

103. Henrietta Williams Pichon: The Human Experience

Gavin Kelly

Hey everybody you're listening to beyond 1894 this is the official podcast of Louisiana Tech University. Our dean series is continuing. We are sitting here with one of our newest deans, Dr Henrietta Williams Pichon. She's the Dean of the College of Education and Human Sciences, and she has been for a month and a half or so now. So she's she's still getting her her feet under her in that role, but she is very familiar with Tech, and we're going to talk to her about that today some so. Dr Pichon, thank you for being on the podcast.

Henrietta Williams Pichon

I'm very excited to be here today. Thank you so much for inviting me

Gavin Kelly

Absolutely so you have a fun journey that we're going to track. So you are a Tech alum. You were a student at Tech, and then kind of spent lots of time in other places, honing your sort of education and finding different stops on your career. And you have a career path that brought you back here, and I think your decisions for coming back here are something we're going to get into because that's interesting, but also charting your path, kind of around a full circle moment type thing. So let's go back to the start and tell us where you're from, and then we'll talk about kind of how you decided to get to tech as a student.

Henrietta Williams Pichon

Okay, cool. Well, I am a native New Orleanian. I am a first generation college student, practitioner and scholar, and I know that can be kind of a mouthful. I attended Ellie Robbin High School. That's one of our famous questions in New Orleans is, where did you go to high school? And Ellie Robbin is a vocational high school, and so I had two vocations while I was there. One was photography and one was lithography, okay? And lithography, just to kind of sum it up, was printing before word processors. And so I think that's the best way to describe that. And so I am a native New Orleanian first generation college student, practitioner and scholar.

Gavin Kelly

How did you decide that tech was going to be the university you were going to go to? I mean, that's a it's in state, but it's kind of a, you know, you go from one tip of the state to the other. So what was appealing about tech as a student?

Henrietta Williams Pichon

I think you nailed it when you said it was that one tip of okay, there we go. I wanted to get as far away from New Orleans as I could possibly get without leaving the state. I think I had had enough of New

Orleans, New Orleans as a 1718, year old, and tuck had some very appealing options for me. And I had a cousin who was a student at a school to remain nameless, but they carry the purple and gold, and I didn't want to go there and kind of be lost in her shadows. And so I really wanted an opportunity to break out kind of become my own, and Louisiana Tech just appeared to be the best place for me, and far enough from New Orleans right where I felt like I could really kind of be me.

Gavin Kelly

Yeah, it's that we we talked to, even students now, a lot of the sort of sentiment that they give about Louisiana Tech has to do with the size of it. And they use words like, you know, community feel and stuff like that. But I think a big part of it you get to, like, classroom size, and sort of the one on one attention you get here as a student. It allows, kind of every student to have opportunities to kind of flourish. And I think that that's, you know, you're echoing that sentiment. What'd you study when you were here?

Henrietta Williams Pichon

When I was here, I studied English. And I think for me, being a first generation college student, and I know at the time, the saying was, college is an opportunity, and it opens many doors for you. And I think being a first generation college student, I didn't even know which doors were possible to be opened. And so I was really starting at ground zero. And so one of the things that one of my high school teachers told me to do was to think about what I really enjoyed doing. And at that time, it was English. And so I figured I could do English, and if something else came along that would tickle my fancy, then I would probably move into that area. But English continued to drive me while I was here, and so it was really a great learning opportunity. I think I learned all of the professors in the English department really began to navigate that scene, and really began to see myself flourishing in that area. And so English was my major while I was an undergraduate, and I had thought about switching over to English education. At one point. But I think it occurred a little too late at my journey, because then I had to do at the time, we called it the NTE. Now we call it the Praxis, and I was too late in my career or my my program to switch over, because then I would have been delayed. And so then I just moved back to English, and that allowed me to graduate. And so I graduated in 1992 and then I came back from my master's in secondary English education, and I was probably one of the first class for the alternative licensure program here at Louisiana Tech. What was that? That's where, if you have a bachelor's degree in a particular area, you can come back and work on licensure and earn your master's degree. And that's when I met Dr Foxworth and the College of Education, who kind of worked us through that, that process. He was over that program, and I think it was through Dr Foxworth that I really developed my passion of becoming an educator. I think he made us understand the importance of education, and it was such a Learning Adventure. And he modeled education to us, and I think that's really how I got my start, because after getting my master's degree here at Louisiana Tech, I was thinking every student should have this experience, and so that really was the foundation for the work that I've done for the last 30 years, right? Right?

