

## Reflections from WT – Special Edition with TAMUS Regent Elaine Mendoza Transcript

Randy Ray: Welcome to a special episode of Reflections from WT, the heart and soul of the Texas panhandle. I am your host Randy Ray. Today is going to be a really different and kind of, like I mentioned earlier, special episode. I have a couple of special guests with me today. As always with me I have the President of West Texas A&M Dr. Walter Wendler, and our special guest today is Texas A&M University's System Board of Regents Vice-Chairman, Elaine Mendoza. Welcome to both of you.

Regent Mendoza: Thank you.

Dr. Wendler: Good to be here.

Randy Ray: I've been looking forward to today. In 1990 West Texas State University became part of the Texas A&M University system. I was living in Tennessee at the time. My family called and I had friends call me and tell me that that had happened. Just to be perfectly honest, I had misgivings about it. I didn't know what was going to happen to my university. I had always bled maroon. I was a Buffalo at heart. But after working here 15 years, I can tell you I truly believe that it has been a fantastic move for the university. Just on behalf of people that work at WT and have graduated from WT, thank you for all you do for us.

Regent Mendoza: Well you're kind and generous, and I'm so happy to hear that indeed you came back to your home and you felt it was still home.

Randy Ray: It is.

Regent Mendoza: Because that's what it's all about is each of the component universities of the Texas A&M system are unique and need to stay unique.

Randy Ray: Yeah, I tell people I came back to WT in 2002 and well just how the campus has completely changed since then. Since I left in 1984, I come back and man it's almost like a different place, but it still has the same personality. It's really great.

Vice Chairman Mendoza, I just want to ask you what is a regent and what does a regent do?

Regent Mendoza: Okay. Well depending on who you ask it could be bad or good. I don't know, but regents are appointed by the governor for a six year term. The governor of the state appoints nine members, three every two years, every biennium. We are charged with the fiduciary responsibilities of the system. We are charged with policy setting at the system level. In truth we employ one person, and that's the chancellor of the system. Everybody else works for the chancellor.

Randy Ray: So you find the chancellor? The regents find the chancellor?

Regent Mendoza: Yes absolutely. We hire and fire the chancellor. We also have a responsibility to the taxpayers of the state. In order to invest those state dollars the best we can and mostly to ensure that every student that comes through the Texas A&M system is prepared to succeed in the workforce, in the military, or whatever occupation of choice that they have.

Randy Ray: What's your favorite thing about being a regent?

Regent Mendoza: Wow. The students. Focusing on enabling their dreams to come true. Focusing on making sure that our institutions are indeed putting all the support systems together, as well as a top-notch faculty, as well as a top-notch staff in order to enable our students to be successful.

Randy Ray: So you're education is in aerospace engineering. Is that right?

Regent Mendoza: That's correct.

Randy Ray: How has that served you as being a regent?

Regent Mendoza: It's about analytics. It's about being able to solve problems. It's about pinpointing areas that need more attention and making sure that we are focused in the right areas in order to make sure that we're delivering on the promise of higher ed.

Randy Ray: Yeah. Well we are a regional institution. Let me ask you this, what are the roles of the Texas A&M University system regional institution?

Regent Mendoza: You know we've already said each one is unique. Through that uniqueness comes the ability to serve students in that area in that community. It's about access. Texas is a huge huge state. There's no way all of our young people can gravitate to one, two, three, four campuses. We have to have access. It's about ensuring that we solve problems and have the workforce, I.e. our students that graduate, to enable communities to flourish by making sure that they have the capacity and the knowledge and the skills to, if they choose, stay in that community and bring it to the next level, no matter what industry is in that region.

It's also about economic development for the community. Having folks like yourself and President Wendler, all the faculty and staff that are here making a home, building the community up. That enables a lot of growth and whatnot. Then, focused areas in research and technology that may not matter to others in the country or in the state, but are very pertinent to this region is a focus of each one of our institutions.

Randy Ray: Yeah and I know Dr. Wendler totally agrees with you about that. He has visited the top 26 counties in the Texas panhandle. Dr. Wendler, speak to that a little bit. We talk about that a lot on our podcast, but how is WT truly the heart and soul of the Texas panhandle?

