

121. Amy Vessel: Professional Brainstormer

Leslee Bennett

Hi everyone. You're listening to beyond 1894 the official podcast of Louisiana Tech University. My name is Leslee Bennett, with the Office of University Communications, and this episode is part of a series with the 1894 alumni magazine. Our guest today is Dr Amy Vessel, the director of the clinical residency and recruitment center in the College of Education and Human Sciences. Dr vessel, welcome to the podcast.

Amy Vessel

I'm so excited to be here today.

Leslee Bennett

So, a question that we ask all our guests is, what is your tech journey? So could you guide us through that, how you got to tech and how you got to your current role?

Amy Vessel

I grew up in rural Jackson parish, Jonesboro, HOTCH, my mom and my dad met at the tech bowling alley. My neighbors were at every single tech football game for three decades, and passed their 50 yard seats on to our family. And so Steven and I both loved sitting at the 50 yard line when we were 2930 years old. Everybody always wondered, How did those young people get such great season tickets? But they took care of us because he played football in the 1950s this precious harvest in family. So Tech was always part of my life. I had red and blue in my house. My grandmother graduated in the late 30s in education. She was a teacher. My mother graduated in the 60s, and she was in the first group of education majors to have class in Woodard hall when it opened in the 1960s so I came along in the 1980s excited to be part of that family history. My neighbors and my family told me what I should do and where I should go, and I started in accounting because I wanted to make a lot of money, and I just love to be around kids. I love to be out in the community. I love to serve, and I took a library science class. I just went out on a limb. I had one extra elective, and I went to Woodard Hall, 108, and I walked into joy Lowe's class, and she walked in, and of course, I was on the front row, but she walked in and she she recited a poem to us, and we didn't react. And I still remember the exact poem. She said, I'm going to read that one more time. And she said the poem to us one more time. And we giggled a little, and she said, Okay, we're going to warm up and get started. And by the end of the quarter, I was an elementary major. I was never going to leave Woodard Hall. They were smelly markers. There was construction paper, and it just spoke to me. It was what brought me joy. So a story that I share with my students always is that I was so afraid to tell my grandmother because my grandmother wanted me to go out into the world and try something different and not follow this four generational lineage, great grandmother, grandmother and mother, all teachers. She just wanted me to do something different, because she said, You'll never make the money that you deserve, and you'll never be valued like I want you to be valued. But my mother made me go tell her. So when I went to my grandmother, she said, I always need to be a teacher, but I wanted it to be your decision, and that was powerful, and that's what

I share with my students, because I want them to find what brings them joy, and I want them to navigate through tech and have enough faculty members, professors, staff members, fellow students notice if what they're doing is not bringing them joy. And so I consider myself a professional redirector. That's kind of what I do in my role. Now, if you have a heart for teaching and you feel called to teaching, I'm going to get you to the finish line. You're running a marathon. There's nothing easy about our profession, but I'm going to get you to the finish line. And if it's not what you need to be, we're going to find what you should be so you'll be happy and you can go make a difference in the world. We moved back here in 99 I was so honored that the College of Education at that time called and invited me to come back and work on an amazing grant with Dr Legeen Thomas and Dr Joy Lowe was still in the building, and Dr Carolyn Talton, Dr Butch Miller, all these professors from the 80s that left their mark on me and made me who I am today, and those professors just guided me in this new role as an assistant professor. So I'm grateful to come back in 99 our boys have been raised here, and we're up to eight bricks in the family now. I've got one graduate who is so successful with his new wife about to be a grandmother to a future Bulldog, and I'm so excited, and I have a son that's still here, and he is finding his way because of amazing professors at tech that redirected him from mechanical engineering to mathematics and. And he has the dream of being a math professor one day, and is helping teach right here on campus. So Tech has been so good to me, but it's been so good to my family.

Leslee Bennett

So growing up in a four generation education family, would you say that inspired your passion for education with like getting into majoring in education and also starting in your early education classes with those professors.

