

Reflections from WT- Dr. De'Arno De'Armond

- Randy Ray: Welcome to Reflections from WT, The Heart and Soul of the Texas Panhandle. This is episode number 27, and we're glad you're joining us. Today, I'm joined with the 11th president of West Texas A&M, Dr. Walter Wendler, and a special guest, Dr. De'Arno De'Armond. So good morning, gentlemen.
- Dr. Walter Wendler: Good morning.
- Dr. De'Arno De'Armond: Morning.
- Randy Ray: Dr. De'Armond, the first thing I want to say is, how much I like your name. So you and I, we've known each other for a long time, about 20 years. And I've always meant to say how cool I thought your name was.
- Dr. De'Arno De'Armond: Thanks, I appreciate it. I like your name too, Randy.
- Randy Ray: You and I both, have one of those names that people not sure, which is our first name, which is our last name.
- Dr. Walter Wendler: Oddly, just to add a little bit to the conversation, we all have D-D, R-R, W-W.
- Randy Ray: Double initials.
- Dr. Walter Wendler: Which is interesting.
- Randy Ray: Well, I like yours, Dr. Wendler, because your middle name starts with a V. So your initials...you can keep going with that.
- Dr. Walter Wendler: It looks like an EKG.
- Randy Ray: So I want to just start off by talking to both of you about the atmosphere across campus. It's different. I have worked at this university. This is my 18th year. You've been here about the same amount of time, 20 years, De'Arno. The atmosphere is different, than it ever has been before. And it's cool in a way. It's a cross between a normal semester and a summer semester to me. What do you guys think about it?
- Dr. De'Arno De'Armond: I think you're right, Randy. I think it is very different. I think, that what we're seeing is, students have started having a stronger desire. They want to be back in the environment of the university, in the university setting and all the things that the university has to offer. And from an administrative standpoint or faculty standpoint, we have to be mindful of

the restrictions, that have to be in place and the safety and the security of everyone during these times.

But I do think you're right. It is different. I think everyone's done a really good job. I can't say enough about how administration has really responded and responded well to the situation, that we've had to face. And I think, the nature of that's been so supportive and I think the students can tell when they're in class. I think they're doing their part and it's making for a very different, but a very productive and fruitful semester.

Randy Ray: I think part of it to me is, I sense from the students that they're excited to be back and they are willing... I have had no problem with them wearing their mask or anything like that, because they want to be here. And they're excited about being in the classroom.

Dr. De'Arno De'Armond: They are and you can really tell those, that really do want to be there. And the other thing, that I've noticed that makes it a little bit more different is, it's hard to read the room any more with masks. You come out, you're ready with your best dog and pony show. You've got all your best canned jokes about whatever the topic is on that given day. And sometimes it's hard to tell, you can watch a little bit for the eyebrow. That's about what you have to watch for it. But from behind the mask, it's a little bit hard to read the room.

And I think that's one of the things, that's been an adjustment for all the faculty. And then you have the whole technology realm, faculty delivering simultaneous courses, in the synchronous format. And that's also been something, but what a great flexibility we have for our students. Just to be able to have that and produce that and give that to them.

Randy Ray: Dr. Wendler, let's talk about homecoming a little bit.

Dr. Walter Wendler: Sure.

Randy Ray: How we had to adjust that.

Dr. Walter Wendler: Well, unfortunately, it's going to be a very different homecoming than we normally have. And I was looking at some images. I can't remember why, but they were homecoming images from last year and it was a big event, of course.

Randy Ray: It was.

Dr. Walter Wendler: It was the first new homecoming in the football stadium and everything. It was very nicely done by our staff. And this year, though, homecoming will largely be confined to the recognition of the courts, the homecoming courts on the football field at halftime. We're not going to do the parade and to add to, in a sense, reinforce what the De'Arno says. Our students

have remarkable character from my perspective. I just wrote this past week on character and they have remarkable character. And I think it's actually shown more brightly in this time, because students are wearing their mask.

