

Reflections from WT with Wade Shaffer

- Randy Ray: Welcome to episode number 18, Reflections from WT, the heart and soul of the Texas panhandle. My name's Randy Ray. I'm one of the faculty members here on campus. Sitting right beside me today is the 11th president of West Texas A&M, Dr. Walter Wendler.
- Dr. Wendler: Thanks Randy. It's good to be here. Always appreciate the opportunity to visit about WT.
- Randy Ray: Yeah, I always introduce you as the 11th president, so there have been 10 before you.
- Dr. Wendler: Right.
- Randy Ray: I'm curious, how important is the history of WT to you?
- Dr. Wendler: Oh, it's exceedingly important. One person that I look to with great frequency is J.A. Hill, Hill Memorial Chapel on campus.
- Randy Ray: Right. Right.
- Dr. Wendler: He led the university for over 30 years as the President.
- Randy Ray: Wow, that's a long time.
- Dr. Wendler: He was here for a long, that's a long time.
- Randy Ray: For a President.
- Dr. Wendler: I don't know how many Presidents in the United States have universities, of the 3000 universities, educational institutions, have served that long, but he is in a very small, elite group.
- Randy Ray: Yeah. Was he the first one?
- Dr. Wendler: No, he was after, he was before Cornet who was in the '50s and I'm not sure who he proceeded. Wade might know.
- Dr. Wade Shaffer: I think he was maybe third, second or third.
- Speaker 4: Yeah, that sounds right.
- Dr. Wendler: But he came, he was one of the original faculty members. I think he started in 1910 or '12 or something, very early on. He was an early hire. Something else Randy, I think that's interesting to note about Hill, is he has a book on speeches

that he's given. Somebody published a book, and it was published by, I'm not sure who, but it's a nice text and I read it with some regularity. I'll read one of his speeches, because we don't speak that way anymore. We speak, we're much more casual. And I am, I mean I'm not saying other people are and I'm not, I just, his speeches, they ring, they have an academic ring to them, which I think is nice from the leader. And I'm guilty sometimes of being too familiar, just too casual in the way I say things. And he is really measured in his thinking and delivery of thoughts and ideas.

Randy Ray: Yeah, yesterday I was sitting in your conference room and I was looking around and you have decorated on the walls in there different pictures from the history of WT. And I go, "Wow, what a rich history we have here."

Dr. Wendler: We really do. And you sat down, I know where you sat, you sat in front of the TV screen, and at the very far end was J.A. Hill and he's got this picture with curly hair in his hands, his face resting in his hand with his three fingers extended on one side, and his pinky and thumb on the other. And he looks like a dandy. I mean, he really does. He looks like a, he is something else. He's got a very nice appearance and of course that people always dressed up for photographs, you know, not like the three of us are dressed today. You know, they were always in full dress and they looked, I think it raises their perceived intelligence. I mean they just look good, it just looks-

Randy Ray: Very, very elegant.

Dr. Wendler: Yep.

Randy Ray: All right, so we've looked at the past. Let's talk about the future. We have just started a brand new year. We've started brand new decade and things are already happening on campus.

Dr. Wendler: Yeah, yeah.

Randy Ray: A lot of changes already coming.

Dr. Wendler: Yes, you're right. By the way, as we begin this, the 30th calendar year of WT, we're going to remember this year, throughout the year, that this is in fact not the 30th calendar year. I apologize, I misspoke. We begin the 30th year as a member of the Texas A&M University system, and I think that Boone Pickens and that board that sought membership in a university system, they talked to three different systems. They talked to, this is what Boone told me. I've only met, I met him one time before he passed and we had lunch with he and a mutual friend, Eddie Scott, in Dallas. And he told me that they were three university systems they considered joining. The University of Texas system, Texas A&M University system, and the Texas Tech system.

And he felt like the best fit was with Texas A&M. And quite honestly, to me I think it was a good choice, but of course I'm-

Randy Ray: Yeah. I've had people, I can remember, I was living in Tennessee when that happened, and I can remember even out there hearing people talking about, "Well I don't know if we want to become part of the A&M system." And looking at it now, I wonder where this university would be had we not.

