103. Collin Wick: Propel and Elevate

Gavin Kelly
Hey everybody you're listening to beyond 1894 this is the official podcast of Louisiana Tech University. My name is Gavin Kelly from the Office of University Communications, and we are continuing our sort of summer Dean series of the podcast interviewing the Deans from each of our five colleges. And today we're covering the College of Engineering and Science with Dr Colin wick, he's the dean in that college, and he has been in that position for, you know, unofficially interim, sort of a year now and then, coming up on a full official year as the official Dean of the College of Engineering and Science. So Dr Wick, thank you for being here with us today.

Collin Wick
Well, I'm happy to be here. Thanks for inviting me.

Gavin Kelly
Sure thing. So we've been covering kind of the personal and career journeys of all of our guests, but specifically our deans. Like I said over these last couple episodes, we're gonna ask you to sort of take it back to the start and talk about where you're from and kind of how you decided on the educational path, or at least getting started on the educational path that kind of led you to where you are now.

Collin Wick
Well, I would say, let's go back to high school. Okay? Was I was thinking going back and forth between thinking engineering, my dad was an engineer and music, okay, which is kind of interesting. I was really heavily involved in music a lot of times through there, and then it was till I took calculus my senior in high school, and I said, this is pretty easy and probably a lot more marketable than music and but I still end up. I grew up in Minneapolis, St Paul metro area. I want to be kind of out of the big city. I never really, I just never was quite a big city Perth. So I went to kind of some rural University in western Minnesota, some liberal arts school. And I went there. And, you know, starting out pre engineering there, they didn't have engineering and and I also still did music. I was playing their Jazz Band was a big kind of thing, and they were really big on it, and they kind of roped me into it more and more. So that was a big part of what I did there. And then my second year, in a way, I just, you know, for lack of a better term, I felt called to be in higher higher ed academics. I always had an interest in it, but I never, ever saw myself as somebody being professor. I was thinking I would be an engineer. I'm going to drive this cool car when I get out of college and get a good job, make good money, and then just get, you know, kind of go wherever you know that leads me right there. I You don't really think that long term of it is as as kind of a youngster or whatever, but in my second year I really, I just felt really, truly drawn on it. And then I realized, after in three years, I could get my chemistry degree. So I got my chemistry degree there, graduated, and then I worked in my PhD in University of Minnesota Twin Cities. And then a year after that, I had married, basically somebody who I was my friend. Well, first we butted heads a lot. My freshman year in college, we were on the same floor where we were, yet actually co Ed dorms, but we didn't really get along that much early on. And then towards the end of the first year, whatever.

In the second year, we actually dated a little bit, nothing much. In the third year, we dated the whole time and got married a year after she graduated. We start at the same time and or year after I graduated, this summer after she did and then she he's a teacher. Became a teacher while I worked on my PhD in University of Minnesota. So I was there for five years, and then after that, I started, you know, baffling, would I want to do this or that and maybe get a job again? Is, is always kind of doing things, and then opportunity, this kind of crazy opportunity, with this, uh, National Science Foundation Fellowship, is really hard to get. And I said, Well, what the heck I tried. I applied, and I got and it was to go to Greece, okay? And it was international, but I made the case to go to Greece, to work for a humongous chemical engineering program there, but somebody who was really well known the US, and he went back there, and I did that for a year, which is really good to live overseas for a year, to kind of get the difference between what it's like in the US than it is elsewhere. And then after that, I came back in Pacific Northwest National Lab for three years, is in Washington State, the eastern part, which is desert, which a lot of people don't know about it, you think of all the, you know, the rainforest and stuff like that. And I really enjoyed it there. It's a really neat place. There's a lot of, you know, the orchards, and you can see mountains in the DIT the background, even though most of the mountains nearby look like they're covered in burlap sacks, but the openness is kind of neat. And then, you know, as they get towards that, and I had other opportunities and stuff like that, nothing seemed to hit I always seem to get interviews. I guess I didn't interview very well, because I just kept on getting the job until Louisiana Tech. And somehow, sometimes you just know, in a way, and really I don't, I didn't really know anything about, much about Louisiana. It was around Hurricane Katrina, so that wasn't maybe the best light when you see nationally on. On it. But it, in a way, when I came here to interview it, just somehow you just know it kind of fits. And in a way, I hate, sometimes I always hate to use these words, but sometimes you feel called to something. And I always felt like I was called to academics. And even though all these different I had other opportunities and and you try to be, I mean, you go after them and stuff like that. And part of it, I believe it never worked out, because you didn't really have the good fit. But once you see something, it just seems like everything aligns to kind of move towards it and and that seemed to be the case for Louisiana Tech and I basically been here for 17 plus years, going through the different things, but my journey is, you know, chemistry professor program, Chair of chemistry, which I was that for four years, and that probably was the most fun I had, because you got to work closely with students and nine month faculty. I kind of enjoyed just having my summers. I worked during the summers, but it's nice to come and when you feel like it, if you just tired or whatever, and come out and leave, however, doing the flexibility is kind of a nice part of that. And then I became associate dean of graduate studies. It's something I really, I'll be honest, the opportunity arose, and I had no idea what I was getting into. And I just, you know, I but I studied it, and I, when I did an interview for that, or sort of interview, I didn't get the position, actually, Dr Sammy dua did, who was a much better candidate than I was. And I saw that, I was like, yep, that definitely makes sense. But then after two years, he, you know, moved up to, kind of the the vice president level, and then the position came open, and they asked me to do it. And I was like, Well, what the heck? And was honest, in my head, it says, I don't know what I'm getting into and, and I've there was a lot of challenges with that position, and I've notoriously heard about it, but I enjoyed, I mean, I you know, there's a lot of minutia in it, a lot of kind of things you have to kind of keep track of, which is really, would say really boring stuff, you would think. But actually, I found out I did reasonably well on that, because it's just, you know, once you kind of get things in place it, I thought it worked out pretty well to the case, better than I thought it would and things. And then really, I really started to appreciate the students themselves, because I didn't. I

