

111. John Worsencroft: The Heart of Who We Are

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. Our guest for this episode is Dr. John Worsencroft. He is the Director of the School of History and Social Sciences and also an associate professor of history. John, thanks for being here with us today.

John Worsencroft

Thanks for having me.

Gavin Kelly

So, we're gonna get into the director position is sort of recent for you, right? Very recent as of September, yeah, yeah. So just this school year, we're gonna kind of walk up to it and sort of talk about how you got to tech, and kind of how your roles at Tech have evolved. But let's go back and take it back to the beginning, like we do for all our guests, talk to us about where you're from, and kind of how you got to a point in your early education where you decided where you were going to go to school and what you're going to major in, and that sort of thing.

John Worsencroft

So I'm originally from Salt Lake City, Utah. That's where I grew up. And as far as my kind of intellectual or educational journey, I don't really know when it was that I decided I wanted to be a history professor, and I certainly, at the time, didn't know what that meant. But very early on, I guess I was kind of drawn to, you know, the idea of higher education. I'm a first generation college student, and so I don't have any kind of experiences being taught to me by my by my family, or anything like that. But I guess, you know, through through TV or whatever. I was drawn to this idea of, kind of working in higher education or being a professor, and so that was kind of a kind of early on goal to me, even though, like I said, I don't think I knew what that meant at the time, but I initially enrolled in at the University of Utah, which is where a lot of students in Utah go. But my, my education journey was cut short pretty quickly because I had joined the Marine Corps and in my first semester of college was actually the was September of 2001 and so my, my, my educational goals were put on one on hold for a bit. But that's kind of how I got my start. Talk to me about that, like, what was,

Gavin Kelly

what was, sort of the reasoning behind that? Yeah,

John Worsencroft

I mean, I think, you know, as a kid, you know, I had family members who would serve in the military. My dad was in the Navy. His brother, my uncles were in the Navy. And so kind of military service, national

service, those ideas were, were kind of ingrained in me early on, and I think that so that was the kind of driving force. I think that I joined the Marine Corps because I wanted to, you know, I wanted to kind of prove, prove something to myself. I had friends who were also joining the Marines at the time. And, yeah, so I joined the Marine Corps in 2000 I remember, the week after I graduated high school, I got on a Greyhound bus and I took it up to Seattle, Washington to live with a friend, and we kind of worked odd jobs. We mowed lawns and cemeteries. We actually installed artificial turf in football stadiums as a way to kind of scrape together money so we could go bum around Europe for a while. And I remember we did that for for a few months in that summer of 2000 and I knew I had to be back because I had to report to the to Marine Corps Recruit Depot San Diego in October. And that's kind of how I got my start in the Marines. How long did you serve? I served for six years, so 2000 to 2006

Gavin Kelly

so how did you kind of get back on track into the your education and that sort Yeah, so

John Worsencroft

I, like I said, I started, I'd rolled in University of Utah in 2001 but that was cut short. I have my unit and getting activated right after, shortly after 911 and we spent a year in California, and then we did, I did a tour in Iraq in 2003 and then when we came home from that, I immediately picked up my studies at the University of Utah, and I got my bachelor's degree in, I think It was 2006 and I didn't quite have the grades or maybe the credentials or whatever to kind of get into a PhD program right off the bat, so I enrolled in I'd made some good relationships with faculty at the University of Utah, and I enrolled in their MA program as a way of kind of establishing myself as an academic, I guess. And I was, I was fortunate enough to to have some really great advisors there, Bob Goldberg in particular, and Elizabeth Clement and Matt bauci. Was one of the ones that gave me a job at at their kind of Premier Public History Research Center, the American West Center. And I was actually doing what you're doing, actually oral history work, interviewing people about their experiences. And it was through that those experiences and I wrote what I think of is a pretty good master's thesis, and it got me a kind of ticket to the next step. Up, and that was in the form of Temple University, which is in Philadelphia, and that's where I did my PhD work. Okay,