Dr. Wendler: Yeah that's exactly right Randy. Regent Mendoza's view on this is, and somebody would say, a listener might say well he's just saying that because she's sitting there next to him, but the fact of the matter is we are absolutely committed to serving the Texas panhandle first and what are needs are here. We can replicate all sorts of things, but we cannot replicate geography. What is here, the nature of the people, the industry and the businesses that have grown up here, they need to be tended to very carefully because they're important. They're an important part of Texas. Most people may know this, but 35% of the beef consumed in the United States is produced within 100 miles of Canyon, Texas where we are. That's an important industry.

There's a lot of oil and gas that's still produced up here. If you look a little bit south of us and look what's going on in Midland and Odessa, I drove down to Midland not long ago and I was through a place where they had kind of a community parking lot for all the drilling rigs that were out there. They were busing, I could see it, they were busing these oil field workers back and forth from one big parking lot to probably 10 or 12 companies poking holes in the ground out there. This is an important part of the state. There's a culture here that has great value in West Texas. We talk about what our engineering programs and business programs, or Ag programs, what they do for this part of the world, but the fact of the matter is there is higher quality symphony, opera, ballet in Amarillo, Texas than in many cities two or three times the size of Amarillo. That's for one reason, West Texas A&M University. We produce those people right here in this building.

Randy Ray: In this building.

Dr. Wendler: In the college you're a part of right here.

Randy Ray: Yeah. In this \$32 million building that the A&M system helped us build.

Dr. Wendler: Yes. By the way, I'm glad you and Regent Mendoza addressed that because our relationship is very powerful. We're planning next year, 2020, will be the 30th anniversary of our membership in the region. We're trying to get ... I actually had lunch with Boone Pickens not long ago trying to get him to come up here and celebrate that thing. I don't know if he will or he won't, but anyway I would love to have him come up for that because he was the chairman of the board when that happened, the chairman of West Texas State University board.

Randy Ray: Let me ask you both this. Should a regional institution try and serve beyond their region?

Regent Mendoza: You want me to go first?

Dr. Wendler: I'll go first Vice-Chair. I think what happens is that when you serve the region well, even if you encase that region with say a border wall so that people couldn't get in or out, the word will somehow ooze out of the region if it's being well served. Two legged marketeers will do the job for you. If we serve people in the Texas panhandle well, people in Houston and Dallas and San Antonio are going to find out about it. Some parents may want their recent high school graduates, for example, in an environment that's different than an urban or suburban center. This is, as I told the young lady from Katy, Texas one day just after I got here, happened to be an African-American woman, I asked her how are you getting along up here. She said well it's different. I said but are you enjoying it. She said well I do, but it's so different. I said well you can actually treat this as an international study experience and you never had to cross the state line because it is such a different culture up here. I think when we do our job well up here the news will travel.

Randy Ray: Word gets out.

Dr. Wendler: But first and foremost we have to serve locally.

Randy Ray: Do you feel the same way?

Regent Mendoza: Absolutely. The core of the institution and the core of, the priorities that they aim to meet and exceed should be the unique part of the campus, but to bring in others from outside of this world is a good thing. Those that are coming, like the young lady from Katy coming in to this institution, to this community, needs to learn about this institution and learn from the folks here and vice versa. There's just so much more cultural exchange and robustness and understanding each other that yield great benefits than to say no just people from this region. That's not going to work.

Randy Ray: I totally agree with you.

Dr. Wendler: Randy, if I can interject just one other thing. I've told myself I'm not going to talk too much because I usually talk too much, but I do want to say this. We just started a new doctrine in education. It's focused on small school systems. There was some, not real pushback, but people said well gosh we're going to run out of small people and small school systems. Well 20% of the United States exists in small school systems, K-12 schools that often get overlooked for the major metropolitan areas. The fact of the matter is we took in our first cohort in this brand new program in January. We thought we would have 15 students. We had 36. We thought all of them would be from Texas. They're not. We have people from Central Florida because people in Central Florida recognize that the education programs at Florida State and University of Florida, those are geared towards major metropolitan and suburban regions.

What we've got here is an approach to training administrators and school leaders that's attentive to the needs of people in smaller communities. I had one superintendent that I had talked with, he had a pre-K through 12 school with 140 kids in it, so just about 10 students per year. He told me he had been in the household of every student that went to that school. Now he didn't have to go to 140 because there were obviously siblings and so on. He maybe went to half that many, but the bottom line is he knew those families, he knew where they came from. If we can serve small schools like that in our region ... We had this effort just recently and reached out to all the 1A and 2A schools in the state of Texas and we're getting a response on that. I'm getting emails from principals in places afar that say gosh we really appreciate this, we've got people we think WT would serve well.