And I know, for example, I received a long email from a student in the business school, who was very disappointed, didn't like wearing a mask and felt like it was confining. He spoke very much like a young person with strong views and so on. And he thought he shouldn't have to wear a mask, but he did. He came to my office with this mask on. And there is something about that. There's no defiance in it. There's just a recognition, that there is a hierarchy of authority. I'm subject to it. I do what the governor says. What he believes we should do, and what the Board of Regents and Chancellor, John Sharp say we should do, I do those things. That's the point of belonging to something, that's larger than you are. No different than a football player on the field, who submits him or herself to the coach and then the quarterback or whatever.

Randy Ray: It's hierarchy.

Dr. Walter Wendler: It's a hierarchy. And there are a lot of places, that want the world to be flat and it's not flat. There is a hierarchy there. And hopefully, if the administration at any organization does anything well, it should be that, it engenders the respect of the people in the hierarchy, to try to be fair and decent and so on and so forth. The students are representing that. So I think the homecoming this year is going to be different, but I think people will be respectful of it and say, "We're doing the best we can." And I really do think students, generally, believe that. There are some, as there are some faculty and staff, who don't think we're doing the best we can and may have a different way of doing things and I respect that too. It's okay. But I believe our goal is to serve all well. And I really do think the students have been very powerful in expressing that. And by the way, I think it's one of the reasons that our enrollment has grown this semester.

Randy Ray: I do too.

Dr. Walter Wendler: That people appreciate that. We treat them like adults.

Dr. De'Arno De'Armond: I think to add to what you just said, you just pointed out something that I think is very unique at West Texas A&M, for a student to have that level of accessibility to the president of the university and to be able to visit one-on-one and for you to make time, I think that's something, you don't see that in a lot of places. And I think that's something, that is a testament to what we do at West Texas A&M. I think you're right and that viewpoints are appreciated and the hierarchy is understood. And I think that's something that has really helped fuel what we have going on here.

Randy Ray: I agree with you. Dr. Wendler showed up to my class before. I taught a podcasting class and he actually came to my class and fielded questions. And they still talk about it.

Dr. Walter Wendler: I had to straighten them amount out. I had to fix it.

Randy Ray: I want to talk about something, that I know is important to both of you. And I want to talk about personal finance, when it comes to dealing with students. De'Arno, I know that, that's your area of expertise. How important is it, that we teach personal finance to students in college these days?

Dr. De'Arno De'Armond: I think it's absolutely crucial. I think it's absolutely crucial. And I'll give you an example. In our area, a lot of our students are first-generation students. And what that means is that, for them, their structures that they have at home are not the same as what they are for others that may have grown up in a family structure, where there's been a long lineage of education.

And so what that does is, a lot of times the families don't understand, the families don't realize and the families... It's not that they can't, it's just never been presented to them in a palatable way. And so it's very crucial for us to fill that role and try to work with our first-generation students and educate them on personal finance matters. And I think, that's something that, I'm very proud of the initiatives that we've put forth at West Texas A&M to address this.

Randy Ray: Dr. Wendler, we're releasing a public service announcement today about that very thing. Tell me, how you feel about personal finance and education.

Dr. Walter Wendler: Well, I think the days... And I apologize, if this is an old story and I'll try to be brief with it. But when I went to school, my father and my father-in-law both said, "Get any degree. It's going to be worth it." They were right. I went and got a pre-architecture degree at Texas A&M University. After I completed an associate's degree in construction management at a community college in New York, I transferred to Texas A&M and it was worth it. And the reason it was worth it, because the tuition... and this is as sure as I'm sitting here, you can look this up in the 1970, Texas A&M records. Tuition was \$200 a semester for all the hours I could take. And there was one fee, one fee, and it was \$12.50 and it was paying for an IBM360 on the second floor of Cushing Memorial Library.

