be busy and it would be a lot going on even if we were a small institution and campus. But that's a lot of students when you talk about, you know, all the students that's, that's thousands, right? You're dealing with thousands at any one time and there's multiple graduation kind of zones throughout a year. Several people graduate in December. So it's not all happening in April and May, right?

Tina: You are correct. So we have three degree periods that we award degrees. We have traditionally May, then you will have August. And August tends to be a lot more like PhD students that are just

finalizing their deposits and getting that finalized. And then December which because of the pandemic this year, our December degree list as one of the largest we've had in the four years I've been here. And we're up over 2 thousand students. And there's just two of us auditing all these students. So it's pretty awesome. Like I cannot even explain to you how much I love my job, like and it's different every day, month grew, yeah. You get to meet students and talk to them and hear their stories. I mean, it's amazing.

Bob: Yeah. As you were describing your role and how vital it is, I think about like I've run a marathon before and, and the analogy of that to being, being in college and just the end of the race. And knowing, having the peace of mind, knowing that somebody is getting the award, the Medal table ready so that when I cross the finish line, I can actually have that metal draped over my head. It would be such a bummer to go the entire marathon and get there. And then to say, oh, we don't have a medal ready or you needed to go back and do something. So the fact that you're intervening kind of as the students are running that race, right? You're providing a great kind of comfort to the student body. That way they can get to that finish line and it can be all that they dreamt. It could be, right?

Tina: Yeah. And when you, when you talk about that, your analogy of a marathon is so perfect. I think about our PhD students, especially because we do a special doctoral hooding for them. So we have a special ceremony just for those PhD students. And that is like I can't even explain how exciting that is to be there and be a part of that. And you know, you've you've watched these students through the whole degree period where you've been auditing their record and watching them meet their requirements. And then you get to participate in that ceremony and get hooded by their advisor and it's amazing.

Bob: What a great perspective! I'm so glad we're talking about this because for me being on the outside hearing the term audit, it just sounds like the driest most pencil pushing thing. But you're describing like you are cheering on students throughout their process, throughout, throughout their school. And for the PhD students, that's like an ultra-marathon runner, right? So it's like even, doubly like important and intense. And then there's always this buzz in May, right when we can have graduation time on campus, but you get to bottle that and take that with you all year round. So what a great like twist on the, the thought of your auditing things is you're actually motivating and involved and cheering on all the students.

Tina: And you made a good point about auditor, so dry, you know, that's a scary word to students when they receive an email from us and we say, You know, after auditing, your student record. Well, you know, for all of us when we hear the word audit, we think, oh my gosh, you know, IRS or something negative.

Bob: Bad things. Yeah.

Tina: Yeah. So we always we always start our emails like this is a friendly reminder. This is what I discover after auditing your record. Just to like keep it on a positive note. And we're here to help. We aren't here to make this difficult. We're here to make it easier and help them reach their goals. And you know it sometimes students have to wait an extra term to graduate, but that's okay too. That is not uncommon. And that's they need to know that that that is okay.

Bob: Right. Yeah. What a great service that you're providing to where it's not like I'm only showing you the kind of troubling spots and you gotta figure it out or go to some other office and who knows what

they're gonna do or say what, what made you want to work at the university. I said you've been here 4 years. What what was what was that decision like?

Tina: So that was, I had been at home with my kids. I have three children, three boys. And they all reached that age to where I'd been at home, I did home daycare for ten years, and then I work at the local Grade School for nine years. And then once my kids hit an age that I felt comfortable working. And I'm doing this in quotation marks since you can't see me but outside the home, U of I just felt like a natural choice. They offer so many opportunities the benefits obviously the benefits are amazing. That retirement plan and the bonus for me since I had worked at the school, my time transferred over. So that was really what a benefit.

Bob: Excellent, awesome. And then you're plugged into the student kind of population and the student focused side of, of the university in such a important way. And what a great kind of motivator. Like you were saying, like you love your job and you're so plugged into it. That's one of the questions that we're asking folks that won the award is, how do you see your role fitting into the mission of the university?

Tina: Yeah, great question. So, to be honest with you, I couldn't have told you what the mission of the U of I was until you guys reached out to me. And I looked it up and really thought about it. And I feel like my job relates to the mission of the U of I because I engage with departments and students to confirm that they've met their requirements. But it's also very satisfying to assist students as a transition to the next step in their career. So I feel like this totally ties in with the U of I's mission statement.