Dr. Wendler: Right. And I'm going to turn the table on that and tell you that I wonder where Texas A&M University would be if it didn't have all of these regional institutions. We affect Texas A&M just as much, well, maybe not quite as much as Texas A&M affects each of us, but these relationships are like marriages and each individual organization benefits from the relationship. You know, our two plus two program, they're getting ready to talk about in vet medicine, that's going to be housed at the Vero Center. We're having the press conference on some more updates on that, some significant additional funding and so on that we've received on January 28th. But I will tell you that a lot of that work that's going on there wouldn't happen without Texas A&M and because it's up here in the Texas panhandle, which is such a unique and distinctive region of the state of Texas, we are going to give back to Texas A& M some benefit because they're associated with us in this very special region of our great state.

Randy Ray: You know one of the things that I appreciate about our merger with the A&M system is I think WT still kept its own personality.

Dr. Wendler: Absolutely. And I couldn't be more, and by the way, I for example knew Russell Long, reasonably well. Still do. We're not in touch every day, but you know, we see each other and I always admired him, and he was one that was concerned, "You know, I hope we don't lose our identity." Kingsville was another, actually all of the campuses, I think had some concern that that might happen, and the fact of the matter is, and I would say this is under the leadership of John Sharp and other Chancellors that we've had in the past, but especially under Sharp, he wants the regional institutions to have a strong identity for themselves in the region, and in the nation when it's warranted for certain programs and so on.

And I think we're doing that at WT. For example, we just recently saw this, and you may want to talk about this some more, but saw the US News and World Report rankings, which I always look at with just a little bit of cynicism. I don't want to get caught up with that stuff on the one hand, but on the other hand, when consistently your programs do well in those rankings, and for example our undergraduate programs generally across the board we're ranked number, I think it was 16 in the nation, maybe it was 14, but it was in the teens, mid-teens, I'll say, not that important. But what was important to me was we have the highest ranked undergraduate online programs in the state of Texas, which is huge.

Randy Ray: That's huge. That's really huge.

Dr. Wendler: Yeah, it is huge. I mean here we are up on the prairie, the wind is blowing, we get a half an inch of rain and we're all excited about it. I mean we're in a very special place here. We've got 6 million head of cattle within a hundred miles. I mean there is just a lot of stuff that goes on here that's very distinctive, and here we are an excellent according to US News and World Report. And by the way, I know that we're an excellent, our online programs are good, and you know that you'll be talking to Wade here in a little while and the fact of the matter is that commitment to excellence, it bleeds through the whole organization by osmosis. You hire good faculty, you turn them loose to do what they do, work with students, and the excellence just starts to percolate.

Randy Ray: Yeah/ Someone was talking to me yesterday, it was actually yesterday, and they say "You obviously love working at WT. Is there a problem with it?" And I said, "Yeah, WT has one problem that they need to address." And they said, "What's that?" I said, " They need to brag on themselves more."

Dr. Wendler: Well-

Randy Ray: I believe in that.

Dr. Wendler: -listen, I'm single handedly trying to take care of that one. I made a presentation one time to the, I probably shouldn't tell this story on myself, but I think it's humorous. J.A. Hill would have never done this. We were talking about how dignified he was and all that. He wouldn't have told this kind of story. But I made a presentation to the Board of Regents and afterwards one of the Regents said in front of everybody, he said, "You know, you should have been in marketing." And I said, "Well, I thought I was." It's part of what we do. We, and I am very proud of it. I've been at a number of universities, you look at my resume, it looks like I can't hold a job, and had different levels of responsibility and so on and so forth. And I will tell you there is something about WT, deep in its DNA, that creates a strong bond between students and faculty, even between faculty and administration.

A lot of universities, you can't say that. I feel even when, when faculty disagree with me or they take issue with something I say, there's a certain kind of professionalism and respect and I hope that flows in both directions. But people-

Randy Ray: I think it does, yeah.

Dr. Wendler: They can disagree without being disagreeable. And that's part of what we do at a university. So I can't think of a better place, well you've heard me say this, this is the best job I've ever had, in the best place I've ever lived, and here I was retired. I thought I was finished. Funny how it works.

Randy Ray: Yeah, I agree with you. We're going to take a break and when we come back, we're going to talk to a gentleman that I have a whole lot of respect for. We'll be back in 60 seconds.

Speaker 5: West Texas A&M university is a student body that learns by doing and is always seeking opportunity, talented and accomplished faculty that teach both in and out of the classroom programs, programs that provide timeless information and meet the challenges of today's world, facilities rich in technology, as well as WT history. It's our alumni and donors that make the big difference and set us apart from other universities.