Gavin Kelly

when you what was kind of the focus of your of your doctoral work? So

John Worsencroft

I've always been interested in how policy makers people, kind of empower people who make decisions, you know, whether it's members of Congress, whether it's like high ranking officials in, say, like the Department of Defense, I'm interested in how they make decisions based upon kind of assumptions they have about, you know, what men and women should do in society, what they think about, as far as, like, what are proper gender roles for people, and how kind of changes in society really kind of throw them for a loop when they have to kind of make decisions. And so I wrote my dissertation, and I just, actually just finished turning into a book this past month on a history of family policies in the Army and the Marine Corps. And I'm really interested in this question of so there's this old saying in the military that if the military wanted you to have a wife, they would have issued one to you. And that saying, while it's still kind of heard every once in a while in certain circles in the military, doesn't actually

accurately reflect what the military is nowadays. Military is actually a really kind of family friendly institution. There's lots of benefits for families, and lots of programs that kind of help families to thrive in that community. And I'm not trying to say that military life is easy by any stretch, but that phrase, that saying, doesn't really kind of hold anymore. And so I wanted to tell that story, how did that kind of, how did that? How did we go from an institution that was not family friendly, that kind of through policies and through statutes, kind of made it, made it really hard, or even impossible to have a family in the military to one that nowadays is kind of seen as a, as a, as a bright, a bright example of of what institutions can do to provide for families.

Gavin Kelly

If it seems like an idea worth studying that has aged well, I guess is what I'm trying to say. Like, you're never short on things in current data study in that regard. Yeah,

John Worsencroft

no. And I think that, like, I mean, I think all of us, like, we hope that our the people that read our work, is a broader audience than maybe just the other historians who are kind of working in this area. And my hope is, is that I think what you're saying is right, that policy makers are making decisions today that affect military families, and not much is known about this history, particularly the activism that families participated in to kind of make changes to make the military what it is today, that it wasn't just kind of inertia that had that that caused these things to happen. And I think that's that's a lesson for policymakers that, you know, maybe my and maybe my work will kind of, I hope, help influence those, those decisions going forward. Yeah, is

Gavin Kelly

there a timeline for your book right now? It's,

John Worsencroft

it's currently in review. And so what that means it's out is it's out with with reviewers right now, and we'll wait to hear back what they say, and then we'll go from

Gavin Kelly

there. Yeah. Well, good luck with that. Thanks. So you're in Philly, what happens after you get that, that doctor degree?

John Worsencroft

So I don't know if you, if you, you or the or the people who listen to this podcast are aware of what has happened to the historical profession in the past 10 years. It's not a good story. The kind of numbers of jobs that have that are available for history PhDs has shrunk significantly in the past 10 to 15 years, for a lot of really complicated reasons, which is probably not you know best that we talk about in the in this podcast. But for me, what that meant was, is that my, basically, my last year of my PhD, I was already applying for dozens and dozens of jobs, and they were not successful. And, you know, I was getting a lot of rejections where I was just getting a lot of nothing in return for my for my kind of for my applications, but through, through a kind of network of mine, I was, I was asked if I was would be interested in taking a research fellowship at Louisiana Tech Working through the Wagoner center with

Dr Jeremy Meer, and at the time I was, I was about to finish my PhD, I was about to defend my dissertation, and I didn't have any other prospects, and so I talked to my partner, and we both decided that we would, we would try this out. It was just for a year, and we ended up moving town to Louisiana from Philadelphia. It was me, my partner, Angela and our dog, and we ended up in Shreveport. That's where we live. That's where we still live today. And, yeah, one year, gig turned into. To another visiting assistant professorship on the tail end of that, and then a tenure line opened up, and it was at a time when we weren't doing a lot of hiring, and so it made sense for me to slide into that position, and I've been here ever since, yeah, well,

