

Reflections from WT- Online Learning

- Randy Ray: Welcome to Reflections from WT: The Heart and Soul of the Texas Panhandle. This is episode number 23. My name is Randy Ray and sitting to my immediate left is the 11th president of West Texas A&M University, Dr. Walter Wendler.
- Dr. Wendler: Morning, Randy, how are you?
- Randy Ray: I'm doing well. I always start out talking about our podcast and you named it The Heart and Soul of Texas Panhandle. Why did you do that?
- Dr. Wendler: That's a good question. I thought the curve ball was supposed to come at the end.
- Randy Ray: Oh, I've got a better curve ball later.
- Dr. Wendler: Okay. Well, I really do feel like with all of this constellation of small communities up here in the Panhandle and the twin... I considered the twin stars of Amarillo and Canyon. Obviously Amarillo's a little brighter, it's bigger and so on and so forth, but it's like a little universe of its own in terms of communities. And we are in the center of it from my perspective. And I don't know why I thought that up, but I just thought the heart and soul.
- Randy Ray: I think it's especially true of teachers. Think about how many teachers we have spread out over the Panhandle and the impact this university has had. I like it. I like it too.
- Dr. Wendler: Let me just say about teachers while you're on it. And I've used this data before, but approximately 73% of the teachers and school administrators in the top 26 counties of Texas in the Panhandle have at least one degree or certificate from West Texas A&M University, which is remarkable. Fact of the matter is, I've told people, if we complain about the high school graduates that we get at WT, there may be one finger pointing at the school, but there's three point back at us because we educated all the teachers and administrators.
- Randy Ray: That's very true.
- Dr. Wendler: And we have to own that. When it's strong, we can let our chest swell out a little bit and say, "We're proud that we've done a good job and we feel satisfied with that." Where it's not that we're comfortable, we'll keep working, but we're pleased with it. On the other hand, if things aren't going well, we can say, "What can we do to help improve this because these are our people?"
- Randy Ray: One thing that I have said about WT, one thing that I think WT can do better and that's brag on itself.

Dr. Wendler: I think that's true and one of the reasons you and I spent a lot of time in communication trying to get the word out through things like this podcast. We do these PSAs, we do these weekly columns that I write. So we're trying to get the word out. And I think it's working. I mean, if you look at the last Sunday, Amarillo Globe-News had three op-eds in it. Well, had four or five, but three of them were from WT people. And the front page story was by John Mark Ballou.

Randy Ray: Who's on our staff. Yeah.

Dr. Wendler: Yeah. Yeah. So I think we're doing a better job of getting the word out. And frankly I say this with great humility, but I think people are proud of WT. It's not perfect. And we're not a big division one school, but we work hard to serve the Panhandle and that's again, why I call it the Heart and Soul of the Panhandle.

Randy Ray: There you go. But another thing I wanted to talk to you about is I want to talk to you about your new book that you just published. I'm excited about that.

Dr. Wendler: Yeah. We-

Randy Ray: Especially page 36.

Dr. Wendler: Did you see that, with you and Johnny Story and your picture in there looking like you're running the world from Pampa, Texas. What I try to do with that is, I made these visits, 132 high schools, split evenly, about 66 in the Panhandle and 66 on the South Plains. And in every one of those schools, I came back with some things that I thought students might be looking for and things that administrators were looking for in schools. And what I tried to do was compress those into a resource that students and families could use when they're considering college. And that's the title of the eBook and it's available online on the www.WTAMU.edu.

Randy Ray: Free of charge?

Dr. Wendler: Free of charge. And I'm not going to say there's any great wisdom in it or anything else, but these are in a sense tales from the trails. These are things I learned when I was out there talking to people about what they valued in universities. And I thought it was very useful to me and if I had a child that was a junior in high school right now, I'd say, "You ought to look at this and think about it because it's not the typical stuff."

You don't talk in the book about GPAs, class ranks, who's the valedictorian. Those things are all important, what your test scores are, but everybody knows those things. These are the things that in some ways, put the flesh on the bones of a university. The book talks about things like, is there a sense of a home? Do people care for the place? Do they take care of the place? Because if there's not a sense of home, if there's not a sense of caring for the place and a whole number of other issues, determination, like we talked about in Pampa. Pampa's

a town of spit. People work hard there. They're, trustworthy. No town is perfect, but there are a lot of people from Pampa that have made a big difference. And I'm not just saying this because you're sitting here, but the work that you and Johnny have done here at WT's another example.