With your support, WT will continue to award scholarships to deserving students and strengthen our programs, which means a better campus, more in depth education, and a lasting cultural and economic impact on our region. Now is the time to strengthen connections, support students, and open doors for tomorrow's leaders. Share your experience. Share your heritage. Share your pride.

Randy Ray: All right. Welcome back to Reflections from WT, the heart and soul of the Texas panhandle. I'm joined today with Dr. Walter Wendler and I'm also joined today by Dr. Wade Shaffer, who is the outgoing Provost of the university. Dr. Shaffer, thank you for being here, sir.

Dr. Wade Shaffer: Thanks for the invitation. I always appreciate the opportunity to speak, talk.

Randy Ray: Yeah. Let me just start out by saying how much we, and I say the entire faculty, appreciate all you have done over the last eight years?

Dr. Wade Shaffer: Eight years. That's right.

Randy Ray: Yeah. I'm not blowing smoke when I say in those eight years, I have never heard a negative thing said about you by anyone. And that's huge. That's a big deal.

Dr. Wade Shaffer: Well, thank you. That means a lot to me and it's been a very interesting and challenging job, one I never thought I would hold, was never in my career plan to move that way. And I appreciate the very, very kind words, for me that means a lot to me.

Randy Ray: Well you have a lot of respect on campus. For those listeners that don't know, what does a Provost do?

Dr. Wade Shaffer: Well, the Provost is the chief academic officer of the university, so the responsibility of the Provost is to ensure the academic quality of the faculty, of the programs, to make sure that students are moving through their studies appropriately, to look at issues related to accreditation of the university from an academic perspective, maintain relationships with the coordinating board in Austin, and the system offices down in College Station. And then just generally

serve as the person who deals with issues, opportunities, problems that involve the academic realm. There's also things like the library and the honors program that fall under the Provost responsibility as well. So it's not just what happens in the classroom. There's other programs, study abroad, nationally competitive scholarships.

Randy Ray: It's a lot of responsibility, isn't it?

Dr. Wade Shaffer: Well it is, like I said, wasn't something I had planned on doing, but you have good people in place, you guys have talked about that many times, I'm sure. And my goal always as the Provost was to try to make the job of the faculty easier, right? To take care of some of the bureaucratic things that have to be done on a daily basis so that faculty could be free to focus on the classroom and focus on their research and their service opportunities for the university.

Randy Ray: So your background's in history?

Dr. Wade Shaffer: Right.

Randy Ray: And so what year did you first come to WT?

Dr. Wade Shaffer: I was hired as an Assistant Professor of History in the fall of 1994, so I'm just completing my 25th year at the university.

Randy Ray: Wow. Yeah. And you're going to go back to teaching?

Dr. Wade Shaffer: Teaching full time. This will be a transitional, the spring semester will be transitional for me. And then in the fall I'll have a full schedule again, be back upstairs in the History Department with my old friends and colleagues up there.

Randy Ray: Well, as we're talking about teaching, I want to talk a little bit about academic excellence. What does that mean to you and what does that mean to West Texas A&M?

Dr. Wade Shaffer: Well, I think a university's reputation, since the essential thing that a university does is to provide high quality education to its students, that it's important that there be stakes in the ground about academic quality and academic excellence, rigor, currency, making sure that programs reflect what's going on, making sure that faculty enjoy teaching, are constantly upgrading their teaching craft, making sure that the programs we have reflect what's going on in the world around us. You're in a field that changes all the time. If you were still teaching the way that you did 10 or 15 years ago, you'd be doing a disservice to your students.

Randy Ray: Absolutely.

Dr. Wade Shaffer: And that's true really across the board. So making sure that the programs we offer are current, up to date, rigorous, and are preparing students for the next step in their lives, is really important to me. As a faculty member, it was important to me, and as an administrator, it was certainly important to me.

Randy Ray: What does a Provost do to help the faculty stay on the cutting edge?

Dr. Wade Shaffer: Well, so there are lots of opportunities for professional development. We offer professional development at the beginning of every semester for all faculty. We have from time to time been able to help faculty with travel funds to go to a conference or maybe funds to obtain some equipment or some material or something like that, to attend a workshop. The other thing is to, and this may sound, may come out, not come out sounding right, but try to set a positive example and try to lead by example, right?

So if the decisions that are being made by me and by my office reflect academic integrity and academic quality, I think it sends the signal to the rest of the faculty that this is critical. This is important.