Gavin Kelly

we're glad you're here, and also, you know, you kind of point to, you know, it's, it's, it's okay. I do believe it's okay to say, you know, you just ended up here because it's where the job market took you. That's perfectly fine. But mentioning too that even throughout your time here, you know, you did things like take a tenure track position because it enhanced your job security, sure points to the fact that the job market for history PhD is being Rocky, to say the least, has not changed. If anything, it's gotten worse. Would you say,

John Worsencroft

Oh yeah, I'd say absolutely for sure. You know, you're

Gavin Kelly

the director of, we'll kind of walk up to to that job in a second, but you're the Director of the School of History and Social Sciences here, emphasizing the importance of humanities in general for all majors and that sort of thing. I know that. You know you'd be a champion for that. You are a champion for that. But talk to us about kind of the importance of that, and kind of why you know, holding on to the humanities and holding on to the programs in your school is important at a time like

John Worsencroft

this. I mean, I mean, first of all, what I would say is that the kind of prospects for, say, a student who wants to major in history or political science or sociology, their prospects are actually really good. The job market is really weird for people with PhDs. You know, a student who gets a bachelor's degree from Louisiana Tech gets a bachelor's degree from Louisiana Tech, and it doesn't actually matter if they get a degree. I tell my students a little time, it doesn't actually matter if you get a degree in business market. Business Marketing or if you get a degree in English. What matters is you got a degree from from a institution like Louisiana Tech. And you know, if you look at the data, you know, students who major in the humanities, who major in the social sciences, liberal arts, they tend to do just as well as their as their peers across campus. And I try to tell my students that, because I think there's a there's a kind of, there's an idea out there that that if you, if you're majoring in these, in these disciplines, you're you're not going to be set up for success. And you know, the data just doesn't bear that out. It's also true that, I think that that employers in the job market really want people with the kinds of skills that we develop in in the humanities, critical thinking skills, things that I like to call historical thinking skills. You know, being able to being able to take complicated problems and make them understand it understandable for a kind of general audience. These are skills that are great for people who are in management, you know, being able to kind of tell people what you want them to do, to be able to

execute a vision. These are things that required the ability to kind of communicate effectively, to be able to write. Well, these are all things that we do really well over in the College of Liberal Arts.

Gavin Kelly

And those are all skill sets that are kind of, we're in a tricky place as a society with AI and things like that. You know, the people are, I think, are in danger of becoming less literate. And, you know, programs within humanities driven schools across the country are kind of in a tough spot, because it, like you said, it is easy for someone to maybe sit and think, you know, well, I'm a business major, I'm an engineering major. What do? I'm just going to take my required gen ed classes in these humanities, histories and sociologies and things like that. But it's about concepts that they learn in there, right? So I guess when the opportunity came for you to take the director position for the school, what was kind of your thought process behind saying yes, and kind of what, what are your kind of goals in taking that role?

John Worsencroft

It's really good question. Timing had a lot to do with it. I had just finished my probationary period last year and had successfully navigated the tenure print promotion process. I was promoted to associate and given tenure, which means that I was kind of eligible at a moment when the college was looking for new leadership at the at the school level, and that was largely because, you know, our, our interim director, Dr Meer, was serving two roles. He was the Associate Dean, is Associate Dean, and was also the interim director of the school. And so there was a need. And you know, frankly, some of my other colleagues, who maybe are smarter than me, decided that they didn't want to, they didn't want to take that that role. And so I saw an opportunity, and I took it because I genuinely believe that the college and really the university are at a real inflection point and and I think that there's a lot of momentum and energy towards building. Something better than than what we've had before. That's I think that's particularly true in the in the College of Liberal Arts. If you know, if the director role had come up at a different point in a kind of past, in the past administration, I probably wouldn't have done anything, but I really do value the leadership of Carl pulliac and Jeremy Meer, I understand the kind of vision that that they have for the college, and I think that I'm, I'm positioned to kind of help execute that for the school.

