

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. Finance and HR, the driest topics on the planet, right? Not when they're happening in an academic unit at Illinois. I'm Bob Dignan. And in this episode we'll talk about how printing books in South Africa, jetting speakers in from around the world, hundreds of accounts and paying folks on time. Are just some of the whirlwind of responsibilities on the desk of Tom Bedwell, Business Manager in the History Department. Tom was awarded the 2020 Chancellor's Distinguished Staff Award. The award is designed to annually recognize 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. It was lovely hearing from Tom about his role in History Department and his passion for education. Enjoy.

So Tom, thank you so much for joining us.

Tom: Thank you for the invitation.

Bob: All right. So you're an award winner. So some, some virtual applause here. Congratulations on that. And what we're going to dive into is all about you, all about your role. And as I read that kinda nomination language, you you have a lot going on in the History Department. Why don't we hear from you what what you do with the History Department, how long you've been there? And, you know, some of the more interesting things that goes goes past your desk. So could you describe that?

Tom: I've been on campus for actually on October 1st, 31 years.

Bob: Wow! I did not know that.

Tom: And I, I started in Engineering and I worked at the Materials Research Laboratory. From there I went to the Biotechnology Center. And then in 2000, I moved to the Department of History. And I've been here ever since. And it's a very unique department. It's an academic department, not research. They do to research, but not as much as they did in Engineering. So that my job is actually the business manager and HR. When I started here, HR was just a little part of the job. It's grown into a larger part of the job. But I take care of the finance for the department and the HR parts of the job of hiring people. And that's actually one of the things that I really like. This is the HR side is where you get to meet all the new faculty that come in. And when they first get here, they really need you. And, and its also not only the faculty, but also when we have new History, has a PhD program. And I'm not the PhD person who does the program. But when their HR steps needed to have to meet with me and I get to meet them. And it's very interesting faculty and graduate students in History. We have them from all over the world. And it's really neat to talk to those people. I, I find that really interesting and it's really sort of fun because you get to hear how in a normal way, how we're all very different, but yet also very the same. It's just the way our cultures are different in how we're raised and that we all still have the same in mind of wanting to work and to do things that we enjoy. So and I really do enjoy my job. And I enjoy the

people that are here. History has great faculty and great staff, and it's always changing. In 31 years, the campus has changed a lot and it's continually changing. And the stuff that comes across my desk sometimes amazes me the things that we do at a level that nobody would even think about. For example, one thing I'm working on right now I'm having problems with is trying to figure out how to purchase an image, to put in a book that our faculty needs printed in South Africa, I can do it here. I just have problems doing it in South Africa because the language barrier and the rules and regulations with copyright, and it's just changing all the time and how to do these different tasks. But it's interesting and it's sort of, I think it sort of keeps me young, so all the different changes that come about with all the job, because faculty have to publish and people don't think somebody's got to buy that picture that's in the bottom of the book. You know, I never thought about that before. So it's very interesting.

Bob: Yeah, it strikes me as like you become some of the somewhat of the like the nerve center of everything kind of does have to float up in some respect if you've got the HR side and the finances side, it all sort of has to kind of connect in some respects. So you might not be spending your entire year on something that a faculty member is delving into. But it does start to hit some of what you work across the unit with.

Tom: It really, it really does with a lot of different tasks that do come together. Actually with HR and finance. They really do correspond together so much more than people think. I actually feel good when people get paid on time. It makes me feel like I did something right. And and I hate when-

Bob: They like that too.

Tom: Yeah, they do. People really like getting their pay and they like to understand why it's on time or why it's not on time. And HR and finance do merge together and in a lot more ways that are on the right account number and history has well over a 150 accounts. And my faculty are very successful at getting money. And we have all kinds of sorts of money and they spend it. So we actually have people who helped them spend the money. So it's just, it's just really good for us to do that kind of stuff. And they relate so much together, HR and finance. And in the people that I meet with all of it.