And that was the only fee. It was \$212.50. No matter what degree I got at Texas A&M, it's worth it. I didn't have to borrow a single nickel and my parents were working people, a janitor and a cook. That's my father and mother. Both in the high school, where I went. I couldn't get a break. They knew what kind of a mess I made and my mother knew what I had for lunch every day. But anyway, they were working people with six kids and

it's not a complaint. It's not anything. It's just a reality, that worked very nicely for me. I wouldn't have chosen anything else. And to this day, as I look back on, it was perfect for me, but here's the point, whatever degree I got as a first in the family attendee of a university and a graduate was going to be worth what I paid.

I wish that was now the case, but a student can borrow 50, 60, \$80,000 for a degree, that they have a hard time finding a job with. And people on the campus sometimes resist, that openness and honesty with students that different degrees command, different rates of employment. If you want to be a primary teacher and maybe a kindergarten teacher, you're not going to earn a lot of money, but if your heart is in that, if that's a calling on your life to do that, then I say, "By golly, do it and do it with passion and love and so on and so forth." But don't borrow too much money to do it, because you won't be able to pay it back. And by the way, that's not just kindergarten teachers. When I was down at Lubbock High School, the assistant principal, I gave him this pitch about, making sure that they not borrow too much money.

The assistant principal came up afterwards. His wife was a banker in Lubbock and she had two physicians, a husband and wife team of physicians come in and try to borrow money for a house. They couldn't write a mortgage for him, too much education debt. So they were living in an apartment and couldn't get out of it. And they were physicians. So it's not just kindergarten teachers, it's some of the most highly revered people in society for the knowledge and insight and wisdom, borrowing too much money. The education credit union just supported our Buff Smart program, where we try to help students become financially literate. Well, it's important, especially, as De'Arno mentions in a family, where the student is the first one, because a lot of those parents think, "Gosh, if Billy or Susan gets a college education, they've got it made." Well, not necessarily, if they borrow too much money. So it's an investment.

Randy Ray: I like what you said financially literate. I think that's an important word, that every student that leaves West Texas A&M University should be financially literate.

Dr. De'Arno De'Armond: I agree.

Randy Ray: We're going to take a break. And when we come back, I want to talk about some of the trailblazing things you guys are doing over in the college of business. We'll be back in 30 seconds.

Speaker 4: 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 our 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 wtamu.edu.

Randy Ray: Welcome back to Reflections from WT. I got to be honest with both of you, I was shocked when I heard the news that WT had record enrollment this semester. With everything that's going on in the world today, we have record enrollment. Not many people can say that. Not many universities can say that. That's something that we ought to all be proud of, I think. And why are we having record enrollment in the middle of a pandemic?

Dr. Walter Wendler: I'll give you my impression. One of the things, that apart from an excellent faculty and staff and students who appreciate what WT offers, in March we started having these, what I call a COVID 19 meetings, where we would talk every week with the key leaders from around the campus. And of course, Neil Terry, a former business Dean is now the provost and has a very good business sense. Very good academic sense too. He helps with all this, as do all the vice presidents in their own way. But I told him in March, I said, "Look." I said, "I'm tired of talking about all these problems that we have. I'm going to tell you what I want. I want our enrollment to go up by one student, just one. One. I have to pay their tuition myself, if we get down to that. I'll pay the tuition."

I want a one-student increase. And that started to focus our efforts on being attentive to how we might be able to build the enrollment in this time. So we started talking to students, we called them. We called 6,000 students. 240 faculty and staff and administrators on the university campus, called 6,000 students and talked to them about how things were going. This was after we shifted online. Now, because of the college of business, back in 1997, they started doing online offerings. Well, they got it down. It's not like its bad, but they are working hard at knowing how to do it. And they do a good job with it. Anyway, I think all of that has helped lead to record-breaking enrollment. And another thing, that's important, the business school, this is hard to believe, but the MBA program has one of 10 students at West Texas A&M University is enrolled in business. And a big chunk of those are in the MBA program, that's offered online. Those numbers are just about right, aren't they?

Dr. De'Arno De'Armond: Yes.