had my own grad students, but I didn't really know the grad students in their culture for a while, and is able to to get involved with them. You really kind of appreciate their journeys and stuff. A lot of them are international, and they bring a lot of different interesting perspectives in here that you wouldn't necessarily get to and and of course, I did have my time overseas as well, and I know what it was like to be a foreigner in another country, and you kind of somewhat of a, you know, some empathy, because of you had that yourselves. But I always was trying to big, to try to do what I could, to get rid of all the barriers that you have from being international coming here. And I mean you, of course, you have, you do your best. Of course, there's still going to be challenges remain, but that's something that I really, you know, I was really try to be, you know, consider, as far as how I handled, you know, the different situations and because they have, if things work out bad for them, they're really in trouble into a certain extent, because they have visas that depend on them having, you know, I mean that university taking the classes and stuff so beyond that, you know, I started doing that, then covid hit, and that really hit us hard, I would say in that, because a lot of embassies closed down and things like that, and our numbers took a hit from that. Now, I believe they're kind of getting back, catching up to that right now, but there are a lot of pathways to there. But also, when I started, grad students really got paid really poorly. And one of the things I had to do is listen to student after student tell me how they couldn't afford anything or something like that. And I tried to put together what I tried to say, the high pressure campaign with Dr Ramachandran and him and I, I actually replaced him when I was originally hired, because we were teach the same thing, and I worked with him pretty closely. So it was kind of neat when he became the Dean of the Graduate School and and so we kind of work collaboratively on that, and we may kept on doing proposals. And that time, Dr Geiss, he made just a modest amount of money available to help cover even more costs of students and after that, and was able to kind of leverage that with our current dean. He shim he gap to get use some more of our gift accounts and scholarships to help support him to a certain extent better. And I felt like that really was one of the the success of that, to a certain extent, really was something that kind of is the thing I kind of the most proud of, more than getting numbers or anything like that, because I felt like we kind of took that, took care of the students, and it still was hard and things like that. But it really, I felt like was kind of difficult early on, just because of budgetary reasons and. Dumb and, you know, after covid, and then you had kind of the inflation, then I felt like that amount wasn't quite good enough. And Dr Ramachandran was now, and he's kind of continued on that, and he's helped finding ways, working with the new president, Dr Henderson and, and, you know, and I think Dr Henderson asked him, What are kind of the big things you want to do, and you can't do everything, but where do you really focus? And Dr Ramachandran really put that is a focus. And I think this upcoming year they're going to try to find ways to to improve the situation there for our graduate students as well. And, and I'm, you know, I think a lot of them, but a lot of us are thankful for it, because we want to, you know, there's a certain point when you feel like you have to do kind of what's right in that case. And I felt like in that, in that situation, we did. And so that's before coming here as dean, yeah, and really, there was a year before I became Dean. I We had some changes. Somebody decided to step down because he, you know, just didn't want to do it anymore. And one of the positions came open was Associate Dean of Research, but they didn't have somebody just to take it on by itself, so I just added it to what I was doing. Of course, Associate Dean of grad studies. And that's fine, because I kind of had it down for a while, and you kind of learned the minutia, and I said things, and I had a good staff that was kind of working on it, so I took that duties on, and then I started to work more with developing faculty. We had a lot of new faculty that year. We got we were able to hire a fair number of them at that point, and I was able to really enjoy kind of working with them

