

Reflections from WT- Dr. Dirk Nelson

- Randy Ray: Welcome to episode number 17 Reflections from WT, The Heart and Soul of the Texas Panhandle. I am Randy Ray and I'm here today with my boss and the 11th President of West Texas A&M University, Dr. Walter Wendler. How are you feeling today?
- Dr. Wendler: I'm doing just fine. I'm doing just fine. It's a little chilly outside, but I'm doing just fine.
- Randy Ray: Yeah, it's a brand new year and I'm excited about it. One thing that before we start talking about the new year, I wanted to briefly talk about is a few weeks ago you showed up to the City Commissioner meeting in the city of Canyon, and that's one of the hats I wear is a city commissioner, and I wanted to talk just a little bit about that meeting and talk about the relationship between the city of Canyon, Texas and WT. One thing that I mentioned during the meeting, and I believe that I commended you and Mayor Hinders for the great relationship that the city of Canyon and WT has. Talk about that a little bit.
- Dr. Wendler: Okay. I will. Yeah, and first of all, I came to talk a little bit about the economic impact that West Texas A&M University has on Randall and Potter counties specifically and then more generally on the top 26 counties of Texas, and we'll get to that in just a second, but I think your identification of a positive and strong working relationship between Mayor Hinders and the University, and I'm going to try not to peg it to individuals, but I'll say the Canyon community and the WT community, I think it is generally very strong and I think that that should never be taken for granted because it's not always the case. So...
- Randy Ray: It hasn't always been the case. I mentioned to you that day when I went to school here as an undergrad back in the 80s it was really two separate things.
- Dr. Wendler: Right.
- Randy Ray: Two separate things and it's so much better now.
- Dr. Wendler: Well and you know the development that's occurring in Canyon, and restaurants, and the square is being developed and just things are happening and I think that's good. It's good for the city. It's also very good for the students because the students enjoy the opportunity, when they're away from home especially, but even if their local commuter students enjoy the opportunity to get into town a little bit on with friends and have dinner or lunch or something. It extends the campus and I think the campus extends the community too.
- Randy Ray: Me too. I wonder what the city of Canyon wouldn't be like without WT. It would be a lot different.

Dr. Wendler: Somebody told me it would look like Tulia, which is not a bad thing. I like Tulia but it's not a University town.

Randy Ray: Yeah, I agree with that.

Dr. Wendler: It's just a, I don't know, I think we have a do have a very fine working relationship and I think it's going to lead to prosperity for both, and Randy, the night or two nights after that, a few, maybe it was the next day, I went to the Canyon ISD meeting and what we've got here is, in my way of thinking, is a three legged stool. The Canyon ISD has a very, very good school system. I mean just look at the growth in Canyon ISD. Canyon is a vibrant, robust kind of Panhandle community and our University is striving to be a regional University that serves its region well, and I think all of these things tied together are a recipe for success for all three.

Randy Ray: So, we are in a new year and we're in a new decade. Let's talk about what the future of WT looks like in the coming year, and in the coming decade.

Dr. Wendler: Okay. We have our long range plan, which it's full of potholes. It's an idea, it's a look into the future and we're going to find out that some of the things we identified in there are worthwhile and other things in there, we need to just shed or not pay too much attention. I've done these before. I did the one, I led the planning effort at Texas A & M in 1998 and 99 for what was called vision 2020 there. They still use the plan. It's going to, in a sense, it exhausts itself next year, but they don't use every point of it. You try to predict the future. Who can know the future?

Randy Ray: Who can do that?

Dr. Wendler: Who can do that? No one. So, you do the best you can with it and it spawns ideas, and I think one of my key goals in the immediate future is to come to grips with a proper relationship size-wise, and in other dimensions of the number of on-campus residential students, and the number of online students. Online education right now at WT is 25% of our students are online.

Randy Ray: Wow, I didn't realize that.