Bob: So that's a great 31 years congrats on that. I mean, you won this award, but oh man, 31 years. What what started all that? Why why did you decide to work at the university? And then why why are you still here? I mean, I'm I'm elated that you are and from the looks of the nomination write up, you just provide so much in such an integral part of the History Department. So I know why they like you around. You touched on your interests, but 31 years, that's gotta be sustained by some deep fuel.

Tom: Well, I actually went to college to become a teacher. And I went to college, become actually a business ed teacher and my minor was History. And then of course I'm gonna date myself here. But back

in the late eighties, there weren't a lot of demand for teachers. And so I started working here because I want to Eastern Illinois University. And they actually have a reciprocal agreement so students can work at our campus here in Champaign at the U of I but still be an Eastern student. And I lived in Rantoul, so I could work here in Champaign in the summers. So when I graduated, one of my bosses who worked in Physics, back in 1986, I work as a student in Physics. They asked me to come work there as an Extra Help person and then I got hired on and I just never left. So I just never left there. I just stayed on and then went on from there.

Bob: I love that. So you've got this deep connection and you're rooted in education, which is clearly a large part of the mission at the University, but also that history connection that's fueled 17, no more than that you said you came to the Institute in 2000.

Tom: A little after 2001 maybe late. So right after that horrible incident. So 2001.

Bob: Right, what I'm fascinated to hear about this. This is sort of off script, so we can kill this if we want to. But, and you're not on the hook for anything, but since 2000 or even from before, if you're in a business finance standpoint, higher education has gone through and then we'll continue from today onward. A lot of changes regarding funding models and money and how things are flow across the university and our campus. What's it been like from your perspective, riding all that.

Tom: it's actually, it's been hard to see that higher education has taken a backseat to a lot of the funding levels and the problems that we've had in a state in the country, they cut back on funding for higher ed. I don't think it makes me sort of sad to see it because like in my own department here, the number of faculty have decreased because history over all across the country, people are not seeing- parents don't want their kids to go into history because I don't see what their opportunities are. But yet actually, there are lots of opportunities for students that graduate, even with a Bachelor in history. And there are so many opportunities, like history teaches you how to write and how to do research. And that's something that goes on to law school and education as well. You know, that's wonderful. And that's one of the reasons why I really do like history. I think that not just the fact that I like history over all the, all the information that we learn. And I think we do as even society is now, I think we need to learn from history and not hide it, but learn from the things that have happened in the past. So we don't happen in the future again. So history is very good that being on campus, I've seen so much change. It's just remarkable when I started here, we didn't have computers and you ask an undergrad now, if they could type something, they don't know what a typewriter is. So it's really remarkable and I love the student part. That's one of the things that I had to stay on campus because I love dealing with students. My job really doesn't get to see too many students unless we hire them. I'm actually in a back room of a building, but we hire students. I get to meet him. I meet him in the hallway. I meet them at departmental events. And I love that part because the students are why we're here. Even me in the business and the HR, finance, we're here for the students.

Bob: Yeah, that's excellent, like the lifeblood of the campus and even in the building with History being and Gregory hall, I get, I gotta image- imagine we're talking about how quiet it is in our hallways during the pandemic and just not having the students that the kind of energy and buzz around, it's gotta be kind of a downer.

Tom: You're correct. It's it's I find that it's very sad. I look forward to when this is over and our students return to our crowded hallways because I like the fact that they are here and I liked the fact that they're even there in Chemistry or Biology. I think we have a lot to offer them an education and knowledge about the world.

Bob: You already sort of touched on this, but I wanted to ask how you see your role fitting into the larger mission of the university. Well, I think my role is very important because I'm sort of the bridge between the faculty and then we'll sort of part of the mission is to get the faculty to do what they need to do or want to do to support the mission, whether it's education, research, or public service. I'm helping them to get their books, printed, book the information to their books. They hiring indexers for their books. And I'm the backup for classroom assignments. And I'm not very good at it but I actually have to help faculty find classrooms and move classrooms around. I have we have a person who does that, but I'm not, I have to help with that. And these are things that people think just happen automatically. Well, they don't, there's a person involved. And so I'm just at the back but I help the faculty accomplish their mission of education and research and public service. And history does a lot of public service they host a lot of things that are out there in the world to get things done and promote ideas and opportunities for people that aren't as lucky as some of us. And I'm here to help them get that stuff done. Whether it's purchasing something, organizing a meeting or something getting flying people in to give lectures. That's what my mission is to make sure that the faculty get it done for the university to moved forward and our students to learn.