and kind of developing them and just being a service to them. We did have some challenges in different cases. We had some change in leadership in different areas, in the research enterprises, and there, there were some real challenges with that. But I felt like, you know, dealing with those challenges and kind of working through faculty on them is something, you know, satisfying. And I always felt that myself as somebody who is most for me personally, I enjoy things most when I'm helping others. And I really kind of realized that as well. And when I came to that spring, when the spring started coming, I started to think about, where do I want to go in the future? And I was worried about him taking me and turning me into, and I hate my friend, Dr Ramachandran, turned me into kind of like him. I could see doing what he does is he's in research, and, you know, the dean of the grad school currently, right now, and but, and I said someday I could see myself doing some but I still didn't want to get pulled out of the college that much. And I also feel a little bit I kind of missed my days of being involved much more heavily with the undergrad side of it, and that is program chair. I kind of enjoyed that, and that's you kind of miss certain of those things. And I was like, well, where would I see myself? And I said, well, to stay in the college I could. And I actually talked to the dean at the time, Dr hegab, that maybe I want to do something like be an academic director, or something which is like department heads. And if I because, I mean, I never thought anything other than that, and I didn't want to leave the college or whatever, but I started think, well, maybe I could be possibly dean. And I didn't really think about till that spring, is it being a possibility. And I just thought about and stuff like that. But then Dr hegab, he told him retire and and then I was notified, told that that was being considered for the interim position, and they asked if I'd be willing to do and I said, yeah, yeah, I will. And it until that point, really, though I never thought it would happen here. In all honesty, it just never kind of crossed my mind. And there's a lot of different reasons for it, but it it came as a surprise to me. And so when I got asked to do it, I basically said, I'm going to do the best job I can. And then they did the national search and all that sort of stuff to kind of to heed in there. And I was going to be like, well, I may or may not get it, you know, in the future, and but I was okay with that. I felt though as well. I just said, I'm gonna do the very best and then kind of let things go where they are. I feel like, my whole career, I've felt like, in a way, there's been a few different times that I feel like things have just kind of guided me towards a certain direction, and it's best for me just to kind of just do the best in the situations I sort of have here. Yeah, I

Gavin Kelly
a couple things. First of all, you sort of echoed a sentiment that a lot of folks who've been on the podcast have mentioned at the beginning. When you talk about coming to tech for the first time and sort of feeling like it was a fit, students kind of say that same thing. Faculty, staff, administrators kind of say that same thing. And I guess it has been because you just ran through kind of a quick version of a long and continuing career here. And I think the question I want to ask you next has to kind of do with that. As someone who's been so heavily integrated into the college of engineering and science since you've been here and in. Current position where you're now, you know, in a leadership position at that college over these past 17 plus years, how have you seen the college change and grow? I mean, and I guess you know, you took up a dean position for some reasons you mentioned, but also you probably part of that is you feel confident about the future and the potential of the of the college, and so talk about kind of some growth and some changes you've seen over the time you've been here in the College of Engineering.