Gavin Kelly

Yeah, I would, would you say that? I think it is safe to say your entire career has kind of been in education. So I also know that after the master's degree came a doctorate degree, and that's from the

University of New Orleans, right? Yes. So again, you're going back down to the to the other tip. Were you just kind of ready to be back in New Orleans again? Or what made you decide to do that?

Henrietta Williams Pichon

I was not. I had sworn that I was never going to New Orleans as a 17, eight year 18 year old would do. And then I graduated, and I wanted to be no other place but New Orleans, and so it seemed like a lifetime at the time, but I was, I was in New Orleans. I completed my last six hours at the University of New Orleans, and had to take an incomplete and so I didn't officially graduate from tech until the november of 1993 and and then I started my first professional position in higher education that January of 1994 and I tell you, it really did seem like a lifetime. And I was like, Oh, my God, I have this degree. The school years have begun, and I can't get in to begin teaching secondary English education. And so this opportunity became available at the University of New Orleans. And it was exactly what I had been thinking in my mind, that everyone should have this opportunity to go to college and pursue their educational pursuits. And so I got my first professional job at the University of New Orleans as a retention counselor, and that was a really great experience for me, because basically, my job was to work with students who had been admitted through this special admissions program and provide them with the supports that they needed in order to be successful. So I was a retention counselor there at the University of New Orleans, and while there, you could earn you could take classes for free after being there for one year. And the only thing I was thinking when I began taking classes at the University of New Orleans was, how can I do my job better? I was trained in secondary English education, and I was working in higher education, and so I began taking classes just so that I could understand how to do my job better. And it's funny how things work, because there is a faculty member that ask, are you? Are you taking classes so you can get in the doctoral program? And I promise you it

Gavin Kelly

had not even Yeah, no, actually.

Henrietta Williams Pichon

And that's one of those things of being a first generation college student, sometimes you don't think through what the next opportunities are available to you. And so when he asked if I would get in the program, and I was talking. With my supervisor one day, or my boss's boss one day, and he said, Well, if he's asking you about getting in the program, I think you should give it some serious thought. And that's how I got into the doctoral program at the University of New Orleans. Like it wasn't by chance on my radar to be able to do that, but it just happened. So,

Gavin Kelly

I mean, obviously no regrets, right? No regrets, but, um, it's, it's always interesting to talk to somebody who's profession has been education for so long. And sort of the parallels between your actual education and then, like your career, it's kind of like you enjoyed your education so much that you wanted to turn it into your career. So I feel like part of this though, going from a bachelor's degree to a master's degree and then to a doctorate degree, you kind of have an idea of what you want to do for work. You know, you mentioned the sort of timeline of it keeping you from from doing the first thing you kind of wanted to do. But as you're, you know, pursuing your doctorate, what starts to pop into your head as like, potential career after the degree,

Henrietta Williams Pichon

I think initially when I got into the doctoral program, and one of the things you have to do is write a statement about why you think earning a doctoral degree will be beneficial to you. And I think I had to do some really good soul searching at that time. And for me, being very limited about the opportunities that were available to me, I really thought about becoming an enrollment manager, and my, my, my piece was going to be the retention piece, right? So enrollment management looks at really managing the enrollment, it looks at recruitment, it looks at retention, it also looks at all these different supports at the time. And so I was thinking, I'm going to be an enrollment manager. And so I worked through my program, took courses, talked to people who were in those areas, and began to realize that maybe that's not where my heart really was. And then I really enjoyed the faculty piece. I enjoyed doing the research. I enjoyed the teaching aspects of it. And although I say higher education is probably the best gig ever for anybody, being a faculty member kind of doubled down on that statement, because I think being a faculty member was really where my true talents lie, because I was able to not only teach students, but I was able to conduct research about the areas of how do we ensure that we keep access and persistence open to all students who want to pursue higher Education that might be vocational education, that might be community college education, four year education, graduate studies. It really gave me an opportunity to explore all of those different areas in my research and to teach and train individuals who wanted to go into that line of work. And so I always feel like I'm doing I'm just doing what I was meant to do, and I enjoy it every day.

