

## Reflections from WT with Mike Knox

Randy Ray: Welcome to Reflections from WT, this is the podcast where we talk a lot about what's going on here on campus and just in the life of people at WT. This is episode number 41, my name is Randy Ray, and I'm joined today by my co-host and the guy that decides if I'm going to get a paycheck every month, Dr. Walter Wendler.

President Wendler: Hey, Randy.

Randy Ray: Hey.

President Wendler: It's good to be here.

Randy Ray: Am I going to get another paycheck?

President Wendler: I think so.

Randy Ray: Okay, good.

President Wendler: I think so.

Randy Ray: Yeah, my wife appreciates it. We have a special guest today. Today, we have Mike Knox who was recently named Vice President of Enrollment Management, and that's a new role for him. So Mike, welcome, I want to talk to you about your past a little bit, and your love for WT, and your new role.

Mike Knox: Great.

Randy Ray: Yeah.

Mike Knox: Happy to be here.

Randy Ray: So you've been here since 2014, what made you want to come to West Texas A&M?

Mike Knox: Wow, you're taking me way back. Well, it was an easy decision. I mean, anytime you're in looking for a new career path, you look at a lot of job descriptions and that was no different for me but when I saw the WT job... I grew up in West Texas. Well, people here may not call it West Texas, but Coleman, Texas is down near Abilene, a small town.

Randy Ray: Yeah, pretty close.

Mike Knox: And went off to Texas A&M. But had always said, I just loved growing up that way, and if I ever found a job in a small town like that with a college, that would be the job for me, so for it to be a Student Affairs Vice President job, which was what I was looking for in Canyon, Texas.

Randy Ray: Where were you working right before you came?

Mike Knox: Sure, I was at UT, Arlington, so in the middle of the metroplex, large city. Great job, I enjoyed it, but I just feel so much more connected to the community here to both the university community as well as the town of Canyon than I ever did in Arlington.

Randy Ray: So when you came here, what was your title when you're first hired?

Mike Knox: Well, I've had three now. So my first title was just a traditional Vice President for Student Affairs. My job at the time was to oversee all the student life parts of the university, the student experience. And that's what I had done for my whole career, which is now over 20 years old. I can't believe it but, so I've been doing that for a long time.

President Wendler: What about the second one?

Randy Ray: Yeah.

Mike Knox: So after I'd done that job for three years here, Dr. Wendler had been here for a year in his presidency and he asked me to consider taking on the enrollment side as well, so I became VP for Student Enrollment, Engagement and Success. So in addition to the student affairs work, I also had enrollment. So I've been doing that for the last five years as well.

Randy Ray: So your new title is not all that different?

Mike Knox: Yeah, exactly. It's been a kind of funny experience over the last couple weeks after the announcement was made. I've gotten a lot of congratulations around town. For a while I said, "Well, thanks. I've already done the job." But yeah, it's nice to be supported. But I'm looking forward to having more of a focus.

Randy Ray: I want to talk to both of you about this. In your title, Enrollment was included both times, both your new titles. Why is enrollment important to a university? And let me say this first, wouldn't it be better, and I'm just being that devil's advocate here, wouldn't it be better if we had fewer students in the classroom? That way we could be more one-on-one.

Mike Knox: That's a good question.

President Wendler: You're some kind of a pill this morning.

Mike Knox: But more faculty can do that as well.

President Wendler: That's the right answer, more faculty can do it.

Randy Ray: So tell me, so again, why is enrollment so important to a university these days?

Mike Knox: Well, I mean, the core of our mission is to educate students, right? So I don't want fewer graduates, I'd like more. I think the Panhandle needs them, the future of the Panhandle success depends upon, I think, students being educated. We're growing and we're also changing. The change in demographics in the Panhandle is amongst students who traditionally have not obtained an education, a higher education. And so I think it's critical for the success of the future of the Panhandle that we are successful with that population, so we need them here in college.

President Wendler: Well, I agree with you. I was just, yeah, and let me just say something because what's going on with Vice President Knox, it's interesting. I mean, because he was student affairs, we had enrollment management, was separated as a cost saving measure. And because I thought the integration of these two things would work well, we put them together under Mike's leadership and it did work well. It worked fine, but I hate to say pre COVID, but it's the truth. Pre-COVID-

Mike Knox: Yeah.

President Wendler: Post-COVID things have changed and we need to really strenuously focus on both aspects. And I think individual leadership again, is a good idea. And Mike brings to me, his knowledge of student affairs and student life on the campus and the impact that has on enrollment. He'll bring that to bear, every day when he talks with students and the people that recruit students and so on, to come to WT.

And I think in some ways it's great. It was great preparation that those years, now almost five, that he, I forget how many years it has been five, four or five?

Mike Knox: Five.