Amy Vessel

I think I'm also a professional brainstormer. And to be a teacher, you always have to think outside the box. You can't always follow the script. You may have an amazing script, we call it a lesson plan, but you're never going to fully follow that lesson plan. You have to have that ounce of creativity in you that you can think on your feet very quickly. You can adjust the lesson, and you can make sure that you meet your objective, your goal, that those students are going to learn in the classroom. And so I think that the way I was taught to cook the way I was taught to garden. My love for books and reading, I've taught children's literature for decades now at multiple universities, because that was instilled in me. I was surrounded with books. My kids were surrounded with books. The whole family were just avid readers. We love literature because that's that's the source of all knowledge. So it was, it was embedded me. It's ingrained in me, teachings in our family, roots deep. And if I teach the intro to teaching class, and I asked the students if they have anybody in their family that was also a teacher, you'll see more than half the class raise their hand. So I do think that it's potentially genetic, but I know that there are others that have no connections to teaching. They just have found that servant heart and making a difference in the world. And once you have that heart, you have to pursue a degree like teaching. It's one of the most important jobs in the world. Every single successful person in the world can remember a teacher that made a difference in their life. So it's our task here at Tech to create the state's best teachers. We've been recognized as one of the best teaching programs, but that's our goal, is to make sure that they leave here, and they go into an elementary, early childhood, secondary, middle school classroom, and their backpacks are full with all the tools and all the skills and all the knowledge to be successful. And I think we've seen that over the past decade, that our graduates are

still teaching. And so something magical has happened in Woodard, and I'm just blessed to be part of it. I do

Leslee Bennett

want to talk about the program and the clinical residency and recruitment center, or CRRC, as it's called, and I do want to talk about that and your role in that and as director. And then I also would like for you to explain what the mission for that is and what the overview of the center is.

Amy Vessel

Sure the state piloted a residency program in 2014, 15, and we still had a traditional 10 week student teaching program on semester hours. So we went out into the schools and we spent about 180 teaching hours. I did that when I graduated from tech, my mom, in fact, Mom and I both student taught at Hillcrest Elementary, right here in Ruston. But in 1415 things changed, and there was a whole team piloting, and for a decade, I had been a practicum coordinator in our elementary program. I taught elementary methods as a professor, but also I walk to the Halls of almost every elementary school in Lincoln Parish, and I was feet to the ground in the classrooms with the teachers, with the students helping navigate them to find their way to the ideal grade for student teaching. And so I was kind of before the clinical experience. If you looked at the sequence of the teaching program, but I loved that job, and when I got called in and asked to just come and help a little bit, Never did I think that Dawn Basinger was going to throw the baton at me, but she's real good like that. And she said, Amy, you need to take this on, and you need to kind of help manage this growing pains, truly, of shifting a whole program from a one quarter student teaching to a full year. But there's a whole team that's going to help but, but you're the person to take this on. And Don has been such a valuable friend, just just salted the earth, loved on, and she and I together worked with Don Schillinger, Brian McCoy and so many others to develop this team model, teacher, educators and mentors. So when we met that spring of 2015 it's so hard to believe that we're coming upon that 10 year anniversary of the team model. How we came up with that idea. On a plane coming back from Chicago, we had gone to some national training. We wanted to learn from the best, and we met our good friend Theresa heck there, talking about co teaching and the importance of co teaching to people in the same room, teaching students and growing them by leaps and bounds. And we pulled all of these national trends, foundations, research based practices, into this model, and our faculty had input. Our our team in Woodard Hall is absolutely amazing. You can't give credit to one person, so I'm just the facilitator. I just live in the room called the center. But there's so many hands that have been on this, including all of our mentor teachers, our school leaders, our district leaders. But with Don as the dean, he kind of gave us some lofty goals along the way. One of those, when we started, we had five partner school districts, and he said, Let's just spread across that 20. And so we did. Now we have more than 15 partner districts that we work with. And Don said, Well, that was fast. I said, but that's what you told us to do. So we're gonna go do that. And we've moved south. We're as far as was Feliciana parish. We're moving south down 167 into central Louisiana. And so what we're finding, working with Trey, George and Colin Bailey, we're finding that we have more students coming from South Louisiana to tech. And so what can we do to send them home so those districts can grow their own? So truly, it is such a joy to do what I do. It's hard to put on paper a bulleted list of what my job is, but I support the districts. I support the school leaders. I make sure that everyone has a purposeful placement so they can grow from August to May. But I could not do it without Belinda birch. She is the glue that holds the center together. And so first, I think, four years