Gavin Kelly

Absolutely, that's interesting, because I think you kept to to that as you went from place to place since then. So walk us through kind of your next steps, and we're going to work our way back here to Tech where you are now. So walk us through your sort of stops, your next stops in your career.

Henrietta Williams Pichon

So I begin as a retention counselor at the University of New Orleans. I kind of chuckle at that, because I when you do what you love to do, that's what you really want to do. And I remember I began that position making \$23,500

Gavin Kelly

Cha Ching,

Henrietta Williams Pichon

and that was the most money I had made. So I was really excited about that. And really the salary was was a non factor, because I was able to do the work that I love to do. So I moved from being a retention counselor to a retention specialist that turned into an associate director for those programs. While Associate Director, I co founded a program for students who had been academically suspended from the institution. And so I was Associate Director for both the college life program and the New Vision Program, and then I became the director of those programs, and then I became the director of those two programs, plus a Summer Bridge Program. Program, where we were bringing students from who completed their senior year that may, and we would bring them to the university for the summer, and they would take courses and get a head start on their college careers at the University of New Orleans.

Program was a huge success, and I really enjoyed that work, but I was working on my doctoral degree at that time. And so then I began, as I said, I initially thought I wanted to do enrollment management, but then I began to do the research and in the teaching, and really fell in love with that aspect of it, and being able to conduct research and train individuals in the profession, and so that's how I moved to my first faculty position, which was at the at Rowan University and Glassboro, New Jersey, right outside of Philadelphia. So that was a really nice experience. Sounds

Gavin Kelly

like a big change, though, was that? Was that, like a change? Was that a I'm sort of ready to go wherever this job takes me, type thing, or was it just happenstance, and you making the most of it? Or what was the jump to New Jersey about?

Henrietta Williams Pichon

It was kind of funny, because I think as a newly minted PhD, some of us get in our heads that we're going to get our first job on the beaches of Miami. And then, when I was really looking, those jobs were not necessarily plentiful. And without calling out any states, there were positions in the northern part of the United States that were not necessarily as appealing for a 33 year old, and so New Jersey was one of those. That was the happy median. It was kind of like it wasn't in the middle of nowhere and easy access to different places. It was really a great location for us, but it wasn't the south Right, right? And so it was on a different kind of pace. And I'll be honest, my husband really didn't enjoy New Jersey as much as I enjoyed New Jersey, and that's one of the things when you have to take into consideration your your family and your decision making. And so he just wanted to get back south. Yeah, is he from? He's from New Orleans as well. And so that's when I went to Northwestern State University, and I stayed there for a number of years, from 2007 to 2013 and I promise you, I wasn't looking at the time, but I just was presented with an opportunity, and I asked if it would be okay to pursue that, because my husband had a career. I had a career. It's one of those things where the family has to come together and make some serious decisions about what happens next. And so I went to New Mexico State, the Land of Enchantment in New Mexico, which is a really great location for me. And I think that's where I really began to see myself in leadership at New Mexico State University. And then from there, I moved to the University of Colorado, Colorado Springs as the permanent Dean in the College of Education there, and then the opportunity for Louisiana Tech became available, and that's a journey in getting back here that might require a little bit more time to explain. You

Gavin Kelly

took the scenic route to get back here. So your first you mentioned, kind of realizing you you have a sort of passion for leadership roles. Your first experience in a dean position was as an interim dean. Is that right? That's right. And that was, it was that at New Mexico State,