Dr. Wendler: So, 2,500 are online. Well, you can talk with Dean Nelson here, he's got a very powerful online program, the RN to BSN program and it's good, and he'll talk to you about that I know, and there's some business programs and others and we're going to increase that. I would personally like to see the relationship between on-campus and online students basically be one for one. In other words, half of our, but while we strive towards that goal, I would like to see the quality of the freshman class, the on campus students that come here to study, go up and we're seeing that last three years.

Randy Ray: The quality.

Dr. Wendler: The quality, as measured by standard quality indicators, and these are imperfect to be sure, but things like class rank, GPA, test scores, and they are creeping up ever so slightly, but they're not creeping down. And a lot of regional institutions right now are dropping standards to try to attract students because the pressure for enrollment is so great that big universities are, they're stifling the growth of the regional institutions. So, I want to address that in the coming years. It'll be a long process, but I would like to get to that, and in so doing, would like to not reduce the on-campus population but not grow it much. I want the primary growth to be in online and I want to continue to increase the quality of the on campus experience, and while I'm talking, I'll keep talking. You're used to that, but I go out and I recommend students don't borrow money for the first two years of college.

I recommend that because students are being choked with debt, and it's interesting that I've been doing that for three years, but the new freshman enrollment goes up, and I can't again predict the future, but I'm going to say watch our freshmen enrollment next year. I'm just going to say that as like a piece of bait out there, but watch our freshman enrollment next year while I'm out telling people to vote...

Randy Ray: You should take that out on tour.

Dr. Wendler: And well, yes, and I've tried to be honest with people. I Say, "Look, don't over borrow." Never borrow more than 60% of the anticipated starting salary. So if you go through our RN program, BSN program, I think the average starting salaries, and Dirk would know more, but I think are probably close to, I don't know, between 50 and \$60,000, something like that. Let's say they're 50. So, I'm saying don't borrow more than \$30,000 to become an RN. Don't borrow more than, if you're going to be a school teacher in Borger and the average, let's say you're a fourth grade teacher and the starting salary is around \$40,000, don't borrow more than \$24,000. If you double that, for example, and I know many school teachers that have borrowed 60 or \$70,000 and they lead a life that's directed by repaying that debt. There are hundreds...

Randy Ray: It's an epidemic.

Dr. Wendler: Yeah, and there are hundreds of thousands of people who received their social security check and the first thing they do is pay for their college loan. They're getting a social security check and paying... Something's wrong with that, and I want to let people know that we're going to try to do things different and we have to be careful. We're increasing fees, increasing costs and if the quality of what we offer is not going up with those increased costs and fees, just read a study on the return on investment of a University education, and there's some surprising schools in that list, but that's going to be my focus I would say in the coming years is this idea of a relationship between cost and quality.

Randy Ray: When we've talked a little bit about the new year, we've talked about the new freshman class coming in. Let's talk about the campus for a minute. We have

recently torn down Stafford hall, and what do you think the campus is going to look like over the next few years?

Dr. Wendler: Well, the campus continues to improve, I think in its service to students and it's got a good pedestrian feel to it. I think it's a nice campus to walk. Some of the walks are getting a little long like over to Ag Sciences and so on, but you can still walk this campus, and I think it's very pleasant. I think the football tailgating and so on, and I'm not talking about wild parties or anything, but just that presence of that activity on campus has been very positive for the campus. So, I just want to see us continue to improve. I want to clean up some of our old structures, Old ED building is a high priority. PPHM is a high priority. These are important campus landmarks.

Randy Ray: So, where a Stafford was, is that going to be parking now you think?

Dr. Wendler: Yeah, at least for the short term, maybe I'll say mid-term, it's going to be parking is what we... We had hoped...

Randy Ray: That'll help make a lot of students happy.

Dr. Wendler: Yeah. Yeah. Well, it's close. It's fairly close in easy access to a number of the places on campus where students go, JBK and so on and so forth. This building, I think it'll help.

Randy Ray: What excites you the most about the coming year? 2020.

Dr. Wendler: 2020. I'm excited about the continued progress that we're making in academic quality, I think, and we have to stay vigilant and I think we're sticking to it, and I'm excited about that. I'm also excited about the fact that this will be our 30th year. In 2020 we'll celebrate our 30th year as part of the Texas A&M University system, which I am, I was talking with Representative John Smithee about this and he thinks it's a very important accomplishment and he said this has been important for WT. WT's grown.

