

153: David Szymanski: A Renaissance Degree

Gavin Kelly: Hey everybody, you're listening to Beyond 1894. This is the official podcast of Louisiana Tech University. My name is Gavin Kelly from the Office of University Communications, and our guest for this episode is Dr. David Szymanski. He is Department Chair and a Professor in Kinesiology here at Tech. Dr. Szymanski, thanks for making time for us today.

David Szymanski: Thank you very much. I appreciate being here.

Overview of the Kinesiology Program

Gavin Kelly: So, let's actually start with kinesiology as a program here at Tech. Talk to me about sort of what makes kinesiology stand out. I know that kinesiology was one of the big programs that necessitated a name change from the College of Education to Education and Human Sciences, because kinesiology is a human science, right? But talk to me about the program kind of in general. What kind of makes it a standout program here—I know it is one of our more highly attended programs. And then talk to me about kind of the little quirks and special aspects of the program that come to mind.

David Szymanski: So, at the undergraduate level, we have two degrees: one is Kinesiology and health sciences, and that is the most popular one. It is geared towards those who want to be in the allied health fields, so PT, OT, medical school, and so on. And we have somewhere in the neighborhood of 400 to 450 students on an annual basis. The other undergraduate major is exercise and health promotion, and that is one that we've just recently revised, where we now have 12 hours of electives that give some students options, so it is - we'll say less of a science undergraduate degree, because the Kinesiology and Health Sciences has biology, chemistries, physics, and then all the Kinesis courses that go with it to help satisfy the prerequisites, but the exercise and health promotion allows someone to go into athletic training, sports psychology, personal trainer, strength and conditioning coach, or any other field that they might think is relevant that could be either directly or indirectly related to it, and so that is a growing one, and one of the things that is growing that, or that makes it, will say, a little bit unique is we now have this health coaching certificate. So, Dr. Allison Reichter is one of our faculty. She came to us from the University of Iowa, and they were doing this program there. So, we are the only program now in the state of Louisiana that has a certified health and health coaching program, which is accredited, and so a student can go through that exercise and health promotion while going through that health coaching certificate, and they don't have to go to graduate

school in order to have, we'll say, a full-time job, which could make a very lucrative salary, and so that is something that we want to inform not only kinesiology students but students that are in psychology and apply to natural sciences, so nursing and biology folks who might be going to other places. This gives them options where they might say they have a possible second job, or this might ultimately become the job. So that's something quite new and unique. And then for those students who are not kinesiology majors, we have minors that they might want to get, and there are numerous four of them that are on our website. One of them is sport and exercise psychology, and depending on the student, they might only need a couple classes because they might already have a number of courses that are required, such as a psychology undergraduate student, and then we have one that's in kinesiology and health sciences, one in exercise and health promotion, and another in sport coaching or sport performance. Excuse me. And so those are the ones that non-kinesiology students can go after, and then that gives them some options, or they get a little bit of a taste of kinesiology, and then sometimes those students change their majors and come into kinesiology because they didn't know all that they could do at the graduate level. We have a Master's of Science in Kinesiology with two concentrations, one of them is Sport and Exercise Psychology, and one is Sport Performance. Those are both unique programs. The Sport and Exercise Psychology, we have a lab called the Minds in Motion Lab, which allows our faculty in that area, so Dr. Jordan Blazo, Dr. Drew Parks, and Dr. Allison Reichter to do things that are related to those areas, and we'll say overall they do things that are in the youth or children's type of area, so it could be the sport psychology, it could be autism, Parkinson's, or the health coaching, or even working in the military, we're doing some things right now in Barksdale Air Force Base, and Dr. Parks is intimately involved with that, and then Dr. Blaser does things with the Aspen Institute, and a peer colleague of his, Dr. Travis Deutch, at Utah State, and so that is a program that looks at what is going on from the youth perspective, all around the United States, so very unique. And then sport performance, Dr. Muchao does biomechanics, Dr. Hai Shu does exercise fizza, I do exercise fizza, and we're in the sport performance. And then we have most recently Dr. Brandon Brochus, who does motor learning and cognitive things, and he is someone who came to us most recently with our newest hire, and he does things in the stage combat, so now he works with Dr. Gwin Mark Gwynn over in theater, and now they're doing things that might be the way I look at his Hollywood fight scenes, for example, and it's something that you might not think anyone in Kinesiology would ever be doing, but it makes it again quite unique. So we have those faculty, and then we have our instructors, and those individuals don't have PhDs, but they are intimately involved with our undergraduate students as advisors, and then work with them either in our club, which is Kinesis, or with our PE K, which is Phi Epsilon Kappa, which is an honors fraternity for kinesiology majors around the country. And then we do things on campus, off campus, and I invite anyone to