of the center, it was me and a graduate assistant and some undergraduate ambassadors. So when we talk about functioning on no budget, it was no budget. We were grant seekers, and we got a lot of great grants, but we used the grants for materials, for the residents, for the mentors, and provided them with stipends during our growth our pilot stage today, we seriously run on no budget. We don't need the grant funds we've we have the equipment. We have our districts buying in they buy the technology, equipment that we need to serve. The State Department saw the need to support the stipends, and they provide stipends for our mentor teachers and for our residents. And so we are a service center, recruiting, supporting, getting everybody to the starting line to become a resident. They're applying right now, and once they pass their exams and their courses, then they start next year. We are the placement makers. We hold hands. We always have tissue and chocolate, because everybody doesn't have a great day. But we are truly a support system. And I think that we have brought a little sunshine to the second floor of Woodard Hall. So we're really proud of what we've done. And if you come to Woodard Hall, you'll see some dots. So in the first years, 2014, 1516, 1717, 1718, pilot years, not state policy. Did not have to do the residency these education majors volunteered. They didn't have to go out into the schools for a whole year. But they wanted to get the most out of their program, and so they did. And so we put dots on the wall, put their initials and to see them come back as alumni and look for their bricks to find their.on the wall. To bring in a spouse, a best friend, a mom, a dad. Some have even brought their children and said, Do you see that.on the wall. I worked really, really hard for that.on the wall, but the dot came from Peter H Reynolds. Peter H Reynolds and his twin brother Paul and his sister Jane, have become special friends. We've celebrated an international dot day every around September 15, ish in Woodard Hall. It's our back to school kickoff. We celebrate all of our new majors, we celebrate our seniors, we celebrate our alumni. But his book, The DOT, was about his middle school teacher helping him find his gift for being a writer and an illustrator. And so we took his book, The dot about making your mark in the world and making a difference, and that is where our dots came from. So you can come to Woodard today and see the pilot dots are actually in the center, the original people who helped us get started. And if you look in the classroom next door in Woodard Hall, 204, you'll see more dots of those volunteers. But it's state law now. Detail, and everyone completes a full year teacher residency across the state of Louisiana, but we're so proud that Louisiana Tech went first tried something new, and we learned as a team that our students are better prepared for their future career, and they're successful and they're leaders, and today they're even mentors to our current residents. So it's it's beautiful to see it come full circle. Well, I

Leslee Bennett

do want to talk about the residency, and then also how that helps a future educator, but also you mentioned the 10 year anniversary of the team model, and so how has the that program changed over the past 10 years from where it started to now?

Amy Vessel

We started in Lincoln parish schools. Elementary program only 1516, we branched out into washill parish schools. Calhoun Middle School was our first secondary school site. We grew into Monroe city schools, Boser parish schools, Cata parish schools, and our residents currently are in 11 of our 15 partner districts. So they have expanded. We watched that many of our students want to return home. They can live with their parents. Mom and dad can help with laundry that can feed them while they're completing their residency. They can save money so they'll have money after graduation for to get