Randy Ray: As I said, I wonder what Canyon would be like without WT, I wonder what WT would be like without the A&M system, it'd be hurting. I think it helps a lot.

Dr. Wendler: I think it's helpful, but have to maintain our identity. I've known Russell Long for 20 years and he was always concerned, and I think appropriately, that we not sacrifice our WT identity as we joined the system. And I try to be ever mindful of that, but I also see positive benefits from being in the system. We have relationships with various system initiatives that are very helpful to WT, and to the Panhandle and I don't think we're, in a sense, losing our identity or selling our soul to get those to work and I want to be mindful about.

Randy Ray: We're still WT.

Dr. Wendler: We are WT.

Randy Ray: Yeah. We're going to take a break and when we come back we're going to talk to someone that has an interesting background in the NFL and is a leader on campus today. We'll be back in about 60 seconds.

Speaker 3: 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. Facility's rich and 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: Welcome back to Reflections from WT, The Heart and Soul of the Texas Panhandle. For the segment of the podcast, we have a special guest. We are going to be talking to Dr. Dirk Nelson. He is the Dean of the College of Nursing and Health Sciences here at WT. Dr. Nelson, welcome.

Dr. Nelson: Absolutely. I appreciate being here. Appreciate the invitation.

Randy Ray: We appreciate you being here.

Dr. Nelson: Sure.

Randy Ray: I alluded to the fact before we went on break that you spent a little time in the NFL. Tell us about that.

Dr. Nelson: I think the key word in that comment or that phrase was little, but that that is correct. I was a free agent with the Seattle Seahawks back in 1986. I was a punter, played in all of two preseason games before I was ignominiously released following a game against the Detroit Lions.

Randy Ray: The Seahawks has, they have a connection with WT. One of my former students, Charlie Martin, played for the Seahawks for a little bit. So yeah. What was that like?

Dr. Nelson: So, my six week tenure there in Seattle, I loved it. At the time, I was hoping it was going to turn in from six weeks maybe to a six year career. Enjoyed Seattle, but had I not been waived back in August of 1986 I never would've met my wife and we would never have had our two children. So, it worked out great.

Randy Ray: Well how did you transition to academics from that?

Dr. Nelson: Oh, that's a great question. Actually, I had already received my master's degree by the time I was in the training camp with the Seahawks. I attended Montana State University for my baccalaureate degree, played football there and had a marvelous time. Enjoyed my experiences there. That's where I studied exercise science. I wanted to go to graduate school, and initially when I was in graduate school, I wanted to go into a clinical setting, largely working in cardiac rehabilitation, patients that have had heart attacks and strokes, and rehabilitating them from physiologic perspective, but a gentleman named Tom Thomas, who was my teaching hero, he was at the University of Kansas where I went to graduate school. He came in one morning and had an announcement for a teaching position at a small college in Nebraska and I had an epiphany over about the 30 seconds that he read that teaching announcement and I said, "I want to be in academic." So, that's how I got into higher education.

Randy Ray: When did you come to WT?

Dr. Nelson: 2010 so I've been here 10 years now and a great group of students, a magnificent group of faculty and staff and I love it.

Randy Ray: Well, tell me about the College of Nursing and Health Sciences, and they've got some really great things happening right now. Big move coming up.

Dr. Nelson: Yeah, absolutely. I couldn't be more proud of the things that are going on at the college. I'm a data driven person. Over the last 10 years, our enrollment has gone up 40%. In 2019 versus 2011, the number of graduates from our college has gone up 90%. When you look at that same time frame, the cost to the University to educate any one of our graduates has gone down 36%. So, when you look at that enrollment growth, you look at that at graduation growth, obviously we're tracking kiddos, we're keeping kiddos, we're graduating kiddos, and we're doing it a much more cost effectively. So, I could not be more proud of that. We do have an online presence. Our colleges, over the last a year, received over 30 national recognitions for all of our programs, largely due to cost efficacy, and quality. So, I'm very, very proud of those.