go to the LATech Kinesiology Facebook page, Instagram, or Twitter, or maybe it's now X. And so we have things for our students, our graduate students, our alumni, our senior adult fitness program, our research that we do, everything can be found there, and it's allows students who visit here, especially those who want to be undergraduates, an opportunity to see all the things beyond whatever their visit here on campus may be.

Gavin Kelly: Very nice, very thorough explanation. I appreciate that and also, a sign of a good department chair shouting out all your faculty there, that's good. Let's talk about you and how you ended up in this position. Let's talk about kind of your background and what drew you to health sciences like this. Talk to me about kind of where you're from, and then early on how you decided you were going to pursue the academic path that you did.

David Szymanski: All right, this is going to be a long one. My first degree is in fine art. Drawing and painting. And I'm from Chicago, born and raised, and then went through high school, and then initially I went to Indiana University as a freshman. I was a college baseball player, got punched by the baseball coach there, and after finishing that fall semester, went home, and then went to a community college, so I played baseball at that community college, started some coursework there, and because I went to a four-year school and then to a junior college, I couldn't transfer after one year, so I had to finish my associate's degree at the College of DuPage in Glen Ellen, Illinois, for those of you who are familiar with the Chicagoland area, anyway, freshman year had a great year, had some actual scholarship offers to leave, and I couldn't accept them because I had to sit out, and then stayed and finished out my sophomore year. Terrible weather, our team was not good, I did not play good, and I only had one opportunity, and that was at a school called Texas Lutheran in Seguin, Texas, and that is an NAI, well, at the time it was an NAI school, now it is a Division Three school, but had an opportunity to play there as a junior and senior, the starting second baseman for my junior college team, and center fielder, all three of us went to Texas Lutheran together, and it was because we played summer league baseball with some other individuals who we knew who also had played there, but they had already graduated. So I go down to Seguin, Texas, from the Chicagoland area, and it was a little different, right? It's more of the, it's in the San Antonio area, and it was more, we'll say, cowboy hats, and gourse, yeah, as it was to the West Southwest suburbs of Chicago, and Texas is his own country, not its own state, I would say, for those who don't, who are from that area or from the state, because they are born and raised that way, as they go through their schooling system, but anyway, had a really good time there, finished an undergraduate degree, as I said, in fine art, and then I will say, unfortunately, I didn't get drafted to play pro baseball, and so I then took a job downtown Chicago at an art studio called Phase Two, and we did all the key line and paste-up things for Philip Morris, which is cigarettes, so we were doing Marlboro cigarette ads and Virginia Slim ads downtown