Henrietta Williams Pichon

that was and I went kicking and then screaming, like I think, and it's been something that's been on my mind because I think about my journey into leadership and higher education, I really enjoyed being a faculty member. Like I would call my classroom my queendom. That's good. And you know, like you just kind of go in, you plan your classes, you schedule your appointments, and everything kind of falls into place. And so I had been asked to take on leadership roles, which I had very gracefully declined,

and and then there was the the dean at New Mexico State was leaving for his home state. And so I said, Okay, I'm at the rank of associate professor. I would like to move into full professor at some point, so this might be a great way for me to become to get some leadership experience. So I was thinking a program coordinator or something like. Like that. And so that opportunity did not present itself to me. And I was like, Well, maybe it's not my time. And then I was presented with what you consider being the Interim Associate Dean for the College of Education. And I was like, no, no. I said no before I even understood right was involved in the position, because I was thinking program coordinator, then department chair, and then the

associate. You had a vision, and this didn't quite line up with that. Fit

Henrietta Williams Pichon

with that. And so I was like, why would you all consider me for this position? So I didn't realize what was entailed in the position. So remember I said that I kind of worked my way up through retention. That was basically what the position was. It was Associate Dean for Academic Affairs, which was mostly dealing with student concerns, and they knew that you had it in you. And so I was like, oh, okay, I could do that. And so I worked on retention initiatives, I worked on curriculum development. I spent a lot of time working on student and faculty, faculty to faculty conflict as well. And and I remember the first year doing it, it was like, Can I do the job? Yes. Do I enjoy doing the job? Okay, maybe not so much. Okay. And so then I and the caveat, or the carrot that got me to consider the position was everyone would say, if you don't like it, you can always go back to faculty, because it's interim. So I remember talking with the dean at the time and talking about that I really wasn't necessarily enjoying the work. And she said, Well, can you hold on for another year and then we'll have a permanent Dean in the College, because she was interim as well, and then you'll be able to go back to faculty. So they kind of knew how to string me along, right? And so I was like, Well, okay. And I said, Well, if I'm going to do it, I'm going to do it a little differently. And so I had a retreat with all of my direct reports, and I said, we just need focus and guidance. And so vision is really important, right in this work that we do in leadership. And so we we developed a vision together, and that's what we sought to do for that next year. So then it made my life a little bit more purposeful, as opposed to feeling as though I was always putting out fires, we began to have a focus and a guide to kind of lead us through more proactive, yeah. And of course, you know, we were also dealing with covid, right? And so covid really changed the way that we were providing higher education. And so that was really exciting for us. And so we moved through that. And then I said, After this, I think I'm really done with with this experience, and I'll have a lot of case studies for my classes moving forward. And then the provost came to me, and she said, I'm going to need you to step into the deanship. Of course, right? Of course, right? And I was like, No, not me. And so I told her no, and then she came back and she said, Okay, well, let me think about it. Let me work on some other things. And then she came back and she said, I really need you to help me out with this. I'm sensing

Gavin Kelly

a pattern. I've heard you more than once now say, I said no, and then I ended up there anyway. And it's obviously for the best, but,

Henrietta Williams Pichon

and I was thinking, you know, I guess Hindsight is 2020, maybe they were seeing something in me that I wasn't seeing in myself, and maybe I had to walk through it to really be able to get the experience that I think they knew I had in need to get. And so I said no, and then she asked again. And so then I agreed, and then that's when she kind of let me know, well, I'm thinking about a merger with health sciences and bringing over some of these social sciences. And on top of that, we're going to have some budget cuts. Could be 3% could be 6% okay, could be 9% uh huh, but I need you in this leadership position to help me work through through these changes with the college. And I was like, I Yeah, yeah, here we go. And so I wasn't even thinking like, what's in it for me? I guess what I was thinking about was, there are going to be a lot of changes, and I'm okay with leading the college through it. And then I was getting support from the people that I had been leading previously, and they were like, I think you. Can do it. I I think you should do. And so I was like, Okay, I'll do and I say, but after this,

