

Reflections from WT- Jeff Baylor and Brad Johnson

- Randy Ray: Welcome to the February 2020 podcast from Reflections from WT, The Heart and the Soul of the Texas Panhandle. My name is Randy Ray, the director of broadcast engineering on campus. And today I am joined by number 11, the 11th president of West Texas A&M University, Dr. Walter Wendler. And we have a couple special guests with us today. Our guests today are Dr. Brad Johnson and Jeff Baylor. Dr. Johnson, let's start with you. What do you do on campus?
- Dr. Brad Johnson: That's probably the most frequently asked question. Vice-President of Strategic Relations. I think of it as a combination of an external relations and special projects role. I think that Dr. Wendler has looked at the opportunities to leverage his own external influence by making sure that there's somebody on the team who can spend time with community college leaders and with superintendents of schools and others to move the WT 125 vision forward for the Texas panhandle and beyond.
- Randy Ray: So you mentioned community college. That's something you have a little experience with, right?
- Dr. Brad Johnson: It's true. I was 23 years in Texas community colleges prior to coming to WT, in a variety of roles. I actually started as a nine month academic advisor and ended up over in East Texas in a community college there as President of Northeast Texas Community College. So it was a interesting ride through that whole spectrum of roles within those institutions.
- Randy Ray: Dr. Wendler, does Dr. Johnson work pretty closely with you on a day-to-day basis?
- Dr. Walter Wendler: Yeah, but he understands the position of the CEO of the organization, even though the community college is a little different than the university, but only a matter of degree, no pun intended. The fact of the matter is that you're the leader. So Brad is able to run with things very nicely. And I don't have to... We spark an idea and off he goes. And thankfully, actually, the whole executive leadership team right now is largely that way. And I'll tell you the truth. I can't imagine with a bunch of people standing around waiting for me to tell them what to do. I don't have to do that with Brad.
- Randy Ray: That's nice.
- Dr. Walter Wendler: Yeah, it is nice.
- Randy Ray: One thing I know that you both are pretty passionate about is student debt. Talk a little bit about that.

Dr. Walter Wendler: I'll just say our debt levels are holding steady, slightly down. We're going to do more. It's funny you mentioned that today, because earlier this morning I was working on dusting off some student debt ideas about ways to reduce student debt. And I think we're going to energize those. I think it's time. And I want students to leave with a debt level that's no more than 60% of their anticipated first year starting salary. And we have people leaving with twice that, and it straps them into a job that they may not want, or a career that they may choose not to do. And I think generally our whole group is passionate about it. We want to be cost-effective and do everything we can to help students.

Randy Ray: How do you feel about it, Dr. Johnson?

Dr. Brad Johnson: Oh, I think reflecting on the differences between a university mission and a community college mission, that is a very interesting part of that. But as Dr. Wendler just articulated, it really comes back to the same principle; what can you reasonably anticipate you're going to be able to earn post degree? And in my previous life, we had two roles that exemplified that so clearly. So we had students who would come in earning minimum wage and leave as a physical therapy assistant, or an occupational therapy assistant, and earn literally \$60,000-\$80,000 a year. That's a huge life-changing role, and taking some debt to achieve that goal made sense for their family.

And then we had child development certificates. These people took care of childcare centers, and they barely made minimum wage. For them to borrow money to get that certificate made no sense at all and it was a prison. But federal policy, which is part of what we're really struggling with, is a one size fits all approach. It believes that fairness means giving every student the same access to the same dollars, instead of seeing fairness as associating the government's assistance with their ultimate goal. So Dr. Wendler has just been so forward thinking in saying we're going to have to look at all kinds of other ways to keep that obligation low. We can't wait on the federal government to change its policy.

Randy Ray: Well, I appreciate that mindset from both of you. Let's shift gears a little bit now. I want to talk to Jeff Baylor, who I think has one of the most important jobs on campus, because if you're not doing your job, none of the rest of us have a job. So let's talk a little bit about what it's like to be director of admissions.

Jeffrey Baylor: Well, thank you. I think I have probably the best job on campus, it's my job to make sure students have access to WT, things like the scholarship program and the CARES Act funding helps us provide access to students. The debt issues students face today are critical. So we're always looking for ways to help them leverage their family's finances. And then of course in these times today that we're faced with, anything we can do to help a student is most important for me.