Gavin Kelly

Good deal like I said, I use the word championing, championing earlier. Doing that for liberal arts is important here, and you kind of look towards things like a GTM renovation. GTM is, you know, you the hub for the college, you would say, and especially for the school, and everyone who has to take classes that align with those majors has to go through GTM. Every student who comes here goes to GTM at some point. But it's a building that hasn't changed since well before either of us were here. Talk about why something like that is important to, you know, sort of shifting the focus and the attitude of the majors here.

John Worsencroft

I mean, I think everything that you said is true. I mean, you know, every student on this campus goes through G team at some, some point, and most of them go through 105 which is the big auditorium that I teach a lot of classes in. I'm actually not holding my breath on the on the renovations. I know that it's supposed to happen, but I we have to do things in the in the present. We can't just kind of wait for a

building to come along to kind of execute a vision and but I think that, you know, to get to your the meat of your question, you know, how is the building going to kind of help us execute, you know, what we see as a kind of future for the college. We're already kind of doing that in the school and the college itself, where we're really kind of making a push towards interdisciplinary work within the school, but then also within the college, and really kind of figuring out ways to incentivize that through finding resources and, you know, encouraging faculty to collaborate in kind of interesting ways. These are all things that I hope the building will kind of help to facilitate better. I mean, you've been to GTM, it's, it's, it's definitely not a building that invites collaboration, sure, and so now, right now, we're just crying. We're trying to kind of build a foundation for that stuff that we really hope will be will accelerate once we get the new building. But

Gavin Kelly

I'm interested to kind of talk to you about just your role as a professor. I think you know you've talked I've talked to people on this podcast who have taken on administrative roles, and have kind of had to slowly drop the teaching aspect of their jobs. And they always kind of talk about that with little sense of regret. In your role as a professor. Kind of talk about your mentality, your approach, maybe to teaching, and why you've chosen to keep that as part of I mean, you're interesting in the fact that you got into this profession with the intent to teach, a lot of people who are professors here, they started in something else, and they ended up teaching, and ended up loving it, but you kind of always knew you wanted to be a teacher, especially in a higher education setting. So I'm guessing it's important to you, as you take maybe new roles on, to continue to keep that classroom aspect as part of your job. So talk about why that is, and kind of how you approach that.

John Worsencroft

It's a really good question. And I do, you know, I feel for the the other administrators across campus who are kind of in that bind where, you know, they're, they're kind of being pulled away from the thing that they love. I think I'm fortunate enough in in my role in that the Dean has been really kind of supportive of, you know, my request, I guess it is, to kind of maintain that connection so I still teach. I teach a lot less than what I did. But, you know, frankly, I think that professors Louisiana Tech teach too much. And so taking a step back a bit has actually been very, kind of helpful for me. You know, I probably think if I have my happy medium, I'd be teaching a little bit more, but I don't think I would want to go back to teaching a 333 I don't think that actually, anybody thrives in in teaching that much, even people who really love it like I do. But right now, you know, I'm teaching less, although you know what, that's done, even with my administrative responsibilities, has allowed me to research more and to write more. I've actually had a really good clip of writing over the past few months because of this transition, which, again, the college has been really supportive in my hope is, is that you know that my experience through taking on this director role, but then also wanting to maintain my status as a research scholar, you know somebody who produces scholarship on a regular basis? Is that attends conferences that that maintains their connection to the to the discipline in the field, and then also kind of maintains a foothold in in the classroom. I think that's a good model going forward. I think that the university should really strive to make that more of the norm, as opposed to administrators just being administrators, and not having any kind of connection to the classroom or to their research. You know, if we aspire to be a more kind of robust research institution, then we need people at all levels to be participating in that

effort. And I'm hopeful that the grace that I've been given by the college, to kind of maintain that status will continue in the future. And I believe that it will. That's good.