started. But the residencies early on, everyone was in Reston, and everyone was definitely in a school as a team, and we went face to face. I went to the schools, and then we grew and we brought in some of our amazing retired teachers who had been evaluators for years, and they went into the schools as clinical liaisons. And that drives traditional student teaching programs and accreditation programs nuts, because it's language that's not common. Of course, we're not common. We're Louisiana Tech. We're different, right? But a traditional student teaching program has a cooperating teacher or a mentor teacher, a student and university supervisor, and we don't we have a team. And so our team is made up of our residency center, in our liaison, in our coordinator and the clinical director in our faculty evaluators. We're one of the only universities that I know of in the area that uses their own faculty to evaluate our teacher candidates. So our faculty are so invested into seeing our candidates to the finish line, we expanded, and COVID really changed. So we're talking about the five year mark. We moved into swivel technology, we moved into survey, monkey, paperless reporting. Things really shifted at that point, and we got feedback from everyone about the changes that we made, and everyone liked the direction that we were moving. We used to do mentor training face to face every summer, people were happy to do online our whole world has really changed since COVID, but something that's coming next. We are calling it team 2025. Is the fact that our State Department used compass for many, many years as the state approved teacher evaluation system, and we wanted to make sure that our candidates not only would be successful after graduation, literally paving the road for them after graduation, we wanted to make sure they understood what compass was, and it was just a small fragment of the Danielson Framework for effective Teaching. So we adopted that evaluation system. Well, this year, the state is piloting a brand new teacher evaluation program, the lead system, and so we're going to have to think outside the box again and think what's best to prepare our candidates. So that's what's coming next. But I also see an increase in our number of candidates returning to South Louisiana. They used to be in a 30 mile radius, and then we expanded the fence a little bit. We set a 60 mile radius, but still, you need to be able to come to campus. But we have created such an online virtual residency program where everyone still does feel supported that they can go anywhere in the state. They can't go out of the state, but we have some candidates from Texas that are going to go home and live in East Texas, and they are going to drive into northwest Louisiana for a placement in Caddo or DeSoto parish. That's kind of exciting to me, because that expands for our admissions office, where we can recruit future teachers. We have students from Arkansas, and they want to drive in, and now they want placements as close to the Arkansas line so they can move home, but we're supporting them moving home. We love them and resting. But we've always said if they'll be here for three years and they want to return home and grow in that school. System. Most of those school systems will promise them a job upon graduation, and all of our school systems provide them with the state stipend. So they are receiving a stipend during their residency. But today, 10 years later, most of our districts are matching the state funds or adding something on top to help with gas money to help with any of those expenses. So we have residency stipends for our Tech students, our education majors, that varies from 3300 to \$15,000 that's like a guaranteed scholarship their senior year. And I love being the recruiting professor who meets with that family, and the child's still in high school, and I get to look mom and dad in the eye and tell them, if they want to be an education major, they need to come to tech, because their child could earn anywhere from 3300 to \$15,000 their their senior year. And mom and dad get really excited about that now. Oh, yeah, yeah.

Leslee Bennett

So residency has been mentioned multiple times, like throughout this so far, but for someone who doesn't understand what a residency is, could you explain that Sure,

Amy Vessel

if you were a resident in the team model, you are shadowing your mentor teacher. And we think about the residency in three parts, fall quarter, winter quarter and spring quarter, and each quarter has a different level of expectation. So in the fall, I'm going to compare it to NASCAR. And in NASCAR, when you are the lead car, there's a car behind you, and they're drafting, so we're going to draft off our mentor teacher, and you're there to assist. You're there to be hands to the ground, and you are on your feet. You are never sitting in a chair, but you're there to help. You're helping with management, you're helping with materials, you're helping with anything, but you're building that trust circle with your mentor teacher. Once your mentor teacher trusts you, they are going to start sharing with you more responsibilities in the classroom, from teaching a small portion of a lesson to a whole subject. And a great example would be at Reston elementary they are on a block system. A lot of our departmentalized upper elementary schools are so if they teach three blocks during the day. During block one, if you're a resident, you may be walking around the room, monitoring, helping with materials, while your mentor teacher leaves, but you both plan the lesson, and you both know the lesson, so if there were an emergency and the teacher needed to step out of the room, the resident is already prepared to step in. But during block two, the resident, and the mentor kind of play a tennis match, and they bounce the ball back and forth a little bit, and maybe five minutes, or 10 minutes, the mentor releases a portion of the lesson to the clinical resident. But by that third block, that resident has already observed a master mentor, teacher and expert in their field teach that lesson, and they've studied and they know the lesson. And then they got a little practice run during block two, so by block three, they're ready to run in the race. And once that trust circle is built, during the months of August, September and October, you see an increase in the release of the mentor teacher, letting that resident teach. So by December and January, they are sitting at the table going, what do you want to teach today? What do you want to teach next week? And they're moving the resident through the different subjects in high school, it's the same thing. If they teach the same subject all day, they're going to turn over more responsibilities faster. In middle school or high school, if they teach a variety of subjects, they're going to help them master one subject area first. If they were social studies, for example, they may teach American history and economics. So they may choose one area first and then work on the other. But by the spring, they're not drafting on anybody. Our residents, for the most part by mid January are already recommended by the school districts. That's another policy. And the olden days, tech recommended me to be a teacher, to be certified in Louisiana. Today, the school system and Louisiana Tech have to jointly make that recommendation. And so it's it's just such a great feeling to see that January survey go out is called mid year certification check in. And would you recommend without hesitation? Do you think they'll be ready by May? Or do you have some concerns and you want to visit with this and chat with this, and to see almost 60, 70% say I would recommend without hesitation, right now in January, that's exciting. So something we're doing is working. I think that the St Cloud State University's co teaching model is working. The different ways that you can co teach, and I shared a couple of examples, you can assist, you can observe, you can parallel teach. There are many ways, but I think it's that grounded. Research that we have in our model that we share constantly with our team. I think that that's the secret ingredient to the success to the team model.