Bob: Wow. I'm like surging with inspiration to be that behind the scenes person from your description there. That you're not trying to take any of the glamour, but support all of those three pillars and keep them going even if it means playing the side roll today of room scheduler. That's amazing.

Tom: Yeah, I like it and I honestly, I like being behind the scenes. I don't like being in front of the scenes. Because when I got I got a letter from I think it was Associate Chancellor, Elyne Cole that I had been nominated for this. And the first thing I thought was, oh god I don't want my picture taken. I don't I don't like to be out front. And the funny thing is my faculty know that that might be, you know, actually, I won an award, another award this year in LAS. And even though one of my former department heads came to me and she says, I know you really don't like this kind of stuff. But please just remember, this isn't all about you, but this is all about us too. Appreciating that you are here and that we want you

here. And we really respect that you're here. And we want to show you that we that's why we nominated you for this award. And she said, we know you don't like getting up in front of people, so.

Bob: Well, it's gotta make it all the better that this is going to be audio only. So but it's great to kind of hear your perspectives on your view from the History Department, how that kind of plays into campus and the United States and education and then broadly across the whole world. You talk about the international aspect of students and faculty coming through and then them doing research on areas of the world. You mentioned South Africa. I know my friend is doing Ukrainian research and work there. So it's all over the map, right?

Tom: Yes, it is. It's all it we literally have faculty that do research all over the world. And I have I have gifts. Honestly, I don't even know what some of the gifts are, but people bring me gifts and it's just wonderful gifts from all over the world. From people. Even like when we had international visitors coming to give a talk, they'll bring me a gift because I helped arrange their tickets or their VISAS. And it makes me feel so good that I'm actually able to help him. But I also considered that's my job. That's, you know, you don't need to give me anything but I have beautiful little trinkets all over.

Bob: That's great. That keeps the fire going a little bit. Another thing that we wanted to kind of ask about is if you think of a day in which you felt kind of most proud to be an Illinois Professional.

Tom: I think mine is more of a reoccurring thing. And like I touched on before, when we in the fall is the busiest time for the HR period. And when I actually have 40 or 50 graduate teaching assistants to get their appointments done and maybe 3 or 4 new faculty. And I can, I'll get them done and they actually get paid on time. That makes me feel so good because I'm representing the U of I and I. And that makes in, if a speaker comes in and we give them a token of appreciation or honorarium. For me to get it done and they actually get the check. I feel privileged that I can get it done through the system and work with the different offices. Because again, that represents us as a team here at the university. And we don't want people to go away thinking they don't do stuff right there. They're too slow. It just makes me feel good when I can get it done right. And, you know, and History does have a lot of speakers come in. We actually run a program out of the Newberry Library in Chicago. I only have to do two speakers a year. I always feel so blessed when my speakers get paid. And actually people at the Newberry Library have told me that people have commented that the U of I does their business very well. That makes me feel really good. That's, I want my university to have that reputation outside for invited speakers.

Bob: Yeah, I really appreciate that perspective of you said it earlier with the room scheduling and what you said now, which is, you know, the stuff doesn't just happen. It isn't it isn't all automated somewhere. And you mentioned kind of back office and the students don't see like we need people like you at that nerve center calling those shots and making that stuff happen because you've mentioned all the systems and the various, you know, the oddities that could come through and the picture in the

book all the way in South Africa. I mean, you're synthesizing a lot of this kind of wildness and you're making some sense out of it. So I just appreciate that perspective. It helps me kind of see my role to anything else you'd want to add.

Tom: No I just think that there are a lot of professionals on campus. And I'm glad that the university recognizes them. And because people like give their all, I think a lot of people really care about this place. And when we all step up I think it shows.

Bob: Well, Tom, thank you so much for taking some time out of your day to talk with us. And again, congratulations on winning the award.

Tom: Thank you very much.

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.