But for me, I think that the number one thing that we always talk about within the admission staff or with the executives on campus is, how are we helping

students? What's the best thing for students? Future students especially. We want to make sure that we're rewarding them for their success in high school, we're giving them an opportunity to attend WT. So when I say I think I have one of the best jobs on campus, I'm one of those guys that are often telling students the good news, you're admitted and you have an opportunity to attend and be a part of a vibrant community. So that's a fun job.

Randy Ray: Do you travel a lot with your job?

Jeffrey Baylor: My staff travels more than I do. I like to spend most of my time in the university. However, when Dr. Wendler goes on his tours across region 16 and region 17, I do travel with him. So I've been out into the high schools and to meet the administrators and the staff and the students. So I travel when it's necessary.

Dr. Walter Wendler: He's out there, Randy, to make sure I don't say something that's absolutely out in left field. And when I do, he corrects me.

Randy Ray: You mentioned the CARES Act and how important that program is. Let's talk a little bit about that. Can you describe what that is?

Jeffrey Baylor: Yeah. The CARES Act was provided by the government to help students access education really for their immediate needs during the pandemic. And some of the things that they were able to fund are, well, anything really related to their cost of living. Rent or food or anything that would allow them to access education, whether it be technology resources, healthcare, childcare, things like that. So it's a very flexible funding source for students. And then of course, some of the requirements for that, it's actually very simple. They have to follow FAFSA, be a US citizen, have no default on previous federal loans, and be registered in the Selective Service if they're male. So very, very broad or very simple requirements to meet.

Randy Ray: But it is all COVID related. If it's the CARES Act, it's all COVID related.

Jeffrey Baylor: It's need-based funding. So if students can show a need relative to this time during COVID, they potentially would be eligible for funding.

Randy Ray: You mention need based. One thing I'd like to touch on just a little bit, and I'd like to ask all of you, maybe to explain a little bit to people that are listening to this podcast, what is the difference between a merit based scholarship and a needs based scholarship?

Jeffrey Baylor: Yeah. Well, a merit based scholarship is a scholarship program, rewarding students for what they've achieved primarily academically during their high school years. We also look at other things, but ours is really focused on their class rank and their ACT scores. And sometimes we look at their school curriculum. Need based aid our students who have some type of financial need based on the government guidelines. We also have some considerations that we

can make within the state of Texas and also within the university to help students access education if their family shows that they need additional financial resources to pay for college.

Randy Ray: Yeah. Dr. Johnson, what do you think about that?

Dr. Brad Johnson: Well, I might just add that I've already mentioned WT 125, but it has transformed the way that we approach so many of these things. And so forever, we have told students your best chance at a university scholarship is right out of high school. But now, WT actually has a merit based scholarship program for transfer students as well. So now a student who may have struggled through high school, not applied themselves, but they have gone to the community college, applied themselves and performed; they now have a second opportunity at a merit based scholarship at WT, and that's pretty much unprecedented territory for WT.

Dr. Walter Wendler: And by the way, I know you got to take a break, but by the way, I will say that our number of transfer students this spring is up. It's not huge, but it's up. And that's good. The graduate enrollments were up too, but the transfer enrollments are up, which is one of my goals. Because it helps; I mean, the best way to get students to go to school debt free is to either have a 4.0 and a high average standardized test scores, but another way is to start at the community college like I did. And I'm not going to talk about myself, but there's a lot of people that start at community college and then go on and have a great career.

Randy Ray: Yeah, absolutely. We're going to take a break. When we come back, I'd like to talk about how scholarships tie into WT 125. Can we do that? They're nodding their head. We'll be back in one minute.

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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 that provide timeless information and meet the challenges of today's world. Facilities rich in technology, as well as WT history. Now is the time to strengthen connections and open doors for tomorrow's leaders. Share your experience, share your heritage, share your pride.

Randy Ray: Welcome back to Reflections from WT, The Heart and Soul of the Texas Panhandle. Dr. Wendler, how important are scholarships connected to WT 125?