I think that reinforces Regent Mendoza's point that when we serve well it will be a value to others.

Randy Ray: I do too. We are going to take a break and when we come back I'm going to ask Chairman Mendoza about some of her passions. All right, we'll be back in just a second.

Speaker 4: 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. Today we're talking to Vice Chairman Elaine Mendoza, who is one of the system Board of Regents. She's paid us a visit today. I wanted to talk to you a little bit about a couple of things that you're passionate about. One thing is the advancement of women and minorities in engineering and technology and science. Talk a little bit about that. Why are you passionate about that?

Regent Mendoza: I thank you for asking. Well, no one could have predicted how much technology would really change things. We knew it was coming, but the extent to which it is rapidly changing things and making the world in some cases a better place and some cases more challenging. If you take a look at the workforce, the current workforce in science engineering and technology, we are going to have an aging out. The numbers coming in are not as much as those that are aging out. With technology being more integrated into our daily lives, it's real important that we have more of that workforce coming in, especially our young bright talent.

If you take a look at the population, if we were to segment the demographics of those that are aging out, it's much different than those that are coming in, or the population of the 18 to 22 year olds right now. If we were able to get more women and under represented minorities into science and technologies, there would be plenty, enough to fill the seats that are going to be vacated as well as

even expand it more. We just haven't had traditionally those demographics entering science engineering and technology. It's real important. Not to mention, everybody brings such unique perspectives. In order to solve big problems and in order to address and make a difference issues of the day, we need all the brain power we can get from those different perspectives to come up with the best solution. Just as we spoke about WT having an influx of folks from all over the state and/or outside the state makes for a better place, the same thing with solving problems.

Randy Ray: Diversity, yeah.

Regent Mendoza: Absolute diversity of thought, diversity of perspective, diversity from experience, all culminates in a much better solution.

Randy Ray: Well WT definitely agrees with you. Our Dean of Engineering, Dr. Emily Hunt, is a female and does a fantastic job. We had her on the podcast a few weeks ago and just fascinating to hear her story. Dr. Wendler would you speak to that too? How does WT back her up on that?

Dr. Wendler: Well I think here, and again I'm going to go back to the panhandle. The panhandle has a certain toughness. There's a tradition here and so on that's in many ways conventional, but there's also a certain toughness. I think when a person can do the job those are the people that rise to the top. I would say that Regent Mendoza is an example of that. I think there are many females and minorities in various disciplines, and in this part of the world if you can do the job that's what matters. There's a kind of pragmatism about performance. I call it performance pragmatism. You do the job, you get the job. That's what causes people to advance.

What I appreciate so much about Dr. Hunt is that she, as a matter of fact I presented a copy of one of the books to Regent Mendoza, on reaching out to children because that's where it has to start. In a previous life I went to a community one time that was a very poor rural community. Everybody there, the young men aspired to be, this is an oversimplification but it will make the point, aspired to be a truck driver, the women aspired to be hairdressers. That was the community. It was a tiny community. Their aspirations, not that, those are both dignified ways to make a living, there's no question about that, but there is when you get a group of people together, there is a much more sundry mix of aspirations. I think that's what happens when we bring different kinds of people into different disciplines. In an odd way our nursing program is increasingly becoming more male than it was, and males bring different perspectives of nursing to the nursing program.

Regent Mendoza: Well I think for many years, for decades I would say, young people, back to Dr. Wendler's point of starting early is exactly right. Sometimes you can't dream it if you don't know it exists. I mean if you think about how many young golfers got in the game because Tiger Woods was there. Also for females, studies show, especially in middle school, middle school girls aspire to do something that

makes a difference. They don't see science and engineering fields that people make a difference in, although that's exactly what they do. So there was not a lot of communication.

The stereotypes of scientists and engineers perpetuate that. If you take a look at draw a scientists contest that was held nationwide to middle schoolers, you have a very typical picture of what a scientist looks like. Young women in particular don't want to aspire to be this recluse, or et cetera, this stereotype. Until we start breaking those, like Dr. Hunt, what a great example, then young people know they can aspire to do things. We have to incorporate the statement and the truth that engineers and scientists make a difference in people's lives, can make things better. It's real important that we do this.