Gavin Kelly

And, yeah, you kind of pointed to your belief in the leadership here, and that's necessary. I think, moving forward if you're kind of, if you want the college and the pathway to align with kind of your vision. And it sounds like you do believe that. So, yeah, it's good to hear. I another question about your teaching. I know that you teach kind of focus history classes. You know? I know that every history professor here has to teach in the big lecture hall, and that's not ideal. But I think when you can get down to, you know, maybe the honors classes, or the more upper level classes, where you can they have a specific focus. I know you teach a few of those, and I know that they tend to kind of shift over time. I know there's specific classes, like the history of whatever that gets taught one quarter one year, and maybe doesn't repeat. So talk to me about maybe what your favorites have been in terms of teaching those kind of more focused history classes. Yeah,

John Worsencroft

it's actually, like my favorite class is actually the class that I dreaded teaching the most, and that's the big survey, the history 102, which is the world history the second half of the World History Series. I'm not a world historian. I'm a US historian by training. And so I was, I felt that I was woefully unqualified for that, for that teaching gig, but I did what, what I think a lot of people do in those kind of situations is they really trying to, they instead of trying to teach something they don't know, they figure out ways to turn the class into something that they actually want to teach. And what I did was, is, even though that class, you know, sometimes enrolls between 100 and 150 students, is that I've, I've kind of done what's called a flip model, in the sense that inside the classroom, I think of myself less as as a kind of professor who's up on the stage, kind of giving my, you know, giving my lecture, reading PowerPoint, reading PowerPoints and more. I think of myself as a manager of of the kind of the the things that I want the students to do in the class. And I think about it more of as a kind of history lab, as opposed to a history classroom. And so, you know, even in these big lecture halls, what I do is I'm having my students do small group work in which they're kind of looking and reading and analyzing primary source documents from the past and kind of making their own conclusions. And my job in that is less to kind of tell them, tell them what they should be thinking, but rather to help them to understand how to think better and to think more methodically, and to steer them towards their own kind of intellectual discovery. And I've been doing that in the in that 102, class since, since, really, 2018, 2019, and it's been a really good model. And I also do that my upper division classes too. I'm students will, you know, will probably agree that I'm, you know, I'm a pretty good lecturer, you know, I can command a classroom, but what I've found is, is that students actually don't really retain a lot when they when they learn by lecture. Yeah, you know, my colleagues over in the in the College of Education can probably, can probably back me up on this there. You know, there isn't a lot to be said, that's good about lecture models anymore. It's, you know, long longitudinally, students don't retain stuff, learn the exam, take an exam, exactly that that model, you know, there's a place for it, and I understand it, but I've been trying to break that my own teaching. And so in each in each classroom setting, what I try to do is give people a kind of universe to operate in. And then really, I give them the reins. Some of my upper division classes, I've literally let students write the syllabus for me, so that they have ownership in the work that they do. Most of my student, most of my upper division classes, they work towards some sort of

collaborative final project that they really are the drivers of. So it's based upon, yes, the kind of confines of the class, whatever the topic of the course is my Women's History class for example, or my recent America class for example. But what they do within those confines is really up to them. Because I really think that, you know, if we empower students to learn. And we give them the tools and resources they need in order to thrive. You know, the sky's the limit.

Gavin Kelly

Very good. I think we're in a tricky era, and I think people tend to look towards maybe liberal arts majors in general, do humanity, specifically history classes. I think there's been a strange target on those types of programs, and I think it's easy for people to say that history being taught period is doesn't align with what their sense of history being taught should be. So I don't know if there's a question here. I guess my question is, you know, what do you say to a thought process like that, that there's some sort of, you know, political intent behind the way history is being taught.