Dr. Wendler: Randy, I'm going to say something that Wade in his humility, would never say, he is also an excellent teacher, and has taught, I believe the whole time he's been in the Provost's office. So he's in touch with the students. When he talks about academic affairs, I think it's important for people to fully appreciate that what that means is what the student learns while they're here. That is the chief kind of academic affair. And I watch university leaders, Provosts, Presidents, all kinds of university leaders worry more about graduation rates and retention rates and these other issues that are used even by like US News and World Report to measure quality. And those things are important. But if you're not focused on students, it's all for naught.

This is a university, this is, we build human capital here, we nurture it, and develop it so people have the opportunity to grow and become, in my perspective, and I know Wade and I have talked about this, noble citizens. They go out and make a positive difference in a culture.

Randy Ray: Yeah. I tell people I have four years to take a kid from being a high school student to being a professional. And sometimes though in those four years, it gets pretty tough, and they'd be mad at me and they think that I'm being mean. But I'm okay with that because I want them, when they have a degree from West Texas A&M University, I want them to be prepared. And Dr. Shaffer, you have led the way in that.

Dr. Wendler: Yeah, he has, he has.

Dr. Wade Shaffer: That's always the goal. And Dr. Wendler said it better than I could, as long as we keep our eyes fixed on the student and the student experience, we're in good shape.

Randy Ray: Do we want to talk about some of the new programs and things that you've helped start, things like the new EDD program, online program?

Dr. Wade Shaffer: Well, and I think, thank you. I think that is, and I'm not going to take much credit for that. Many, many people worked very hard to put that into place, but that's our second doctorate level program. And one of the signs of an institution that's healthy, that's growing and thriving, is the ability to take on additional degree programs, particularly doctoral programs, which are very complicated in terms of the dynamics of them, and in terms of just getting approval for them. That was a two year process that involved multiple entities to prove that we were worthy of having this online doctoral program in Educational Leadership. And we were rewarded at the end with an outpouring of applicants for that. I think we had twice as many as we had anticipated. We ended up taking two cohorts of students instead of one.

There was some concern that maybe that was a backlog and so as soon as those students were admitted into the program, wouldn't have more. But contrary to that, this year we had an equal number of applicants for the position. So, it's already has a reputation of competitive program, but it's a marker of our growth and maturity as an institution that we can add doctoral programs to our listings and maintain high quality in them as well.

It's part of our strategic plan, it's part of our long-term vision, that we become a national university and that that is a university that produces doctorate candidates on a large enough scale to have national standing. We're not quite there yet, but if we can add one or two more doctoral programs by the end of this decade, we could attain that. We could attain that standing and that's where we belong. I think that's our rightful place.

Randy Ray: Yeah, so that's all online. I think that's one thing that we are good at is online teaching, and I mean the US News and World Report just had, they were singing our praises about our online program, undergraduate programs. So I think that's, and Dr. Wendler you want us to keep pushing that way?

Dr. Wendler: I do. Michael would be, I know this, but Wade's time, but I'll just say this. We have 7500 students on campus right now and 2500 students off campus, and those are rough numbers, but they're close. I would like to see our on-campus enrollment stay about the same, at about 7500 students, but I'd like to see more valedictorians and salutatorians from the Top 26, I'll even say the top 46 counties of Texas, I'll include what we call Region 17 down around Lubbock and so on, more valedictorians and salutatorians. We have a principal scholars program, we've talked about here that before, where principals recommend students to us. Our numbers are approaching 200 already this year. Last year we had 90, the program was new, and this year we're approaching 200 already, and we've got months to go.

And I want to see those kinds of students that represent the very best of the Texas of the South Plains in the Texas panhandle enroll in WT. But I want that

number to stay at about 7500. I want the university's growth to come from online programs. So I don't, I'm not desirous to have 20000 students on the campus. I mean it would be wonderful if we did, and there may be some of that that just happens naturally. But my goal is 7500 students on campus and then a number that exceeds 7500 eventually, we're only 2500 now. But if that went to 5000 I'd be tickled pink in the next five or six years. But it could go beyond that.

But one of the things, and Wade knows this because the Deans feel this way, and Wade is with the Deans all the time, they want the people that teach online to also teach on campus. So it's not, some of these programs, and I'm not besmirching Southern New Hampshire University for example, which are very popular, 100000 students online, but they might have people from Seattle teaching online, and they may be good people, but they're not transmitting the geography and the culture of the panhandle of Texas, which I think may be our most valuable asset across the board. So anyway.