Chicago, 35 West Wacker Drive, right on the river, and if you ever watch the television shows with all the emergency doctors and all that, it usually show that lake or the river and where the that building is, and whenever my children see that, I was like, there's where dad worked at one time, but anyway, I was, in my opinion, selling cancer sticks, and I was trying to be a professional athlete, so this is something that I didn't really enjoy at the time, but a scout from the Chicago Cubs actually called while I was visiting some of my friends in Texas during a spring break, and they said, Are you still interested in playing baseball? And I said absolutely, I'm interested in playing baseball, and they said, well, we're interested in you if you're interested in us, and I said, okay, so then I basically never went back to Chicago, quit my job, stayed in Texas, and trained for the next four months, and was preparing for major league tryouts, and back in those days you used to go to the major league stadiums and actually try out, today it's different, so I had a tryout with the Texas Rangers and the Chicago Cubs, and both situations it rained during the tryouts. So I was a 22 year old, hadn't played a year of college baseball. Now in a tryout where we only threw in the outfield grass, so that we wouldn't ruin the infield at the old Arlington Stadium, and then we ran on the track warning track, the 60 yard dash, and then we hit in the batting cages. Well, it wasn't anything that allowed me to potentially shine, right? And then when I flew to Chicago, it rained, and they called the whole dang thing off, and so I didn't even get to try out there. So for me, I just saw the sand and the hourglass just coming out, where I just said this is that was my opportunity, and it didn't really work, so got to figure something else out. So now, where do I go? Well, I was still staying in Texas with my friends at the time, and so I actually got a job to be an admissions counselor at Texas Lutheran. So, for two and a half years or so, I was an admissions counselor there, helping other students learn about that private liberal arts college in Seguin, and help with recruiting for the athletic department as well. And after doing that for those two and a half years or so, I decided I wanted to change my life, and so that led me to think about what do I want to do now. Well, I decided I wanted to be a baseball coach at the collegiate level, and so I said I need to get a second undergraduate degree in kinesiology. So that's where the kinesiology started after all the other things didn't work out, so we learned to pivot and go another direction, right? And so I got my second undergraduate degree at Texas Lutheran, went three semesters with all kinesiology courses, because I already had all the other prerequisites or other courses done. Then I started my master's degree at Texas State, which is in San Marcus, Texas, and I was then coaching at Texas Lutheran, because the coach that I played for, Ray Cott, who played for the 1954 World Series New York Giants with Willie Mays, he retired, and then Coach Bill Miller from Judson High School in San Antonio, Texas, who's a Texas Lutheran football and baseball alum, got the job, and he didn't know anything about college recruiting, and I did, because I'd been working in the admissions office for three years, he asked me to be his assistant, and that's how the door to be a college coach opened for me.

And so I finished both the undergrad and the graduate program, and was working summer baseball camps at Texas and Texas A&M and Baylor, and just talking to those other coaches that, like, you need to get into a circle of coaches that gives you other opportunities, so that maybe the job you have if you want to grow and get into a higher position you need to be meet other coaches and so I did and I ultimately the fourth year that I was coaching at Texas Lutheran I applied to graduate programs because the professor there at Texas Lutheran was a Dr. Bill Squires who I actually talked to two weeks ago because he's still doing well in the Seguin, Texas area. He encouraged me and many students, "Hey, go get your PhD, go get your PhD, and probably many students are like, "No, you're nuts, I'm not doing this, I'm not getting further education. He, though, resonated with me because I started learning about baseball research through my master's degree, and so I learned about heavy weighted balls and underweighted balls, heavy bats and light bats, and this was by Dr. Coop Durin out of the University of Hawaii, and all of a sudden he was doing research to increase bat velocity or throwing velocity, and this was research that he did in the early 80s through the 90s, and I was like, man, that's really cool, why didn't anyone ever tell me or anybody I know in the baseball world about this, and back then, and this was the late 80s, early 90s, everyone thought that Dr. Duran was kind of crazy because baseball didn't do that type of stuff. There was no research in baseball, but I was like, you know what, I think there's a future in this, because if the NFL does combines, and they do some testing on their players, and other programs, like soccer or rugby, do some things through the European or Australian areas. There's no reason why this can't be done in baseball. And then, at the time, when I was talking about that, people were telling me, "You're crazy, because nobody tests baseball players, and I said they should be, and I think they will be in the future."

Gavin Kelly: Foreshadowing there, right?