John Worsencroft

I mean, I would, I would hit it straight on. I'm glad you asked the question. This is something that I think about a lot, and I've actually talked to my students about it a lot. History always is political, even for the people who say, who say that we should get the politics out of history, they're, they're taking a position that is political. I think that's first and foremost, you know, the questions of kind of the uses of history, or, you know, what is history? These are things that we grapple with all the time. I would say that, you know, and I tell my students this, if you're learning the exact same historical narrative that your parents learned, or your grandparents learned, that there's a problem, because history is, is always a product of present day concerns the historical questions that we ask as scholars, the reasons that we study history. You know, history is not just about learning facts and dates and names from the past. History is an avenue for us to understand the present, and that's always changing. And therefore history is always changing. And so, you know it makes people uncomfortable, and I and you know, if you're paying attention to the news, you know that people are expressing outrage that over over stuff that their kids are being taught in school. But like I tell my students, there's just no way for history to not be controversial. It's it gets to the heart of who we are as a people. It gets to, it gets to the heart of what we're trying to accomplish in the present. And it really informs what we think of the future as well. And all of those things are political at the end, so I don't shy away from them, and I don't even begrudge the people who disagree with me, but I wish everybody would just acknowledge that simple fact that that what we are do, what we're doing, what we're doing, whether you're in the business college, what we're doing, whether or not you're in the engineering college or the college liberal arts, what we are doing is political in the sense that it matters to people. It's about power, it's about it's about resources, and it's about shaping the present and the future. There you go. Well,

Gavin Kelly

I appreciate that answer. Thank you. And it kind of, and it goes back to, it echoes what you were talking about earlier in that, you know, teaching someone history, having a student who isn't a humanities major take humanities classes and learn about the concept of learning is helpful in putting modern day into perspective, you know. And I think what I said earlier about you risk kids becoming more illiterate with AI and things like that, and just like learning becoming less of a thing and more regurgitating

information just to get an education, just to get a degree, because that's kind of what the expectation of society is. You put danger on that sort of

John Worsencroft

thing. Yeah, no, I think. And I again, I tell us my students all the time. I designed that history 102, class, when I was talking about earlier, I designed it for people who hate history, because I think that when a student walks into a history classroom, they assume that what they are going to hear is somebody reading from a PowerPoint, and that their job will be to kind of memorize a bunch of facts and dates and names that they'll have to regurgitate at some point in the future on a test. There are no tests in my classrooms because I think they're a poor way of assessing knowledge. And what I do in that 102 class is really kind of break down what they think history is supposed to be, and then I build up what I think they should that what I think history is, which is really a kind of methodology for understanding really complex problems, and once the students grasp that they can understand the utility of it, even if they're not a history major, even if they're never going to take another history class again, that they're going to learn skills in my classroom that are widely applicable, whether they're an engineering where they're going to go on to be an engineer or an accountant or a business marketer, they're going to learn something in my classroom that will be useful for them.

Gavin Kelly

Very good, very good. Well, I I warned you this was coming, and we are going to close here on a bit of a corny question. But when this episode comes out, if my calculations are correct, it will be the day before thing. Giving. So I'm gonna hit you with the age old question, and feel free to answer however you'd like. But what are you thankful for?

John Worsencroft

So you did warn me, and I admit I gave it some thought, and I don't have a really good kind of answer, but I will say this, I am thankful that it seems that, like I was saying earlier, the university is really poised in a kind of moment where we can really affect some change here, and I think that there's leadership in the right positions all the way up and down the organizational chart, and I'm thankful to be in the position I am in as this, as a director of the School of History and Social Sciences, to try and at least steer the faculty that I work with in that that direction, towards that vision that we're trying to work for. So very

Gavin Kelly

good. You gave a very poignant answer. You could have just said, I'm thankful for, like, a good bacon cheeseburger.

John Worsencroft

I really I'm good. I'm thankful for that stuff too. I'm thankful for the breakfast that I had this morning, you know, all that stuff. So, yeah, I'm thankful for the corny stuff too, but I am really thankful for that other stuff. I

Gavin Kelly

appreciate it, and I appreciate you making time for us today, John, it's been great talking to you and getting

John Worsencroft

to know you. You too. Thank you. You

Gavin Kelly

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