Dr. Walter Wendler: One in 10. And a lot of schools have big business programs. And part of it is that business degrees have great value in the marketplace. That's just a matter of fact. So anyway, I think that's all part of it, Randy, but the bottom line is, it was a commitment by faculty members, staff and university leadership to try to grow the enrollment by service, by from the heart service to our students.

Dr. De'Arno De'Armond: I think that's very, very true. And I think that I was part of that group, that made calls to students and I had lists, that I would work through throughout the week. And sometimes for our MBA students, you're making those calls... We have students all around the US and around the world and you're making those calls at different times. And I can remember some of those calls I made on my patio, calling students and I'll never forget talking to people right after the pandemic broke. And we started doing that and I saw the importance of what we were doing, when I talked to this woman in Virginia. And she said, "You took time to call me."

Randy Ray: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Dr. De'Arno De'Armond: I said, "Yeah, how you doing? How's it going?" "What do you do at the university?" "Well, I help run the grad programs." "You do?" "Yeah. How's it going? What can we do for you?" And I think that alone... It's almost hard to not get emotional about it, because I think what you find that, what Dr. Wendler's saying is, we are so fortunate at West Texas A&M University, that there's just such good leadership. That when I look at it, in terms of for our friends in Ag, I'm thinking of my buddies over there, I think of it in terms of like all the horses, pulling the wagon in the right way at the right time. And everybody came together during that time.

And I think that's been a huge bonding, for not only the students, the faculty, the administrators, I think just the whole community. The constituents as well, because they saw, "Look what they're doing." And I'll never forget making those calls and just how those students responded. And something that I really, I look back on the body of work that so many did. And it's just, it was one of the highlights that I've probably had, even though 2020's not been one of the best years. But it's definitely one of the highlights.

Randy Ray: Well, I think, one of the things about West Texas A&M University, that's always been a fact here, is personal relationships that we have with our student.

Dr. De'Arno De'Armond: I agree.

Dr. Walter Wendler: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Randy Ray: Last week I went to my hometown of Pampa, Texas and I had a student come up and he was saying, "Hi, it's good to see you again." And said again, how much he appreciated me calling him and sending him emails and just checking in on him. I think that means a lot to students.

Dr. De'Arno De'Armond: I think you're right. You think about it. You think about how do we do this? What's the magic recipe? And I think there's not one. I think it goes back to what Dr. Wendler said. We've been a pioneer in online education, since 1997. We've had quite a jump. If you think about it, in the marketplace,

we've tested things out. We've broken things. We've seen works, what doesn't and the reality is this we're not done yet. We're just starting with a new realm of more of the production end of what classes will be like in the future. And I think it all centers around quality, affordability and flexibility. And I think that's what we do. We have done such a good job at this university with providing quality and providing the affordability and a four-year degree still to this day. And then also with just the flexibility we make the...

Dr. Walter Wendler: That's powerful three-legged-stool to hold the university up on. It really is quality, affordability and flexibility, and students need flexibility. When I went to school, I'm talking about when I went to Texas A&M, now 40 years ago, I can't even count that high. But when I went down there, they didn't have to be flexible. Everybody looked like me. They were entering, they were going to try to finish in four years, they transferred in like I did and they took all my hours. They made it work in the program. They were flexible. They were flexible. We become bureaucratic sometimes. Bureaucracies tend to calcify an organization. Hyman Rickover, the famous Navy Admiral said one time, "If you're going to sin against God or the bureaucracy, sin against God. He'll forgive you. The bureaucracy never forgets." So I think De'Arno's hit the nail on the head.

Randy Ray: And we were talking this morning, before Dr. Wendler got here, about streaming services, like Pandora and Spotify. We were also talking about Netflix and Apple TV, and I think that's our world now. And I think that we've approached education, that way here at WT, because people want things on demand now. And we're providing that and our online speaks to that.

Dr. De'Arno De'Armond: You're exactly right. And I think that all starts with a really robust technology infrastructure. If you don't have the technology infrastructure to which to build and grow and to continuously improve, what do you have? And I will tell you-

Randy Ray: We owe a lot to James Webb and his crew for that.