President Wendler: It's great preparation for what lies before us, and Mike has appropriately mentioned the changing demographics. Our student population is 30% Hispanic, 5% African American, which by the way, absolutely reflects the population of the Texas Panhandle. It is-

Mike Knox: We love that diversity.

President Wendler: And it's part of who we are up here. And it's very important. One of the things that's becoming more and more diverse in a sense, we make it to a place where the university is more diverse than the Panhandle. My goal is to be reflective of and responsive to the populations that we serve. But a growingly important

change in the population is the age. Our student age is creeping up. Many students now are coming to college later in life. We had this recent case, I won't mention the student's name, but we had a case where a student, five years out of high school, three kids, married and three kids, wife encouraged him to go to Frank Phillips and get associate's degree. He did what his wife told him, which is always a good thing from my perspective, he did that. And then they decided, "Hey, I've got an act for this."

He didn't know he had, when he left high school, he was working jobs. He was job to jobs, just working jobs, paying, taking care of his family, which is a high calling, the highest calling, I think. But anyway, so then he decided, "I'm going to go to WT and get a degree in Computer Information System." CIS, BBA, and CI in the college of business.

Well, he finished that and with flying colors and he got a job in Austin, too bad, we didn't have a job here, form part of our job. And Mike just said this, and I just want to reinforce it, is to create opportunities for people to grow new businesses here that have need of the students that we're producing. This young man went to Austin. Austin's fine, but I'd rather have him stay here. But now he's working on an MBA in Computer Information Systems. And I say more power to this guy, but he is not a traditional student. The idea of a traditional student, that's 30 years old, three kids, married, working full time and coming into school. We have got to bend our business to meet these young people and increasingly, older people, people with families, single moms, single dads, that grandparents just all kinds of people. I think Mike has a knack for understanding all that is actually, will be the fuel that propels us to the next level that is at our campus here at WT.

Randy Ray: We're going to take a break when we come back, I want to talk about what some ideas Mike you may have for enrollment and what our fall enrollment projection may be. And I want to talk to you both about the book that you're working on. We'll be back in one minute.

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Randy Ray: All right, welcome back to Reflections from WT. This is podcast number 41, and we're talking today to Mike Knox. Mike, tell us about the Fall enrollment projection.

Mike Knox: Sure.

Randy Ray: How are we looking for the Fall?

Mike Knox: Yeah, well, there's definitely some good news in there. Our freshman class, our first time in college, traditional freshman, it looks like it's going to be up a little bit.

President Wendler: Good.

Mike Knox: And that's been consistent.

President Wendler: Yeah.

Mike Knox: Even though it's been challenging in enrollment, the freshman have done pretty well. Another good piece of news that does impact our enrollment is we're always looking at last year's freshman. We call it our retention rate and who comes back and that took a real hit during the pandemic. We've always struggled a little bit here as do most regional institutions, but it was rough during the pandemic. But this year it's preliminary, we won't know until after the class begins, but just a week or so ago, we were close to an all time high in our retention rate, so our returners from last year. And that'll help us for years because if those students come back from their freshman to sophomore year, the odds that they continue on to junior and senior is much higher. And so that'll be a bubble that goes through for the next three years. And if we can keep that going, we'll have some improvement.

Randy Ray: What's the biggest challenge in your job?

Mike Knox: Well, the biggest challenge is this is on both enrollment and student affairs, and that is keeping students here through graduation. So, lot of factors make that difficult. First of all, it's just the students that we have.

Randy Ray: So retention.

Mike Knox: Retention.

Randy Ray: Retention is the biggest challenge.

Mike Knox: Retention and persistence all the way to graduation, yeah.

Randy Ray: One thing that I have in my 20 years of teaching in higher education, one of the things that I've noticed that is so important for students is that they are engaged outside of the classroom. And I believe in that and I tell my students all the time, "You got to dig in and do other things. College is a place where you get to experience things you've never been able to experience before," so talk about that a little bit.

Mike Knox: Well, that's been a mantra really for me with my own division the last year, I read an article and I've read these articles, my whole career. There's lots of research into what makes students successful and really is nothing new, things

haven't changed. But this one article really convinced it and it's been my message to students and parents all summer. And it's about what you just said. Students have to have two... There's two indicators to tell you if they're going to be successful, one, they got to be connected to a person on campus. And we work really hard and I and the student affairs division to make sure they have that connection, but they also have to have at least one thing that they do that gives them meaning every week. That can be academic, I mean, if they're really academic oriented, they love their studies, they want to get involved with a research project, more power to them. But for some of them, they need to be in a sorority or fraternity, or they need to be in a service organization or for many students, it's a religious organization. It's all sorts.

Randy Ray: Do you feel like we have to push Gen Z a little harder to do that?