Randy Ray: Yeah. Tell me about the big move coming up.

Dr. Nelson: Yeah, we have probably by Fall 2021, the baccalaureate program in nursing will be moving to the second floor of the Amarillo center. There's 25,000 square feet of space in that facility. That particular program has grown the University, thanks to the leadership of Dr. Wendler I think has committed additional faculty members to that program and that's how we can grow. And so if we're going to grow that program, we need additional space. And so I think that 25,000 square feet of space is going to turn into a marvelous clinical experience for the students, once they're admitted into the baccalaureate program in nursing. So, their final two years will be there. There'll be some tremendous symbiosis because we work closely with the hospitals, obviously, in clinical rotations. So, just from a logistics standpoint, that's going to make a lot of sense. Moreover, the college has our department of communication disorders and the WT speech

hearing clinic is already up and running there, and they serve children, the speech hearing clinic does. They serve children, they serve adults, and we also have the Panhandle Area Health Education Center in that particular facility.

So, you combine all those entities with some other initiatives we're working on right now. One is referred to as the Healthy Texas Panhandle, which is something that's near and dear to my heart, and we have expertise not only from the student's perspective but from the faculty perspective in our college. We want to work closely with the Paul Engler College of Agriculture and Natural Sciences to help bring to fruition what's referred to as the Institute for Advancing Agriculture and Health. We have strengths that this University in those two areas and working with County extension agents through the A&M AgriLife extension service. I want to provide preventive services to the medically underserved throughout the entire Texas Panhandle.

Randy Ray: Wow. Let me ask you both about the Amarillo Center. Dr. Wendler, when did we open that? It's been a couple of years now?

Dr. Wendler: Just over, yeah, just over a year really. A year and a half.

Randy Ray: It's a beautiful facility and I would encourage everyone to, if you're downtown to go by and just take a look at it. What all's housed down there now?

Dr. Wendler: Well, mostly Dirk's programs. Dean Nelson, he's got a good slate of programs down there, but I just want to emphasize what Dean Nelson is talking about here and that is this idea that this will be a hub to help address healthcare in rural Texas. I've just visited 65 schools in the South Plains. Did number 65 the day before yesterday, and in two places, Hamill and Crosbyton hospitals are either closed or closing. And what's going to happen there is that those citizens of those smaller communities are going to be starved for healthcare. And Dirk knows much better than I, and I wish he'd say a word about it, how would that's going to be addressed through nurse practitioners that 16 walked the stage, I think it was 16 on Saturday. I shook hands with every one of them and I asked every one of them, "Are you going to stay in the Panhandle?" And all but three said yes, and I said, "That is a bingo." And that is Dr. Nelson's leadership of that nursing school, and along with helpers like Kathy Shipp.

Kathy came with me on a couple of these visits. She is the twice appointed President of the Texas Board of Nursing Examiners. First appointed by Perry and now appointed by a Governor Abbott, and she has a sense of the power of all this. That came from Dean Nelson. That didn't come from anywhere else, and her passion for nursing. She has a great passion for it. She's a WT graduate, but she has a heart for the Panhandle, and I think these smaller communities that are going to be served by nurse practitioners, but again, I'm just a layman. Dean Nelson knows the real story on all of this.

Randy Ray: Let's talk a little bit about accreditation. Accreditation is a big thing in universities. Would you explain what that means and what accreditation your programs have?

Dr. Nelson: Yeah. Some disciplines have to have accreditation. They have disciplines specific accreditations, and in order for a person to become a licensed, you fill in the blank, they have to have graduated from a program that's accredited by some national organization and in the College of Nursing and Health Sciences, we have two separate national accreditations. One is the American Speech Language Hearing Association or ASHA. They supervise our program in communication disorders, specifically the graduate program where students get a masters in SLP and become licensed speech language pathologists. And then also we are accredited through the Commission on Collegiate Nursing Education, or CCNE, and then they review all of our programs. Not only the baccalaureate but the master's programs in nursing as well, and in fact, we just had a CCNE visit last spring and found out the results in fall and so we have 10 years worth of accreditation. That's the maximum length of time they can make that recommendation and we received that this fall. So I'm very proud of what's going on in all of our departments.