Dr. De'Arno De'Armond: That is correct.

Dr. Walter Wendler: And by the way, it's an inventive faculty. It's a faculty, that's willing to build a better mouse trap. And I think that's, again, this flexibility and looking at ways to make things work for-

Dr. De'Arno De'Armond: And it also ties into the realness and to the quality. There's different aspects to those three prongs. There's different aspects, that exists within there. Quality is a function of many different things. Affordability is a function of many different things, and flexibility is a function of many different things. And they have overlaps and they have ways in which we reach people through those three prongs. And I think it's not uncommon

for you to see professors to be testing out a new microphone or to be testing out a new camera or to be testing something out. And it goes back. I'll never forget, when Dr. Hallmark was the provost at West Texas A&M, I was standing the HELC one day and I had a webcam and I was trying to figure out how to buckle the webcam to the monitor in a classroom.

And right as he walked by, I broke it. I shattered that. It was an expensive webcam, probably. And I look over my shoulder and here's Dr. Hallmark standing right behind me. And he said, "What are you doing, De'Arno?" And I said, "Well, sir, I broke a webcam. And he just looked at me and he laughed and he goes, "Keep it up, De'Arno." He said, "You keep breaking stuff. That's the way you do it." And then he went on and I'll never forget that. But I think it's okay to fail. Not everything we do in that space is going to work perfectly, but we learn from it. We grow and we continuously improve, moving on. And I think the students pick up on that. They've never known life without these streaming services. They've never known that.

Randy Ray: Well, we say that over here, one of the things that we're proud of over here in fine arts, and especially in the immediate communication program is, is hands on from the get go. We put stuff in your hands and then that's the way you learn best over here.

Dr. De'Arno De'Armond: Students love that.

Randy Ray: We could talk for days about this stuff.

Dr. Walter Wendler: I can see that this is something else, isn't it?

Randy Ray: I'm ready to throw you guys curve ball. Ready? We traditionally throw Dr. Wendler and our guest a curve ball. So here's the one for this month is, I want guys to think back and tell me, this is our October podcast, I want you both to tell me your best Halloween costume you've ever had.

Dr. De'Arno De'Armond: What are you going to go with there?

Dr. Walter Wendler: I don't know.

Randy Ray: I got you.

Dr. Walter Wendler: You got me. I will tell you a Halloween experience. And I already apologize for telling so many stories, but I got a story. It was Halloween. It was in New York, out on Long Island, about 40 miles from Manhattan. And we did daytime trick-or-treating. Nobody went out at night. Not because it was dangerous or anything, it was just a tradition. After school, you'd come home, get your costumes on and go. Remember, I come from a family of six kids and I had my bags with my candy in it, and it was raining and the bottom fell out of my candy bag. And I think I was probably in third or

fourth grade, and I just ran home crying the whole way. All my candy went out on the street. I tried to put some in my pockets.

Randy Ray: Do you remember what your costume was that year?

Dr. Walter Wendler: I think I went as a Hobo or something, which was pretty easy, actually. You just go to the dresser and get my stuff out. I'll never forget that.

Randy Ray: Bottom the bottom fell out. What about you?

Dr. De'Arno De'Armond: One year, the family went as a rock band. And so, we had a big hair rock band. So my wife and I, and the kids and the hilarious thing was...

Randy Ray: I hope you were the bass player, because their the best.

Dr. De'Arno De'Armond: I didn't think about it, but walking around in different neighborhoods and visiting with people, I saw a lot of my former students and they're looking at me. They recognize me, but they didn't really recognize me in there, but it really sparked some fun conversations that night had. I had a blast doing that.

Randy Ray: Well, that's going to about wrap it up for this episode. This has been a fun one. I've enjoyed talking to you, De'Arno.

Dr. De'Arno De'Armond: You too.

Randy Ray: We'll have to get you back sometime.

Dr. De'Arno De'Armond: Absolutely.

Randy Ray: We appreciate you joining us for this episode of Reflections from WT. Be sure to join us again next time. We'll see you then.