

REGIONALLY RESPONSIVE UNIVERSITIES

By Walter V. Wendler

There are 66 high schools in the Texas Panhandle. I endeavored to visit every one of them as West Texas A&M University's (WTAMU) freshman president in the spring of 2017. The region is the size of West Virginia, sparsely populated like so much of the Great Plains; the Panhandle is home to only a few larger school districts near Amarillo and Canyon. The balance is a constellation of smaller beacons that light a thinly settled world. Too frequently, regional institutions and their metropolitan counterparts monolithically assume that students are students. Geography is of little consequence.

Not true: not in West Texas, not anywhere.

I initiated this six-months-into-the-job-10,000-mile-top-26-county tour of Texas to understand how a regional university should serve its people.

In Childress, Texas, a mother and daughter approached me after the presentation to talk about her acceptance into WTAMU as well as Texas Tech University (TTU). They were undecided and candid with me about it. I said, "Both TTU and WTAMU would provide an excellent campus experience. WTAMU has a lower sticker price, while TTU has more scholarship opportunities." I appreciated the



West Texas A&M University President Walter Wendler spoke with high school students throughout the Texas Panhandle to understand how a regional university should serve its people.

predicament, but I had a solution for them, and it was simple: When the president of TTU comes to visit, share your dilemma with him and do whatever he says. However, if the president from Texas Tech doesn't come to visit and engage in 45 minutes of conversation, then the young lady should probably come to WTAMU. Student and Mom laughed, concurred and waited.

Over 70 percent of the teachers and school administrators in the top 26 counties of Texas have at least one degree from West Texas (WT). Those alumni enjoy institutional engagement.

Some campus leaders believed that I might more profitably visit larger schools in Dallas and Fort Worth. However, local responsiveness demonstrates commitment to campus and community. Here are some important lessons I learned from making these visits.

People take higher education seriously and, more importantly, personally.

During another visit in McLean, Texas—population 778 with a total district population of 245 pre-K through high school—I arrived early. Finding the room, I met a man in jeans, running shoes and a work shirt who was arranging chairs in the assembly hall. Making conversation, I asked, “How long have you been on the janitorial staff?” He replied laughing, “I am the superintendent.” He explained that this was part of the last line in his job description, “other duties as assigned.” He was also a bus driver, substitute teacher, cook, groundskeeper, and just about anything else needed to provide educational opportunity in service to his students and their families. He was the epitome of agility.

All educational institutions are in flux: roles and responsibilities must be fluid.

The power of community flourishes in Gruver, Texas, where a donated section of land (640 acres) allows students to grow corn. Farmers volunteer tractors and time, and students, teachers and staff help work the land. They thought they were just planting corn, but they were growing community. The yield of corn challengingly coaxed from the land funds scholarships. The superintendent reported that in a few years, every graduate of Gruver High School would have the opportunity to

attend college or vocational training. Free. No Washington, no Austin, no complaining, just local grit. For comparison, Houston Independent School District's average ACT score for its 215,408 students is 21.1. The average teacher's salary is \$53,431. But, they are not growing corn. Gruver's average ACT score is 21.9, teacher salaries \$46,095, and it has all the corn you can eat and scholarships.

High schools innovate and they legitimately expect the same from colleges.

When visiting Friona, Texas, WTAMU's first ever Harry S. Truman Scholarship recipient, Jonathan Espinoza, a U.S. Army veteran and Friona alumnus, came with me. In 2017, he was one of two Truman Scholars from a Texas institution and the only one from a public university (the other was from Rice University). I always made an effort to bring along a WTAMU student and a graduate of the high school being visited. Prospective students and families get a living testimony of possibilities. The Friona community was overjoyed. They broke out the fatted calf—actually turkey sandwiches and cookies. Jonathan's mother was a cook in the high school when he attended. Noble work for a noble woman from a noble family in a noble town. Citizenship in a crock-pot of potential.

Smaller schools value and appreciate achievement and hard work.

These impactful experiences demonstrated community expectations that might help shape WTAMU. This led me to write letters to the high school students in the top 26 counties of Texas who excelled academically and in extracurricular activity. I subscribed to over 30 local newspapers—every outlet in the Panhandle—and employed student workers to read and flag articles about students who did well in all-state choir, FFA, 4-H, robotics competitions, science fairs, math contests and other engagement activities. I did not include student athletes, as they garner accolades in their communities already. These congratulatory letters of recognition are copied to the state representative, state senator, school board, the high school principal, and the newspaper that carried the story. We have written over 7,000 letters to date with thousands of contacts copied.

Communicating with students and leaders has value.

At Canyon High School, a group of 600 students showed up. Knowing that 75 percent of our study body borrows money to attend college and that it may lessen their chance for a home loan in the future, I suggested to them, “If you have to borrow money to attend WT as a freshman or sophomore, please don't come here. Rather, articulate courses debt free from a community college.” (I told every high school I visited this.) One Canyon administrator asked me if I feared firing. My simple-minded response: “For telling the truth?” One local banker praised the position saying he too frequently had to deny mortgage applications to families due to over indebtedness from educational loans. Being transparent is critical in gaining the trust of our future students. Wherever their aspirations take them, their perception of our integrity and honesty is paramount. I am betting my professional career that such relationships will win the day.

In this part of the world, range-driven pragmatism rules; education is both a value proposition and a valued proposition. Dollars and good sense.

A college is valued through truthfulness and transparency with students.

The coming great divide in America is not founded on color, creed, gender, party, age or faith. The 21st-century divide is shaping up, shamefully, to partition urban and rural citizens.

When universities recognize that we serve real people, with real needs and real aspirations, institutions will be successful. Serve locally first and without apology: regional responsiveness will create positive results. This applies to all universities, even flagships. **P**

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