Dr. Walter Wendler: Well, I think they're exceedingly important because we have set out some targets in WT 125 areas that we want to focus the university on. Beef, water, the leadership and management of smaller schools, healthcare in the rural regions of the Texas panhandle and so on. And I think to the extent that we can provide scholarship opportunities it will reinforce those initiatives. So I think they're very important. And we get students then that are headed in the same direction that the university is headed in.

And I think the WT 125 is a pretty careful assessment; remember, we had hundreds of people involved from all over the panhandle, half from on campus, half from off campus. So these are people that have an affinity for the university. Of course, those that work here generally are fairly favorable. And then from outside. And they want the university to be successful, they are anxious for the university to be successful. So the scholarship to reinforce that direction of the institution, that's identified in 125.

Randy Ray: You guys, this is a tough question. I wonder what percentage of our students have at least a scholarship? Would you guys know how to guess at that?

Jeffrey Baylor: Yeah, it's fairly significant.

Randy Ray: As one would think, yeah.

Jeffrey Baylor: The number that's popping into my mind; and I've looked at this number several times; is over 40%, which is significant when you think of the amount of money students receive per student. And of course, when we'd looked at that, that's why we enhanced our scholarship program this year.

Randy Ray: And this CARES grant that we got, which was, we were talking in the break, around \$2.8 million, which is going to be very helpful for a lot of students. And we talked, it's kind of up to our discretion how we dole that out, which is nice that it is very open like that. Dr. Wendler, I wanted to ask you about another scholarship. Chancellor Sharp's wife recently passed away and we were all very sad about that, but one thing that you helped initiate is a scholarship in her honor. Could you talk a little bit about that?

Dr. Walter Wendler: Yes, we did. Actually, it was Todd Rasberry's idea, and a very good one, as a means to recognize the contribution that Charlotte has made to both the state of Texas and of course to the Texas A&M University system. And frequently the spouse is quietly toiling away at various things. And we felt like it was a good opportunity to recognize that. We committed \$25,000 to endow, which is a modest scholarship, but we're getting fairly significant participation now. And that number is growing. And my guess is that it'll reach a \$50,000 before it's done.

Randy Ray: And that is a merit scholarship, as opposed to what we were talking about earlier?

Dr. Walter Wendler: Yes, yes. It's merit based. Yes.

Randy Ray: Do any of you have a story that you can tell us about a student that needed a scholarship and got one? You have one that comes to mind?

Jeffrey Baylor: Yeah, we have many of them.

Randy Ray: Let's hear one.

Jeffrey Baylor: Well, I'll give you an example of something that happened recently. I was in the hallway of Old Main, and I saw a family sitting in the hallway; mother, father, and daughter. And mother was on her phone, dad was sitting patiently, and daughter had her head in her hands, just looked like she wasn't having a very good day. When I approached her, I found out that she was struggling to pay her bill, right? And the mother was on the phone trying to access a Parent PLUS loan. So additional loan money. So I asked the student if she'd come down and talk with me, I walked her down the hall, she met with the scholarship office and we immediately identified a funding source and she had the academic background to qualify for a scholarship.

We funded the entire balance with a scholarship and the parents did not have to borrow any more money. And we got her signed up for the next term. And that's just one example; students don't always know where to go or how to get additional funding. And I want to go back to the question you asked earlier. I said 40%. I was thinking of the merit based scholarship. We also have academic scholarship across our colleges that students earn once they're here. So I'm sure that percentage is much greater than that, I was thinking more on the incoming first-year student scholarships. So anyway, that would be one story, and there are many stories like that.

Dr. Walter Wendler: When we were out on the road visiting 132 schools, I told them a number of things. And one of the things that I said was, "If you don't believe that you're qualified to receive a scholarship, you're not because you won't fill out the form. You'll look at the form and say, 'Ah, there's no sense in doing this. I'm not a great scholar.' Well, that's a self-fulfilling prophecy." I tell people, "Spend a couple of hours, fill out the FAFSA forms and then any other applications, and get them in. And then if you have a question, if you think, 'Oh my gosh, what am I going to do? What am I going to do?' Go to our scholarship office. There's people over there that are willing to help." And a lot of times it's just there and it lays there. I'll give you an example. Two years ago on the Pell grants, which everybody understands, they're grants for needy students. They're not loans, they're grants. These are federal dollars.