Bob: We work in an Education Unit and I so value using both sides of the coin there, that there's a credentialing aspect to this and there's the credits and do they add up and are there in the right spots in order for us to say, we confer your degree in this name, in this college and this school. But that you're also seeing the other side, which is you're playing, we're all playing kind of a stepping-stone role in students' lives getting onto the what is that next thing that they're going towards? What, where are they off to next? And that's kind of more of a growth thing, right? It's not all about numbers and credits. And did you or didn't you? It's about that journey that they're on to next.

Tina: Yeah, I totally agree with you.

Bob: So you won the award, chancellors Distinguished Staff Award. Could you paint a picture? Where were you? What was it like finding out that you won the award?

Tina: I was working remotely because the pandemic had just started. And first I received an email from human resources letting me know that I had been nominated, which just being nominated was such an honor and, you know, I wasn't even expecting to win. I just I was so excited that I was nominated like that made my whole year. And then later I had won the award. And I mean, I was so overwhelmed and honored that I just started crying. I I was kind of embarrassed that I did that.

Bob: Aw that's great.

Tina: I was just I honestly, I tell my boss all the time, like I work for the best place on the campus. And I feel so blessed and so lucky that I work where I work. So getting this award was just like icing on the cake, if you well, that sounds so cheesy, but it's so true.

Bob: That's a great picture that you painted for us of the jubilation. And then also I like that you're sneaking in little plugs to work for the Grad College. You're like sneaking in "best place to work" if, you know, if you want to come work for us will take you. So, if you can think of a day that you felt kind of in your four years so far that you felt most proud to be working for the University and to be an Illinois professional. Do you have a day or a thought on what would be kind of one of those moments?

Tina: Absolutely. So here, here I go again. I feel proud every day, like in I am not lying to you. When I was driving to work every day, I would say a little thank you prayer to God for like having this awesome job and I'm just so happy every day. There's so many parts of my job that make me feel proud. I mean, definitely helping graduate students meet their goals. The doctoral hooding. But I think definitely the best day for me at the U of I was receiving the CDSA award. That made me feel so appreciated, so respected, and just so proud. Like, what an honor.

Bob: That's awesome. What great, like fuel to keep going. You got it. You didn't need the boosts, like you said, icing on the cake. But that sugar rush sure will feel good, especially during the remote work times and all of the changes that have been happening with graduations. I'm sure this won't be pleasant to kinda talk about and hear on the recording 2-3 years from now as we're all trying to forget this time, but I gotta ask because you're involved in graduation processes, what's it been like having to navigate the spring semester, getting thrown off and all the in-person things changing, has that changed how you guys are doing things and how are you coping with it?

Tina: Yeah, definitely. So we've changed because the majority of us are working remotely. We are slowly starting to have like one-on-one meetings with students definitely, you know, wearing your mask, keeping your social distance, keeping up very controlled. It makes me sad that these students are missing out on actually participating in a in-person graduation. But I think we've done an amazing job to stay in contact with them and keep it as personal as we can, you know, we can't change how things are, but we can try our best to make it, you know, as personable as possible and just reaching out to them. We've looked at other venues, you know, doing Zoom get-togethers. We're doing student grad, student appreciation week in October, and we're doing all kinds of things online. So I think we're making the best of a bad situation, but making it as good as possible.

Bob: I'm glad you guys are, are, as, as everyone is, the more I talk to people and learners. Like you said, there are elements to this that are just nobody can change and we're stuck with them or, or the changing of it all. But there are small ways that you can look into and, and things that you can do for the students. So that's great. Are there any other interesting things about unique aspects of your job that you want to mention?

Tina: As we're talking about. The, the one thing that I think is so unique about my position is I do get to meet students. I do get to talk to them. I, you know, when we were on campus, I would have students just stop in and see me and talk to me about where they're at as far as their degree goes, and then just getting to know them and hearing their stories. And just there's so many unique and interesting people out from all over the world. And I think that's really an interesting part of my job.

Bob: Fantastic. I'm welling up with pride, listening to kind of how you're talking about plugging into the students and your role. That's definitely a benefit, like you were saying to focusing on the students is you get that interaction and if the students weren't around, we wouldn't be here. So you're right at the core of what's going on at the University. So I really thank you for doing that and thank you for taking some time to talk with us about what you do and congratulations again on receiving the award.

Tina: Thank you so much. I've enjoyed getting to talk to you and getting the CDSA award. Man, what an honor.

Bob: Thanks for listening to this episode of the Illinois professional. If interested in nominating someone for a campus staff award. There's a link in the description with more information. And be sure to follow @IllinoisHR on Twitter for informational and inspirational posts.