Collin Wick

When we first got here, there was a different trajectory. And then when, basically they had state kind of stopped funding at the same level they did. And I think that changed things quite a bit, actually at the college, and it made it from something we had a little bit more research, and, you know, growing in research, and, you know, kind of how the grad students and the grad sort of population, that it's been more focused on the undergrad sort of level since I've actually changed here. That's one of the big changes they sort of have here. And and now, right now, I feel like we're actually trying to go back and to be more creative, as you know, Dr Henderson has done, to try to find more creative ways to get money and things like that, that we're feel like we're growing in kind of somewhat different directions now, I think now, of course, the undergrad and the population is there, but also I think with Davey Norris in innovation enterprise. Well, now it's Donna Johnson, but with that sort of team there, I think they really have some outstanding potential there to kind of grow and even uplift the region. So I see that is a much bigger impact here than might have been before. And also, as I said, I think just our normal research enterprises and and, you know, our grad student population, I feel like, is kind of in the way of it can be growing again right now, as I said, from before, from, you know, back when I got here, they said we had some big challenges and then, but kind of growth and stuff like that. But throughout it all, the one thing I've kind of realized, though, and this is more on me than the college itself, because I think the college has always had this, is we really have some of the best graduates. And we have our graduates, they're really the best, I would say, anywhere nearby, and they're competitive with anybody in the whole country. And even their education is I've learned more by, you know, talking to people from other universities and stuff like that, some of the things we do here are truly unique to us, and can can hold up to anybody outside out of this area right here. And though, as I said, I don't know necessarily that's smart to grow. That's something we've already do. It now, right now, I'm trying to grow some of the things we do and try to have, we, we really have an idea of what we do really well, and that's part of hopefully my job is to try to get an idea of what our faculty really else have passions of and things like that, and then try to expand that a little bit. And we are doing, we have some people are doing things like that, and that's going to help even, I think, improve our graduates even further. But, but, you know, beyond of how we kind of change, I'd say our college now is enrollment wise, we're kind of grown, and we, I expect in the fall, we might have, should have record enrollment in our college as well. Yeah. But, you know, it's kind of a roundabout way in different things. I wouldn't say our character and things like that. The culture and stuff, I think is somewhat pretty is similar to what it's had before. But, you know, I mean, but it's kind of, but lots of changes within that,

Gavin Kelly
yeah, and consistency is good, especially, I think when, you know, for a lot of people in a lot of places, Louisiana, tech kind of has a reputation as an engineering school. It's a very popular college and program with nation and worldwide sort of impacts you touched on a few reasons. Why do you think, you know engineering, specifically here at Tech, stands out for a lot of people. Why do you think it continues to be a successful program for the students to come through it?

Collin Wick
it's just because the history that's a huge history that you're building on, and that history has a has sort of inertia of itself. So I mean, and for me, I I'm not an engineer, I'm a scientist and and I always felt like I was more successful when I didn't try to be. I'm science. I'm separate from them, but I'm as a scientist. How can I support and build upon what we have right there? And I think even in a lot of our science

programs as we have, we have some excellent students on there, and really top students, but the reason why they're really good is because of all the things that I think we have in place already and kind of building upon it. And I think for me personally, I think the success of our college and even the university is to still try to understand that that history and then inertia of that engineering, if we can kind of engage ways to kind of better work together and kind of use that history, it can, it can help even propel other things, I think that we have excellent in this, you know, University of outreach, with STEM outreach, and I think lot of that is because of our history in this sort of area. And. Um, you know. And I think there's other aspects as well where I think if we can kind of meet personally, also as dean, is find ways that we can kind of work, even with other colleges or other disciplines and things like that, to kind of use that history for you know, to you know, to propel others. But I really the reason why is because we have all those alumni as well, and we have some truly, truly outstanding alumni, and they want to give back. They don't just want to give us money. They want to help elevate us. And there's a lot of opportunities. We have companies, and they embrace us and they want to work with us. It's because they usually have our former graduates, but they also know those people that do really well. They're the, you know, the other people in their corporate or whatever they understand, these are truly outstanding people are getting from Louisiana Tech, so they also want to partner with us, in some cases, to be able to be a better opportunity of getting access to our students as well.

Gavin Kelly
You mentioned you have a history with research here at the university, and I know that that plays a big role, especially at the graduate level in the college. Talk a little bit about, sort of like some research highs, maybe recently, further back currently, that you've seen some exciting sort of recent, maybe it's grants or current projects, some sort of high points in research here at the university, especially in that college.

Collin Wick
I mean, I think one thing I've noticed recently is we've been better integrating with other parts in the state, and so we can do research projects with them a lot better. And I think a lot has to do with covid, covid doing zoom and so I mean, and I've been heavily involved in that as well. So we can have regular zoom conversations. When we try to do it, they just never seem to take off. Now they do, and they're pretty straightforward and things like that. And but we've had, you know, if I look at some of our successes, I have times go to our bigger centers. We have the treacherous Technology Center, which is fully funded by we call soft money. So they bring in external money, and it funds all of their different people and stuff like that. And could keep going. And, you know, Dr Matthews and his connections with different people in industry, municipalities, and also, you know, working with different funding and stuff like that. And then our Institute for micro manufacturing, which has really been being truly successful lately. Now they have a recent director who's started, I think, one to two years ago, a couple years ago, Dr Arden Moore, and he's really kind of, and I think with him and a lot of new faculty, they've kind of revitalized certain things. And also they're they've actually brought in, like a got a big earmark worth Julia letlow and and huge amount there, and we got a department defense sort of grant on that as well. And so lots of build just to build infrastructure in there. And so that really is that center has kind of had some worse, more recent success. And then we have this i circ, which is integrated STEM Education Research Center, which I personally, I have believe, is something that is kind of little bit. We've not invested as much as we could have recently, but we're trying to reinvest in that. But they've had a lot of