Randy Ray: I totally agree. I'm really proud of the fact that over here in the media communication department at West Texas A&M we are very diverse, and I love that. In fact, our two student leaders at our campus radio station are both female. Our general manager and our program director, both female. The general manager is Hispanic and the program director is African-American. I love that. I love that we are so diverse over here. I think it makes us stronger.

Dr. Wendler: I agree with you. It's like biodiversity. It does create strength. The other thing is that it breaks the preconception about West Texas, that they're just a bunch of old guys, cattle ranchers, and oilmen, and so on and so forth. There's some of that, and I mean that's not necessarily all bad, it's just that it breaks that preconception. I still say it's performance pragmatism. You get the job done, you can run the radio station, you're running the radio station. That's the way it works.

Randy Ray: Yeah. Let me ask you just real briefly. Another thing you're passionate about is healthcare and economic growth in rural areas. Can you speak to that just a little bit?

Regent Mendoza: Well I just don't see how you decouple educational attainment away from having access to great healthcare. It starts with maternal care of the mother in pregnancy and it continues on throughout the life of an individual. I mean if you're sick, not feeling well, if you have an impairment of any sort that is not identified as you're young, that puts barriers on you.

Randy Ray: How do you learn?

Regent Mendoza: That's exactly right. We've got to find a way to eliminate that barrier. Being able to diagnose problems early. Be able to have a maintenance program. I can't get over how much millions of dollars are spent by industry to maintain equipment, their earning assets. Whether it's a robot, a drill press, I mean you name it. Industry pays a lot of dollars in maintenance, which is nothing but a wellness program for their equipment. Imagine the power of being able to ensure that our best and brightest resource, bar none the human being, has that kind of

investment with respect to wellness, with making sure that we are well "maintained" and so forth. The power that can be unleashed is tremendous. You can't decouple access to healthcare from educational attainment from the very beginning.

Randy Ray: Well I can hear the passion in your voice when you talk about that. Yeah, very passionate about that. I appreciate that. It is tradition on all of our podcasts that I throw a curve ball, so I'm going to throw you one. You ready?

Regent Mendoza: I hope so.

Randy Ray: This is not too tough.

Regent Mendoza: Okay.

Randy Ray: Let's think back to 12 year old Elaine Mendoza. What was your dream job back then?

Regent Mendoza: To be an astronaut.

Randy Ray: Really?

Regent Mendoza: Yeah.

Randy Ray: Did you ever think that you would be a Board of Regent member, especially Vice Chairman?

Regent Mendoza: Not at all.

Randy Ray: When I was 12 I didn't have a clue what that even was.

Regent Mendoza: I didn't even know they existed. Right. Even when I went to A&M I didn't know there was a Board of Regent. My mother was a lifelong, is a lifelong educator. She just retired. Educational attainment changed radically the economic situation of our family because my parents put themselves through school while we were going to school. There's just, I just feel like education is the great equalizer. It's the great enabler. It ensures democracy and the democratic process by getting folks engaged in community and so forth. I felt, at least myself, that being able to participate and volunteer, I wasn't blessed with the education gene that these great educators have, but I could do something in parallel to enable them to do their thing. No, I did not know there was a Board of Regents, nor did I ever dream that I would be on the board, but it's been a real privilege.

Randy Ray: I think I figured this out. What if, I think this would make you happy, what if the Texas A&M University System put a regional institution on Mars? There you go.

Regent Mendoza: I would do that.

Randy Ray: You could take your-

Regent Mendoza: I would have to visit there and do a podcast I'm sure.

Randy Ray: Maybe we can get that done in the future sometime.

Regent Mendoza: That would be nice.

Randy Ray: Well it has been just a treat to talk to you today.

Regent Mendoza: It's been my privilege.

Randy Ray: Thank you for visiting our campus and thank you for taking care of us.

Regent Mendoza: Thank you.

Randy Ray: Dr. Wendler, as always good to talk to you sir.

Dr. Wendler: Same Randy. I appreciate you and I'm so thankful Regent Mendoza.

Regent Mendoza: West Texas A&M is very important to our system and our state. One of our duties, as I mentioned to you early on, is to deliver back to the taxpayer. What a better way than to hold up and ensure that West Texas A&M continues on its growth, continues on its success, and builds upon all the alumni that you all have doing great things. That's how we pay the taxpayers back, so thank you.

Randy Ray: Well on that note we will thank you our listeners for joining us today for Reflections from WT, the heart and soul of the Texas panhandle. Be sure and join us again next time.