Leslee Bennett

I do want to mention the mid year recruitment event, and because I know that's a big deal, especially for juniors and seniors going into their educational career. So could you explain what that event is and what it entails, and then just explain, like, the creation of the event and how that all came about?

Amy Vessel

I want to give some credit first to text Career Center, because text Career Center had a teacher job fair that I attended, let's just say, a really long time ago, when I student taught spring quarter in the early 90s, I knew that I wanted to stay and get my masters at Tech, and I did, but I went to the job fair anyway, because I wanted to see what it was really all about. And that was such a smart move. And I'm probably going to give credit to Dr Curlin Talton, because she probably advised me to do that because she was my advisor. But the next year, when I had my masters, I walked in very confident, and I knew exactly what was going to happen at that event, and it was a great event for me. That year, I left with cards and information about district job fairs. I went to the Washington job fair. I had a job in June. That's early. Back then, that was early. So tech did such a good job preparing me for my job. As I came back to tech, 1999 and I saw that the teacher job fair still existed. We saw almost every district in the state coming, usually in April, I went over and talked to him about bumping it up a little bit to march, because there's a national teacher shortage, and we see school systems offering verbal job offers earlier, and they wanted it to be earlier. But as we work with our partner districts, we realized that we wanted to make sure we instilled a situation, a scenario, a practice run for our seniors, where they get the chance to meet with our partner districts, our key partner districts and our partner districts were thrilled. So we use the model the Career Center used with their job fair that's open to anyone, any school system they come from, Alaska, California. We've met people from all over the country that come to those job fairs, and right now we have a heavy, heavy Texas population of Texas independent school districts. We decided that the second Friday in January, we would offer a special benefit to our partner school districts that are hosting our residents, to come in and meet our seniors and meet our juniors. When we added the juniors, it gave our juniors the chance to meet their potential future homes for the residency. It also made it really serious, and so to see them pull us aside and go, thank you. I realize now this is happening. It's time for me to pass my practice exams. It's time for me to turn in my application, and for our seniors, they said, Dr vessel, this is real. I'm about to graduate in May. It's a wake up call. It's a huge wake up call. And it's so easy to put together. We've got such an amazing team of planners on our campus. The Davidson athletic complex has just been the logical place for that venue, and I was actually excited to see after we were there for several years, the teacher Career Center also moved their job fair from the student center to the Davidson Athletic Center as well. I think they got that suggestion from the districts because they love the ease of parking at the DAC. But now for all education majors, there are two opportunities to meet with school districts mid year, in January and then in the spring, they still have what I call the big teacher recruitment day. But it's just been great. And so we've done that, I believe, since 2018 or 2019

Leslee Bennett

Yeah, I was going to say talking with, like, some of the students and some of the districts, you can really see it become real for them, and they get really excited just talking to the talking to the districts, and just watching everyone, you can really feel the excitement in Becoming a future educator. You

mentioned the national teacher shortage. And I did want to talk about that, and I wanted to ask, how is the CRC combating that we are