Randy Ray: I appreciate that.

Dr. Wendler: So I think that is a... I want to encourage people to look for those kinds of things, not just the sticker price, not how good the cool students are. Those are all important things, but if it stops there, you might as well be buying up an electric egg beater or something. I mean, it's something different.

Randy Ray: So your book, not necessarily driving people to WT, it's driving people to their best fit, right?

Dr. Wendler: That is exactly right. And I say that over and over again. And I apologize because right now I'm at WT and I see so many positive things that I'll use it as an example sometimes, but I would talk to a group of students some days and partly mention WT, other than that I'm the president of WT when I'd introduce myself. But after that, it was encouraging students to develop a plan for one, for themselves. And that's what this little eBook is supposed to do, is help students find a plan for themselves that will help them select a college where there's a good fit if that's what they want. I also tell people, college is not the answer for everyone. You can-

Randy Ray: I agree with that. Yeah.

Dr. Wendler: Yeah. You can be a productive citizen and go out and pick up a trade. You can work in a family business, you can join the military-

Randy Ray: Yeah, we need people like that.

Dr. Wendler: Yes. And it's a full range of things and you have to go where you're comfortable and things that you... Worst thing in the world is to have a college degree that you were never really invested in. And then you get out and you can't find a job whether it doesn't help you in the workplace. And I know people don't like to hear that kind of practically minded talk from a university president, but the problem is, and it's a simple problem, it's the truth. It's the truth.

And I think that helping people realize that ahead of time... Would you rather be a happy carpenter, a satisfied carpenter, a joyful carpenter, or a dissatisfied CEO? Push comes to shove.

Randy Ray: Well, Dr. Wendler, one thing that I really appreciate that you do is giving words of advice like your book and like your PSAs, not necessarily about WT, but just about helping people. So I appreciate that.

Dr. Wendler: Well, thanks. I consider it an honor and a privilege to serve the people of this region of West Texas through WT. It's a great place to be.

Randy Ray: Well, we only have a couple of minutes before the break, but I wanted to real quickly touch on summertime. What's the campus look like right now?

Dr. Wendler: Right now it's quiet, but it was quiet last year. We're fixin'. You can tell I've been in the Panhandle. We're fixing to start summer school here, the first session. And last year, when we were fixing to start summer school, 85% of the students were online. And this year it may be 100%, but incrementally, that's an increment. That's a small increment to go from 85 to 100.

So the first session we plan to offer nearly everything online, there'll be some exceptions.

Randy Ray: Yeah. I was going to teach a face to face and we transitioned it over to online. So-

Dr. Wendler: And you got thrust into the fire last semester. I mean, all of a sudden you were teaching online. And it'll be better this time.

Randy Ray: It gets better every time. It's one of the things I like about my job. I have times to reboot as I call it. So try it again differently. Well, I'm glad we brought up the online thing because we're going to take a break and when we come back from our break, we're going to talk to an expert in online teaching. We'll be back in 30 seconds.

Speaker 3: West Texas A&M University is proud to call the Texas Panhandle home. And providing the top 26 counties with opportunity and qualified graduates is an important WT mission. From their first experience on campus to graduation day, the WT experience is a challenging series of steps that will embolden students to reach their full potential. And then in turn, go out into the Panhandle and make a difference. Quality education with a big local return is one thing you can find here at WT. For more information about West Texas A&M University, visit our website at www.WTAMU.edu.

Randy Ray: Welcome back to Reflections from WT: The Heart and Soul of the Texas Panhandle episode number 23. On this segment of the podcast, Dr. Wendler and I are talking to Lora Haasl and she is the technical service manager, IT manager, wears probably a half dozen different hats, over in our IT division. And she's here to talk to us today about online teaching. Welcome.

Lora Haasl: Thank you. Good morning.

Randy Ray: As you and I were walking into the building this morning, I asked you had things been slower and you said, "Oh no, they've been a lot faster." And that's because

of all the craziness in the world and the craziness with our university, and a lot of people have had to go to online and that's increased your workload.

Lora Haasl: Yes, it has.

Randy Ray: So tell us about that.