Randy Ray: Just give it to you. Yeah.

Dr. Walter Wendler: Yeah, they give it to you. Nationwide, 2.4 billion, B, billion dollars left on the table. Nobody asked. That caused Governor Abbott to say every student in Texas high school, unless they have an objection of some kind, will fill out a FAFSA form because that might reduce their college indebtedness and be good for them and good for the state of Texas and good for our economy. And there was money left on the table, \$2.4 billion. That's a lot of money.

Randy Ray: Yeah. It really is. One of the things you talked about, Dr. Wendler, is students need to apply because you never know if you're going to get it or not. Right?

Dr. Walter Wendler: Right.

Randy Ray: I'll tell you this. My wife and I established a scholarship, it's called a Dig In scholarship. And all it is, is we just need you to be involved. We don't even look at grades. We just want you involved with different organizations across campus, digging in and getting involved with college.

Dr. Walter Wendler: And by the way, Jeff will tell you all day long, so will Brad, that the students that get involved do better, their GPAs are higher.

Randy Ray: Yep, absolutely.

Dr. Walter Wendler: They're less prone to go out and drink and do things that would subtract or somehow diminish their attention to their studies.

Randy Ray: All right. You guys ready for my traditional curve ball? You ready? Over the Christmas break, my son-in-law asked me this, so I'm going to ask you guys this. If you started some kind of retail business, what do you think it would be? If you got out of higher education and started a retail business, what would you do?

Dr. Walter Wendler: You want me to go first on this one?

Randy Ray: Yeah. You go first.

Dr. Walter Wendler: I eat oatmeal for breakfast seven days a week, and I always eat at the house. And they have these little packages of oatmeal that you can buy and put hot water in them. I told Mary, if it was up to me and if I was 40, I'd be doing this. I'd start in a drive-through oatmeal stand, basically. You know how people line up at the coffee shops? Get oatmeal too. And you could order it; like I eat sometimes with almonds, sometimes with pecans, sometimes with walnuts, I put all kinds of stuff in it. Sometimes with frozen fruits, sometimes with oranges in it, and mix it all up.

Randy Ray: It's kind of like the yogurt thing, except it's oatmeal.

Dr. Walter Wendler: Yeah, except it's oatmeal. And you know what? We wouldn't be having this conversation. I'd be a rich man.

Randy Ray: Well, okay. Dr. Johnson, what about you, sir? What kind of retail store do you think you would like to operate?

Dr. Brad Johnson: Well, I'll tell you, they opened a Starbucks at the end of my block, maybe three, four months ago. And every day when I leave home, there is a line of cars out there. So I can tell you one thing I'd look very seriously at would be a Starbucks franchise about anywhere, because it's pretty incredible what throughput they generate on that.

Dr. Walter Wendler: You could just peddle oatmeal out of that thing, too.

Randy Ray: Oatmeal and coffee.

Dr. Walter Wendler: Oatmeal and coffee.

Randy Ray: Jeff, it's your turn. What would you do?

Jeffrey Baylor: That's a really tough question.

Randy Ray: I know it.

Jeffrey Baylor: I think I would open a drive through pickled egg stand. How about that?

Randy Ray: I'm going to ask you another question.

Dr. Walter Wendler: I suppose you'd have plenty of free time. He could just volunteer to recruit...

Jeffrey Baylor: Well, listen. The way I look at it, this is the curve ball, right?

Randy Ray: You're throwing one back.

Jeffrey Baylor: So I'm going to throw one back at you. So I'll just tell you, so right now I'm trying to cut some weight like everybody at the first of the year. So I'm getting a lot of pickled eggs. So that's the only thing really on my mind that I can think of to sell right now.

Randy Ray: You know what? I would go to your store because I like pickled eggs.

Jeffrey Baylor: Yeah. They're good. Yeah.

Randy Ray: Well, this may be the strangest curve ball I've ever thrown and some of the strangest answers. So we're going to have a pickled egg, oatmeal and coffee stand here outside of the campus any day now. Anyway, thank you guys for joining us. It was a good day today.

Dr. Walter Wendler: Thanks so much, Randy.

Randy Ray:

And thank you guys for joining us for Reflections from WT, The Heart and Soul of the Texas Panhandle. We'll see you next time.