Gavin Kelly

yeah, for real, this time, this is it, no more, no more Dean stuff. I'm

Henrietta Williams Pichon

going on sabbatical. I really want my sabbatical. And they were like, okay, you'll be able to get your sabbatical. And so we did that the merger went through. I worked with the college, helping us understand what were some of the challenges about merging with these other units, what were some of the things that they would really like to see reflected in this new college that we were building together? We got through the budget cuts in a way that I think everybody felt as though we could take the hit on the budget cuts without losing the essential parts of what we do as a college. And those are the two biggest challenges, I think, moving through. And then, of course, we were still moving through covid. And so at the end of that, I was like, I'm not doing it anymore. And so the Provost said, Okay. And so I think in May, maybe she sent me a text that says, We need to talk. And that's

Gavin Kelly

a good one. It doesn't matter what you're doing. That's always a good text. And I

Henrietta Williams Pichon

was like, No,

Gavin Kelly

my sabbatical is right there disappearing in front of your eyes.

Henrietta Williams Pichon

It was disappearing right before my eyes. And she said I wasn't able to do what I wanted to do, because it took longer for the merger than she had anticipated. And so she was like, I really need you to just hold it together. For me, just one more year, and bringing everybody together. And then I started getting feedback from people in the other colleges to say, we support you and being able to keep us together while we look for a permanent dean. And as I was going through this, I was constantly saying, I don't want the permanent position for this. I really think we need to bring in someone who doesn't

necessarily has been wrapped up in the minutia of the merger to be able to look at it with fresh eyes. And so I was like, Okay, I'll do it, and I'm definitely I'm not applying. Do not nominate me, and I negotiated at that point for some leadership development to help my department, because then I think I realized, can I do leadership? Yes. Am I enjoying doing leadership? Yes, yeah. And so I was thinking, Okay, I need to start looking outside of New Mexico State for these opportunities. And so that fall is when I really began to look at other positions for permanent leadership, because I think I'd realized when I talked to other people who had worked with me in the College of Education, in the newly formed College, really began to see some of the things that I think others were seeing in me. And so that's when I guess I decided to take my leadership on the road. Yeah, went to Colorado, was there one year, and saw the advertisement for tech, yeah. And then I was like, but I can't leave. I just got here, yeah,

Gavin Kelly

but it felt, it felt like the perfect, right? It was a match made in heaven. It was

Henrietta Williams Pichon

a match made in heaven. It was allowing me to take all the experiences that I had at New Mexico State and my one year end to the University of Colorado, and really begin to apply that in a state that I love, a school that I love, it would be home, home for me. And so I was really excited about it, and then I said, I'm not going to apply, though I'm not going to apply. And then I was talking with one of my colleagues, and he said, Please don't put that on me. But one day we were talking, and he said, Do you miss Louisiana? And I said, every day, yeah. And then I was like, I'm gonna there it is, yeah, there it is. I'm going to apply. I think it was divine intervention at that moment that say, yeah, you need to apply. This is where you really want to be, and you should apply. And mind you, I haven't gotten invited to do this. I haven't been offered a position, and I'm already talking myself out of it. So I applied and went through the process, and I guess they were excited about me as I was excited about being able to come back. And so here I am, yeah,

Gavin Kelly

well, welcome back. First of all, you know, here felt like I was on that journey with you. So appreciate that, and I know that also kind of again coming into a position where the Dean role. Was kind of in the middle of a shake up the college itself, you know, a name change, kind of trying to do some some rebranding in that sense. So I know that you spent some time away and things have changed, but I'm sure part of it too was, this is the, this is the school that I remember, you know. So talk about, kind of apart from the obvious, being back in Louisiana and being able to sort of hone in what you do best in the leadership realm, what were those other decision the factors that went into the decision to come back here, I