Lora Haasl: Well, before spring break happened, we were starting to hear about COVID-19 and what it was doing in the US and where things were headed. And so we became concerned that it might be possible for faculty to have to transition their classes from face to face to online. So we started offering workshops right before spring break on how to transition your classroom, from face to face environment, to an online environment, just in case that were to happen while spring break was going on. And ultimately it did. All of our spring classes were moved from face to face who were not already online into the online environment. And I think we're ready-

Randy Ray: That's huge. Let's all think about what you just said. All of our classes at the university, all of our classes were moved to online. That's a huge thing to do in a short amount of time.

Lora Haasl: It is, and it helps that we had 380 classes fully online already in the spring semester. So we did have a lot of faculty who were already teaching online, who were experienced with teaching online. So the transition for them was relatively simple because they were familiar with that environment, but we actually had 115 faculty attend those workshops on how to transition your classes from face to face to online. So there were quite a few faculty who either had never taught online or had not taught online in a really long time and needed to know what was it they needed to do to get ready for teaching remotely.

Randy Ray: I'm going to ask you this. What's the big advantage of online? What's the best thing about online classes?

Lora Haasl: I think in today's world it gives students the opportunity to be flexible with their education, to be able to work jobs to support their families or to support themselves, but still have the opportunity to get a college degree and a college education where in the past, you had to physically come to class all the time. So it was very difficult to hold down a full time job and attend class. So, this to me, opens the door for education to so many more people.

Randy Ray: Dr. Wendler, I know that you're a big advocate of online teaching. Why?

Dr. Wendler: Well, Lora, I think, hit the number one point right now is accessibility. And there are so many... Especially at this time of economic crisis, we've got a health crisis, but with the unemployment levels just shot up like a rocket, we've got an economic crisis and a lot of people will be rethinking their careers and how they

do things. And many may want to go back to school and study. And this opens the door for many more people. That's number one.

But to add another perspective on top of what Lora has suggested, I like the fact that a student can go back over a lecture three or four times. I'm not the sharpest knife in the drawer. I struggle with some classes, calc two was... And I took a linear algebra class, and I had to work at those things. And the nice part is now you can listen to the same lecture over and over again, and you can stop it, you can... It puts learning much more, I think, in the hands of students. And I'll just say this one other thing, there's a myth that it's cheaper and it's easier to teach online and those are both wrong. It's not cheaper and it is not easier.

Randy Ray: I totally agree with that. I learned the hard way not too long ago.

Lora Haasl: I would actually say it's twice as much work for faculty to develop an online class than to teach a face to face class.

Dr. Wendler: I think so because you have to plan everything out.

Randy Ray: Yeah, and I agree with you, flexibility is so important. I am always surprised at the number of students in my class that are working. And it's, different these days. And maybe that's just a WT thing. I don't know, but we have a lot of students that are out and they have full time jobs. So the nice thing about online is they can go to class when it best for them.

Lora Haasl: Right. And to expand on what Dr. Wendler just said about being able to watch the content over and over, there is research to support that to retain 80% of knowledge of something of some content, then you have to revisit it between eight to 10 times. So I see this, especially in the STEM fields, because in a 50 minute class, your professor may work three or four problems, and then you have to go out and remember how to do that to work your assignments that you have to turn in and learn how to work those problems, where in video, you can watch it over and over again until you get it. And I think it's even more important in the STEM fields.

Dr. Wendler: Well, I would agree with you and I just read a... You're going to say, "What does this guy do for enjoyment?" I just read a piece yesterday on STEM education in rural India. I'm very committed to education in rural settings. 20% of the population in the US is rural. 63% of the population in India is rural. There's small communities all over the place. It's big towns too, obviously, big cities, but there's a lot of rural and almost 70% of the kids that come out of those rural communities want to study in a STEM field. They see that as a way out of the rural locations and as good career opportunity and so on and so forth. So I think Lora's right, especially in some of those fields, it's provides opportunity that otherwise wouldn't exist.

Randy Ray: Lora, do you think that WT is a pioneer in some ways with online?

Lora Haasl: Absolutely. Now I came to WT in 2002, but in 1997, WT launched WT online, which was a homegrown learning management system. And so they were pioneers. They were on the very starting line of online education. And that system served WT for almost nine years, offering online classes when it really wasn't mainstream yet. So it's strange that a small college in the Texas Panhandle would be a pioneer in online education, but they definitely were. They had some foresight and they jumped in with both feet and started in 1997 if you can believe that. We've come a long way.

Randy Ray: We have.

Lora Haasl: We really have.

Randy Ray: Do you both think that online education comes easier to the new generation, to the current generation. They're digital natives and are they more acclimated to learn in that way or not?