successes lately, bringing in some major grants. But I to me there, there may, because a lot of what we do to educate our students goes through that, and that is benefits our undergrad and grad students as well, inner graduates and a reputation in that. And so I think that has to be a place for me. And I guess some more forward thinking of investment, but we have some great people in there as well. And, and I, you know, I believe that these different areas, and that one in particular, I guess, you know, we're trying to kind of build what we're doing in some of these things. I said, you know, I heard from external people is some of they create some of the best students. Even early on, you have talked about people that we run into companies where they talk about how great our sophomores are, well prepared. They're almost ready to go in the jobs because of these things. And we're trying to, when we realize that, and they can, they're the ones that can study, trying to increase that or add that to other areas, and then, and then, you know, and then they, the neat thing is, they study so they can actually get results on and see, is it going to work or not? Because a lot of the challenges you're going to change the way that we teach people, you have to have evidence to back it up. You just can't say this is my opinion, or whatever. But that, that that, I think, and we were able to get some new partnerships also with them, some national partnerships with some foundations and stuff like that. Yeah,

Gavin Kelly
it's always ongoing. There's, there's, it's, again, not, not just specifically at the College of Engineering and Science, but the research impacts continue to be sort of a priority, I think, at all high leadership levels here, and something that I know, Dr Henderson is very forward thinking about you've, you know, you've mentioned some reasons that I think qualify here. But I got one more question before we let you go looking ahead to this upcoming year, big incoming, Potentially record setting, fresh. Class you mentioned, sort of growing enrollment within the college too, apart from kind of the obvious and maybe the things you mentioned already, what has you excited in the College of Engineering and Science coming up?

Collin Wick
Okay, well, one thing I'm kind of real excited about, it's a little under the radar, is working with innovation. There are a lot of companies that I think that can work, and they can work with federal grants, stuff like that. And there you can have truly game changing things for the region and for for the university. And we can't. There are a lot, as I said, they're down the pipe and they're working on them, and we just have, there's a couple of them, we just have one or two steps that we can make them happen. And if they do, we'll really have some exciting things coming out there. And these, as I said, it could potentially be game changing in different cases. And not just, I said, for the college, but just the region we could have bringing companies to the region. And oftentimes, we've also talked about getting our trying to get our story out there a little bit better as well, so that a company or something where they're having problems hiring students and where they're at, they're willing to come here also and and I think we're starting to see some of that happening now, and I believe we're almost to a precipice where it could really just kind of truly, kind of build upon itself and have a multiplicative factor. One of the challenges I think, at Louisiana Tech is we're in a small rural area. I told you, I, like, would rather live in a more rural area than anything else anyways. But without a high population, we might not have as much political clout as others do. But when we can kind of build these other cases, and our great graduates, of course, and get that story out there, we can finally maybe get some of that, because we do have, we're always going to be a place that does more with less, and that's just part of what we do

there, here and but at the same time, you know, we can kind of also wear as a badge of honor, and once we can get even more there, we can do more with more, is really what potential to be excited about. And I think also the new leadership, I think he has very creative ways of bringing in money, because that's, in the end, what I think we have. We have great people and and a great culture, I think, but we're still doing it with less, if we can kind of get with that. And I think, you know, with with the leadership we have, I think there's, I said, it just takes creativity in that, yeah,

Gavin Kelly
and, you know, we know how great rest and is, but you're right, and it's kind of Louisiana Tech has to operate, kind of, in spite of not the city, but the size of the city in the area. And so being able to compete with metro areas is tough, but I think, I think we're doing it. I think you're right. I think it's, it's up from here. So again, appreciate you taking time for us on the podcast today. Appreciate you putting in time. I mean several, several years worth in the College of Engineering and Science and hanging on to that, that Dean role, and looking forward to what the college can accomplish in the future. So thanks again, and we'll see you around. Go Dogs.

Collin Wick
Yeah. Go Dogs.

Gavin Kelly
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