Mike Knox: Yeah, and I'll tell you, it's been fascinating watching. We had this prolonged period of disengagement where everything was online and students, it seemed when they came back to campus, that there was a hunger, we had some record numbers at buff branding and other things. And yet we are struggling to get students to join and to make commitments that are more than just maybe one evening or an entertainment-based something. So, yeah, it's been challenging without a doubt and we do have to push, but we're working hard on it.

Randy Ray: Dr. Wendler, you've spent most of your professional life working at a university. How important is that engagement outside of classroom that you've seen in your years of working?

President Wendler: Well, Mike has said it, I think it's part of what makes a traditional university come to life, is the stuff outside of the classroom. You see it with your students here. We talked about it, could be, Mike said, it could be academic, it could be one of the various service organizations, religious organizations, there's many, many ways for the student to engage. Student workers, I've got student workers that work for me, five of them, and they're engaged in what we do in that office. They help run the university and that connection is really important. And Mike was spot on, I just read a study and I quoted a lot because I'm very concerned about student debt, 42% of the students that leave the university leave because of over indebtedness, 42%.

On the other side of that coin, if you ask, why do they stay in the university? Why does the students stay? They don't talk about the football team or how nice the grounds are or how the petunias are taken care of, they don't talk about that kind of stuff. They talk about a personal relationship with one or two mentors, whether they're faculty members or staff, the human connection. And we have allowed some of that to go soft because of what we're doing right here. In a sense, we do a podcast, we do videos, we do these things to try to communicate what we're about and if we think that's the end of the job, we miss the boat. This is step one, step two is go engage somebody, learn their name, know what they like to do, talk to them about their lives. That's what's important.

Mike's staff, and I will say our faculty do a great job with this. I tell this story lately, it's happened about eight months ago now, but I tell this story of standing around in with a group of about 10 or 12 students, I didn't count. And I asked them just out of curiosity. I said, "How many of you have the cell phone for all of your faculty members?" Half of them raise their hand. I said, "How many of you have the cell phone for at least one faculty member?" They all raise their hand, so there's that intimate connection where people, our faculty reach out, our staff reach out and try to connect to students. And I think that's what builds a strong university experience.

Randy Ray: I think it's part of the culture here.

President Wendler: Yes, it is.

Randy Ray: I mean, I worked at a different university, which the culture was totally different. I mean, I only saw my students in the classroom, but at WT I've been here 20 years. I've had students at my house, we've gone out to dinner, we've gone on trips together, so it is different.

President Wendler: And I think that makes a better education.

Randy Ray: I do too.

President Wendler: Well, in the end, we develop human capital. I hate to be so sort of mechanical about it, but that's what we do. Our output is human capital, it's improved human capital, somebody that can think differently. The student comes here to be an engineer and basically we say to them, "Look, you give us \$20,000 a year for your classes, your room and your board, and that's about what it costs. And you do that for four years and we're going to take you, a person that's not capable of being an engineer and make them, help make them an engineer." We're going to work with them and give them experiences and insights and knowledge and wisdom that will help them be an engineer or a nurse or a school teacher, whatever by you just picked engineering. And the fact of the matter is that's what we do. That's the output of the value equation that we run at WT.

We help people become what they want to become. The model for the State University of New York, I started at a SUNY campus in New York at a community college, two-year school was actually a technical school. Well, it was two years so I call it a community college, but the model was the, in Latin, which I can say, but I still remember it. And I didn't care a thing about this kind of stuff, I played little hockey, I had cars, I worked full time, I was not interested. Let each become all he is capable of being, that was literally, let each become all he is that he is capable of being.

Randy Ray: Well. I like to paraphrase it earlier. We help people become what they want to become. I like that.

President Wendler: With guidance and we're not trying to supplant families or their faith life or anything else. We're trying to augment that because all those things work. Mike and I have just finished a series of seven reflections on student leadership, we're publishing it as an ebook. It's going to be out today to the students as they come back to campus because we think student leadership and engaging students as leaders is important and it will engage them.

It'll close those synapses, which we think, will keep them connected here and improve retention and persistence. And I want people from Houston and I don't know, Mobile, Alabama, maybe Tuscaloosa, Alabama, even though we don't have a Division 1 football team to say, "I want to go study at WT. I heard something about WT, I want to study there." And we can do that, we can do it by adherent to the Panhandle values. What brought Mike back from Arlington to here? Not that Arlington was bad, but it's not Canyon, and I think what makes Canyon, Canyon and the Panhandle, the Panhandle are the value systems that our people hold to. They work hard, they want to improve, they want to grow, they want to flourish. These are high aspirations.

Randy Ray: So if someone wants to read your ebook, how would they get it?