Dr. Wendler: I'll go ahead and take my stab and then Lora. I will say yes. And it's because most of this generation most, and then the next generation 100%, will have never used a personal computer. They'll be on devices and pads their whole lives. And I remember even now, probably seven years ago in talking to an online class in the Chicago suburbs, I was at SIU and we went up and they asked me to talk to an online class. I talked to an online class and one guy was on Interstate 80, doing 70 miles an hour during the online class on his cell phone. And I'm not sure that's a good idea, but thankfully my discussion wasn't that riveting, it didn't cause him to lose his attention to his driving, but again, it's accessibility and the demand for accessibility that young people have now. You tell them 10 minutes, that's too long. They want it right now. And by the way, I'm not being critical of young people because I'm about that way with most of what I want, I've just got used to waiting. They're not used to waiting.

Randy Ray: No, they're not. Do you agree with that?

Lora Haasl: I do. I feel like information is at their fingertips and we have a question, we wonder about something, oh, let's just Google it. And so yes, I feel like that this generation responds well to that taking ownership of that learning and diving in and having that information readily available to them.

Dr. Wendler: Yeah. And my, my theory is that the face to face interaction, the more personal and high touch, high content interaction that you get in actually having a live conversation, there's less of it, but it doesn't diminish its importance. It's still exceedingly important to individuals to have some of it. Maybe instead of being 100%, it might go down to even 10%. But the cognitive delivery, the other 90%, that's very important, but that 10% really does seal the deal. That's where it happens in my mind.

Randy Ray: Well, Lora, every one of our episodes, I throw Dr. Wendler and our guest a curve ball. You ready? Again, I think I'm getting pretty relaxed with my curve balls.

Dr. Wendler: Well, I don't know. I don't find them all that easy. Every once in a while, you'll throw me a softball that's also a curve ball.

Randy Ray: Here's the curve ball today. Have either one of you ever had a nickname?

Dr. Wendler: Yeah, I have.

Randy Ray: Silence. I got him a little bit. No nickname?

Dr. Wendler: Oh yeah. I've had a nickname.

Randy Ray: I've had some too, but none that I can say in front of Lora here. What was your nickname Dr. Wendler?

Dr. Wendler: I'm embarrassed to say this, but I'm foolish enough to say it. It's not bad or anything. It was The Bear.

Randy Ray: Was this in college or high school?

Dr. Wendler: High school.

Randy Ray: Where?

Dr. Wendler: High school in New York.

Randy Ray: You were The Bear?

Dr. Wendler: I was The Bear.

Randy Ray: Big burly bear.

Dr. Wendler: Something like that.

Randy Ray: Was that when you were playing hockey?

Dr. Wendler: Yeah. And a few other things, but yeah, that was my nickname. It's not... My son who had a thick crop of hair and it used to stick out in the front and he did not like it, they called him Fred Flintstone. It kind of-

Lora Haasl: Oh, no.

Dr. Wendler: His hair looked like Fred Flintstone. But anyway, it is what it is. The Bear.

Randy Ray: Yes.

Dr. Wendler: I'm going to be interested to hear what Lora's was.

Lora Haasl: I don't know what this says about me, but I actually have never had a nickname.

Randy Ray: Really?

Lora Haasl: No. That makes me sad.

Randy Ray: Can I give you one?

Lora Haasl: Sure.

Randy Ray: I'll have to think about that for a little bit.

Dr. Wendler: Can I give you one, funny. What was yours?

Randy Ray: Well-

Dr. Wendler: The ones you can't repeat any of them.

Randy Ray: Well, my real name's Randall. So I guess Randy is... That's all.

Dr. Wendler: That's not a nickname.

Randy Ray: Kind of.

Dr. Wendler: It's like I know Johnny's real name is John, but his nickname-

Randy Ray: It's actually not. Our engineer Johnny Story, it's actually Johnny on his birth certificate.

Dr. Wendler: I had a friend in a... Well, I had a couple of friends, but one in particular, whose name was John Only Briere.

Randy Ray: His middle name was Only?

Dr. Wendler: It was Only. It was John Only. There was no John Billy or John David. It was John Only, which I thought was kind of-

Randy Ray: That's his "only" middle name.

Dr. Wendler: Yeah. John Only.

Randy Ray: All right. Well, thank you all for joining us for podcast number 23 of Reflections from WT: The Heart and Soul of the Texas Panhandle. We are looking forward to talking to you again next time.