Dr. Wendler: Derek, I know you're not prone ever to a hyperbole, but what were the findings of that accrediting report? Did you think that we really rang the bell? I know we did and I'm smiling about it, but the fact of the matter is just say a word about what the accrediting group said.

Dr. Nelson: No, I think one of the most glaring things they notice where the licensing rates for our NCLEX results. So when a student passes, or rather when a student graduates from a nursing program, he or she is required to take a licensing exam. It's referred to as the NCLEX. We are mandated to have at least 80% of our graduates pass the NCLEX first time they take it. For the last eight years, we have averaged over 95% of our graduates from West Texas W&M have passed that licensing exam the first time that they took it. The Speech Language Pathology students take what's referred to as the Praxis. They have virtually 100% passing rate on the Praxis.

Dr. Wendler: And again because this man is prone to natural humility, the fact of the matter is that places us in very strong competition with many, many nursing schools that charge a lot more money and don't achieve the kind of results, number one, and number two. When he came, the nursing program was on the edge, on the precipice of just falling apart. Isn't that right Dean?

Dr. Nelson: The influx rates were low, and we had some stern, some hard, difficult discussions with faculty and with students. The faculty made some recommendations with regard to admissions criteria in terms of progressing through the program, in terms of exit criteria and I supported those recommendations. They are the experts in the field, they are the professionals, and I think collectively we've been able to put together a program that educates

nursing students magnificently. I'm very proud of what's been going on in that department.

Randy Ray: Well you should be and it's such a big part of West Texas A&M University. Thank you for all you do over there and we are all proud of the nursing program and the College of Nursing and Health Sciences. We're a bit out of time. I'm going to throw you guys a curve ball. You're ready?

Dr. Wendler: I'm ready.

Randy Ray: You're ready. We'll see if you're ready. Let's say that you were a superhero. What would your superpower be?

Dr. Nelson: I don't know the names of the superheroes, but the one that's flexible, that can stretch. Who's that one?

Randy Ray: Mr. Fantastic.

Dr. Nelson: I would be Mr. Fantastic. I think he's a...

Randy Ray: Why? Because you want to remain flexible.

Dr. Nelson: I want to remain flexible. That's exactly right. There are lots of twists and turns and curves and changes and ups and downs when it comes to the University life and being able to accommodate all those twists and turns and changes and ups and downs comes in handy.

Randy Ray: That's a good answer.

Dr. Wendler: And by the way, if I might add to that, one of the, and I don't know anything about these, but I know because I understand this sort of superhero thing that Mr. Flexible never loses his roots. You know from where he's coming in from where he's going, and that's that too.

Randy Ray: Good answer. What's your answer?

Dr. Wendler: I'd almost like to say the same thing. I don't want to be Superman, that's not happening. I'm an old guy that can hardly lift 40 pounds anymore. What? I don't know, Randy. You stumped me. You stumped me. Why do you got to stump me?

Randy Ray: Normally I don't.

Dr. Wendler: What a way to start the year, but you stumped me. I'm not sure what I'd want to do, but listen, I'd be glad to be the assistant for Dean Nelson while he was the Mr. Flexible or whatever he was called.

Randy Ray: I think, if you were ask me, I think I'd want to be The Flash, the guy that's really fast because there had been several faculty meetings that I'd like to speed out of. So...

Dr. Nelson: Maybe you can be Mr. Invisible and kind of leave.

Randy Ray: Yeah. Mr. Invisible... Or what about flying? It'd be fun to fly to.

Dr. Wendler: Oh yeah, it would.

Randy Ray: Yeah.

Dr. Wendler: That would be.

Randy Ray: Well, that's going about wrap it up for episode number 17 of Reflections from WT, The Heart and Soul of the Texas Panhandle. Thank you for joining us, and we'll be looking forward to talking to you again next time.