Henrietta Williams Pichon

think, when I was looking over the website and looking at some of the amazing things that are happening in the College of Education. Mind you, I did not learn about the human ecology becoming a part of the college until I think I was in the interview stage, and so I was thinking, Oh, well, that's my jam. I've just had some experience with merging departments and colleges, and was told from my colleagues that that was a really good strength of mine, was being able to help everyone feel as though they were contributing to the vision and the mission of this newly formed college. And so I felt like I

would be able to bring that to the table, to be able to listen to the different departments, see how we can work better together. I think sometimes in these mergers, it gives us an opportunity to look at our disciplines with fresh eyes, to see how we're connected. Because sometimes we can get very siloed in the way that we think about the work that we do, but bringing in new disciplines that are connected in different ways that we hadn't thought about tends to re energize people in different ways. And so being able to be a part of that, I thought, really spoke to my heart, and that I would be able to do that work, and just being here in the short amount of time, talking with the faculty who've been available over the summer, talking to the staff about the work that we do and helping students get connected. I really do feel as though I can jump right in. Have some ideas, not necessarily sure how well some of those ideas will work with what we have set up here at Tech. But I think that's part of the joy. I think you want to have somewhat of a vision, but you also want to co create that vision with the individuals getting feedback from them, and so you don't want to go too far down the road before checking in with everybody, to kind of see is this where we're really trying to go, and so that's the fun part to me, to see kind of where we want to go, and how do we all contribute to getting us there? I think there's been a lot of great work being done at Tech, speaking through the testament of we're here. We're growing, growing, for sure, there's still excitement on campus. A lot of my work focuses on access and persistence and development and engaging campuses. And when I look out my window, I see an engaging campus, and even though it's summer, it's still a very engaging campus. I mean, we engage students, and the functions of the different offices, faculty are around, administrators are around. The city's buzzing. I told someone, tech is Rustin and Rustin is tech, absolutely, and I see that, and I'm glad to be a part of that. I truly am,

Gavin Kelly

well, absolutely, we're happy to have you here. I know I speak for everyone when I say that, it helps. It's not ever you know, it's not mandatory that everyone who comes here and works here has those connections to tech that go way back, but it is always a bonus when it happens. So being able to kind of fall back in kind of like a back, like you never left type moment, but with all the bonuses of what you've learned along the way, it's good to have you around. One more question before we let you go, you kind of talked about growth and vision in the future. And again, I know you're only a couple months in, and that you still have, we have to get to the fall when everyone's back on campus, and you still, you know, have a lot of people to meet and things to do, but as you get into this early stage in this Dean role, what are your kind of hopes for the College of Education and Human Sciences in the short term,

Henrietta Williams Pichon

I think in the short term, what I would like to see us do is create a co create a vision and mission that really brings into the fold the various units that we have for many years. We were the College of Education and ignored different segments of our college, but then making sure that everyone's aware of the human science piece, that's a part of that. And we have Psychology and Behavioral Sciences, we have kinesiology, we have human ecology, and of course, we continue to do what we've always been known to do, and that's prepare educators for the region and the state and and we're really excited about that and being able to continue that work. But then I think there are a lot of other opportunities that are present for us. There are a lot of opportunities with external funding that we would like to tap into as well. There are other opportunities with the use of technology and the work that we do. How do we incorporate technology? Being Louisiana Tech University and having all of these

collaborations, and I've seen a lot of collaboration since I've been here, in this six weeks that I've been here, I've seen and observed a lot of collaboration with the different colleges, with the College of Business, with engineering, with applied sciences. I mean, we're collaborating, and I think that's a part of what we speak to and one of the things we just began an early conversation about the College of Education and Human Sciences, and one of the things that resonated with among the leadership team was the human experience. And how do we lean into the human experience and let our students know that this is really what being a member of the College of Education and Human Sciences is about. It's about developing the human experience as best we can. That's

Gavin Kelly

great and well, it's, it's obvious from talking to you, how passionate you are and how excited you are, even when it sounds like talking to you, even when it's challenging, it's, it's exciting, you know. So again, welcome back. I know it's early, but I hope you're you're locked in and ready. It seems like you are. Thank you again for making time for us. Good luck in this position. And Go Dogs.

Henrietta Williams Pichon

Go Dogs.

Gavin Kelly

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