President Wendler: They'll be able to get it on the website tomorrow. They can go, the easy way to get it is go just, in the search bar at the home. I don't know the exact address, but at the search bar on the WTAMU website, just put in eBooks and they'll find 8 or 10 of them. I don't even know how many are out there now. We package up articles, these pieces that I write each week, now, and sometimes others work with me. Michael McBroom, we did one on intercollegiate athletics, which I thought was very nicely done, not because of me, but because of Michael McBroom. This one is nicely done, again, not because of me, but because of Mike Knox. I mean, we're done one on philanthropy, we're trying to talk about various aspects of the university and then make those more permanent by putting them out as ebooks. And I got a whole stack them in my office.

Randy Ray: Yeah.

President Wendler: I mean, it's just, we print them also. This one's not printed yet because we're hot on getting it out as the students come back. My hope, my hope, is that students will read that ebook as they, and I know this podcast is going to be late. The students will have been back already when they hear it, but if they hear it, but I would hope that they would read it early on and say, "I'm going to get engaged. I want to learn more about leadership based on what Knox and Wendler have said and what they've written in this little ebook."

Randy Ray: Well, I'm anxious to read it. Mike, I think I'm speaking for everyone that I know we appreciate having you on campus. I think you bring a positive energy to what we do here. Well, thank you for doing that.



Mike Knox: I've worked at a number of institutions and study at some, and I say this, every change I get, this is the favorite place I've ever been.

Randy Ray: Yeah.

Mike Knox: Yeah, it's just fantastic.

Randy Ray: Yeah.

President Wendler: Me too, and I'm not from Coleman.

Randy Ray: Okay, well, I'm going to throw you guys a curve ball, our traditional curve ball. Mike, most people may not know, maybe some do, that you are the father of eight.

Mike Knox: That's correct, yeah.

Randy Ray: So between eight kids and you and your wife, you've got your own football team, right?

Mike Knox: Just about yeah. Yes, pretty much.

Randy Ray: So I'm going to ask you both. And since we're talking about Mike's big family, I'm going to ask you both about being a father. What's your favorite thing about being a father?

Mike Knox: Well, I'll be interested to hear Dr. Wendler's because he's got older kids in mind. So for me, my oldest is a senior in high school. I think probably the most gratifying thing has been as they get to that age, watching them develop as their own person, making decisions, usually good, sometimes not, but they learn from those. And just occasionally when you get a glimpse of maybe an influence that I had, or my wife had, and that's pretty cool.

Randy Ray: Yeah. Dr. Wendler?

President Wendler: I couldn't add anything to that, that really is true. My great satisfaction comes from seeing them stand on their own, which they do. They're both, they have careers that they're good at, they're both dads. I have six grandkids, three in each family and I'm watching those grandkids now develop. And Mike's right, they don't do everything perfectly, not the grandkids, not my sons or Mary's and my sons, but it's tremendously rewarding to see them kind of own up to the struggles of becoming, of aspiring and becoming. I watch them lead their faith life, which very important to me and I think I'm thankful for that. Yeah, it's just the way it is.

Now, since I'm the co-host, you're a father, you tell us.

Randy Ray: Well, like you both said, I'm very proud of the success both my kids have. My daughter's a doctor and my son just got a new job at ESPN, so they're very successful, I'm proud of them. One of the things that I always try to practice whenever I see my kids, I try to get them to laugh at least one time and it's getting harder and harder now. It's usually just an eye roll because, but I'm good. I think my favorite sound in the world is the sound of my kids' laughter, so.

President Wendler: That's good actually.

Randy Ray: Yeah.

President Wendler: And I concur with that. I try to get my kids too, and sometimes in this world it's hard. I mean it just, this stuff is not as funny as it used to be.

Randy Ray: Well, they've heard all my stories and all my jokes, so yeah.

Mike Knox: They start to tell him after a while, which is, that's kind of fun, too.

President Wendler: I got my grandkids telling my, my father used to... Boy, this is weird, Johnny, I'll probably cut this. My father used to say to us and I came from family of six kids and working parents, I mean, they were. My father was a janitor, my mother was a cook in the high school, both in the high school where I went.

Well, my father, because his grandfather told him this, "Mabel, Mabel, in the stable, keep your elbows off the table." And my grandkids all know that, that's four generations. So what little we do, we've got to be thankful that some of it sticks with them. And I told one of them, we were just down visiting in Beaumont and one of my grandson had his elbow on the table. I said, "Mabel, Mabel". He said, "I know, get my elbows off the table," anyway.

Randy Ray: All right, well we will wrap it up on Mabel, Mabel. So yeah, I appreciate you guys listening. Thank you for listening to episode number 41. Mike, thank you for being here, I enjoyed our conversation today. Please join us again, Next time it will be episode number 42. We'll see you then.