Amy Vessel

finding that our districts are so desperate for hires they have mid year needs. When we student taught, we had graduates finishing in November, we graduates finishing in March, and graduates finishing in May. Now that we have an August may residency, we only have may graduates, and so the districts have had some growing pains with that. But they they want the best of the best. They want our candidates, and they want them quickly so they are doing. Had verbal commitments with our candidates, and what I wanted to make sure we said was the fact that most of our education graduates have a verbal commitment or a serious job interview waiting the week after graduation, they are sitting in Louisiana Tech's graduation, smiling, joyful, not fearful of what's next, not worried about what job or how they're going to survive in the world, or am I going to have to move back home and live with mom and dad? They already know their journey. Some of them even have keys to their classroom before they go to tech graduation. So it's exciting, but for me to have to say no sometimes to a resident that's offered a sabbatical for April and May for a district that says, Please, can we hire them early? We are also the rule followers, and we have to make sure all the state policies stay in place. So it's not always fun to hold my position that I hold in the CRC, but I'm in charge of making sure all the rules are followed all of the certification applications that Belinda submits to the State Department. We want to make sure that they all have all the T's crossed and all the i's dotted.

Leslee Bennett

I did want to ask, what are some of the career paths, not only educational, but if someone is looking after EDUC, after majoring in education, and they're like, well, maybe I don't want to be a teacher, but maybe I want to do something else. So what are the career paths they could go into? That is

Amy Vessel

a great question. Leslie, you can be a teacher. You can pursue a master's degree in curriculum, instruction, making you wiser, knowing not what to teach, but why you teach it that can lead you to becoming a reading diagnostician. That could lead you to be come a math or a reading literacy coordinator, a leader in your school, a grade level leader. It can lead you to being an assistant principal. If you pursue our ED leadership degree, you could be a principal, an assistant principal, a superintendent, there are so many avenues outside of the classroom. The classroom is where it starts. And if you talk to any principal, any superintendent, any professor, they all taught once, maybe they taught for a decade. Maybe they taught for multiple decades, but they taught somewhere, and maybe they taught multiple grades, and that's what they always remember, and that's what they use to teach others. So it's the starting ground, but it's not where you might stop. It's exciting to read an educators resume. It won't look like any others.

Leslee Bennett

So for listeners, where can they go to learn more about the CRC and to get more information on future in education, you can go

Amy Vessel

to Tech's website and look under the Department of Curriculum, Instruction and leadership. We're also on social media at La tech CRRC, we post any events, any updates. Our partner districts share job openings with us. We could have graduates out there teaching or returning to Louisiana. Maybe they moved away for an adventure, and they're coming home and they are interested in teaching again in Louisiana. We post everything on our Instagram and our Facebook site, so we would love for anyone who has been part of our education program in Woodard Hall, or is interested to reach out to us. We've got our contact information on all those websites, and we would love to talk to anybody about our team story and share with them how we can help their dream come true if they feel called to make a difference in the classroom.

Leslee Bennett

Well, Dr vessel, it's been nice learning more about the CRC. Are there any last words of encouragement that you would like to give to future educators?

Amy Vessel

I'm just so proud of our alumni, and I'm so proud of the high school students that come into our building because they feel called to teach, and we want to be part of their journey. We want to be part of their story, and we want to make them the best that they can be, and provide them with all the skills that they need so they will be successful for a lifetime. So that's kind of our quest, not just me, but the whole team. And it brings us joy every day. And I always tell our teachers in our early classes to raise their hand and promise me that when it doesn't bring them joy that they'll find something else that will, because we want all of our students impacted in a very positive way, so we want them around the best teachers, and that's what I hope we're providing. We're just really, really proud of our alumni, and we're really, really proud of our current education majors. They are truly the best in the state. Oh, for

Leslee Bennett

sure. Thank you for joining us and thank you for all that y'all do in the College of Education. It's really awesome to watch all grow and everything so thank you. Applause.

Gavin Kelly

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