Randy Ray: Well, Dr. Shaffer, once again, let me say thank you. We all appreciate your hard work and we appreciate you being an advocate for the faculty and you are loved across campus.

Dr. Wade Shaffer: Well, thank you very much again for those kind words. It's been a great experience for me, but I'm really looking forward to the next chapter going back to doing what I thought I was going to do when I came to WT in 1994 which is teach students about American history. So.

Randy Ray: All right, well, you guys ready for a curve ball?

Dr. Wendler: Always ready for a curve ball.

Randy Ray: I may throw you two today just.

Dr. Wendler: Well, that'd be fun. That'd be fun.

Randy Ray: This one's kind of, we've talked about academics a lot today. Have you ever thought about what you would have, what would you would be doing today, had you never gone to college?

Dr. Wendler: Oh, I know the answer to that. I would be a carpenter.

Randy Ray: Really?

Dr. Wendler: Yeah. Yeah. I mean I started, my family were all in building trades, and all that sort of stuff. My extended family, carpenters.

Randy Ray: So was that what led you into being an architect?

Dr. Wendler: Yeah, that's kind of what, my uncle was a contractor. He's passed now, but my Uncle George was a contractor in New York and he helped train me to become a carpenter. And as I was doing that, he saw something where he said, you know, and he worked with some famous architects he worked with Phillip Johnson, who's probably one of the greatest 20th century architects in the world. And he did some jobs with Phillip Johnson. He said, "You know, you might have a spark for that." And that's when I, went into community college to study construction, basically, construction technology. And when I finished that, that's when I transferred to A&M. so I think beyond a shadow of a doubt, if I hadn't gone to college, I would've been a carpenter, and probably a very happy person.

Randy Ray: Yeah. I saw a picture of you the other day doing a little work out at the President's house. I said, "Don't you have people to do that?" You said, "Ah, I like doing it sometimes."

Dr. Wendler: Yeah, I still like to put my hand to something once in a while. Don't have time to play golf, which I enjoy, but yeah, I like to do things with my hands.

Randy Ray: Dr. Shaffer, what about you? What would you be doing today?

Dr. Wendler: I think quite honestly, I would be in sales. My father was a salesman, and eventually worked in management for Montgomery Ward for about 30 years. He was very successful, built a good career in that. His brother was a car salesman, and ended up owning his own Ford dealership. My first job was in sales. I liked interacting with people, and actually that's benefited me in the classroom because you're always doing a little bit of salesmanship.

Randy Ray: That's right.

Dr. Wendler: In the classroom as well, right? To be able to, that glibness and that willingness to get them to come along with you, to buy into, if you will, pardon the expression, what you're talking about. So I think probably sales for me.

Randy Ray: Yeah. I've got another question. This one's going to, this one's going to trip you up, I think. A lot of our students listen to this podcast and I had a student come up to me a few days ago and said, "Would you ask Dr. Wendler and the guest a question for me?" "What is it?" They said, "If they were to get a tattoo, what would it be?" I know you guys are really not tattoo guys, but what would your tattoo be?

Dr. Wendler: Oh, gosh. I don't know, but I think it'd have to be in a place that nobody else could see.

Randy Ray: Yeah.

Dr. Wendler: I don't know what it would be.

Randy Ray: How about a buffalo? Let's go, all three of us, go down to the tattoo shop and get a buffalo tattoo. What do you say?

Dr. Wade Shaffer: Right there on the ankle where you always have socks to cover and everything that.

Dr. Wendler: Yeah, something like that. I think, I don't know what you've been drinking. I'd get off it. No, I don't know. I've never thought of that before, but I would for now, I'd, yeah, I'd like to have a Buffalo tattoo.

Dr. Wade Shaffer: I'd just say real quickly that I've been here long enough that we've gone from, "Oh my gosh, this faculty member that we're hiring might have a tattoo." to, "Oh my gosh. This faculty member were hiring might not have a tattoo."

Randy Ray: Yeah.

Dr. Wendler: Yeah. How are they going to fit in? That's funny. It's funny what's on students' minds, and how things change.

Randy Ray: Yeah. Well, I appreciate both of you being here today, and I think, I enjoyed the conversation. I always do.

Dr. Wendler: So do I.

Randy Ray: But I especially enjoyed today. Thank you all for joining us for episode number 18 of Reflections from WT, the heart and soul of the Texas panhandle. Please join us again next time.