David Szymanski: Yeah, for sure. Because now everything is testing in baseball, there's not anyone who doesn't do it. Anyway, I started then thinking about this PhD seriously, and so I applied to a couple different schools, Auburn University and Auburn L. Bama, being one of them, and so that's where I met Dr. David Pascoe, who ultimately became my mentor, and he said, "I don't know anything about baseball, but if you teach me baseball, I'll teach you exercise physiology, and we'll make it work. And then my wife was offered a position to be a graduate assistant strength coach at Auburn, so my wife, who works here at Louisiana Tech, Jessica Szymanski was the first female graduate assistant strength coach at Auburn in the fall of 1996 So that's when we went there, and so, and by the way, also a little bit back story. When I was working at Texas Lutheran, I recruited an 18 year old young lady named Jessica Gaetan to come play volleyball at Texas Lutheran, and ultimately she became my girlfriend, then my fiance, and then later my wife, while she was a senior in college. So she

went from being Jessica Gaitan and as a junior in college to Jessica Szymanski her senior year, and we were married while she was finishing her undergrad, and I was finishing my master's at Texas State, and we've been married ever since.

Gavin Kelly: And the rest is history, right?

David Szymanski: The rest is history. And then at Auburn, the wonderful thing that happened there is that I also went and talked to Coach Hal Baird, who was the head baseball coach for Auburn, and the volunteer assistant had just finished his PhD, and was going on and taking a job somewhere else. So, Coach Baird said, "Hey, if you want the volunteer assistant job, it's yours. And I said, "Awesome. So, now I got accepted to Auburn. I had a graduate teaching assistantship, and then I was the volunteer assistant baseball coach, starting the fall of 96 that year. David Ross, who's, if you know baseball, ended up winning a World Series with the Boston Red Sox, and then also with the Chicago Cubs, and then Tim Hudson was our starting pitcher on Friday night and center fielder all other evenings, and then Tim went to the World Series and won with the San Francisco Giants, but before that was with the Atlanta Braves, and then before that he got drafted by the Oakland A's, and so I was like, man, went from Texas Lutheran small NAIC school, about 1800 students to a Division One perennial powerhouse in baseball, and we go to the College World Series that first year in 1997 in Omaha, Nebraska, and the College World Series that was like mecca, right, because everyone always wants to go to Omaha, it's always been there, and I just thought this was the greatest thing in the world, but after we ultimately lost to Stanford in the College World Series, and we got back to Auburn, the head baseball coach, Coach Baird, said, "Do you want to be a coach or do you want to be a doctoral student, and then within a week, Dr. Pasco also called me into his office and said, 'Do you want to be a doctoral student or do you want to be a baseball coach? So they both said, 'Make a choice and decide. Well, because I was a volunteer, and at that time volunteers made no money whatsoever and couldn't make any money, I elected to then stay with my doctoral work and try to complete my degree, but that summer I started. I was teaching summer school, and I had this 682 180 pound African American basketball player in the back of the room. Well, I didn't know at the time, but it was Chuck Person who was NBA All-Star with the San Antonio Spurs, and he asked me if I wanted to train him after he took my class because he had back surgery and he wanted to get back into shape so that he could go back to the Spurs and I agreed and I said absolutely I'll do that. So interesting story that most people don't know after training Chuck that year or that summer I should say he said, How would you like to be the head strength coach for the Indiana Pacers, and I said, "What are you talking about? He goes, "Well, Donnie Walsh is the general manager. He drafted me out of Auburn back in the day when I was a college basketball player. And I said, "Well, I'm from Chicago, and I'm a Chicago Bulls fan, and those who know me, I wear

Jordans pretty much every day. But I said, "Yes, I'll go for the interview. So I went to Indiana, interviewed with Donnie Walsh, met with them. They basically told me that you'll be hired well within two weeks or so. If you know anything about the Bulls and the Indiana Pacers, they were very competitive at that time. Well, they hired Larry Bird, and Larry Bird didn't know David Szymanski, so the job that I thought I was going to be offered, Larry Bird said, "No, I'm not interested in this guy. We're going to get somebody else. So I did not get the job with the Indiana Pacers, and after essentially just kind of worrying and worrying and worrying about whether I was going to get it or not, I finally made the decision, and I told my wife, "I'm not going for any jobs, I'm going to finish my PhD, because this is going to be something that I think will change my life. So that was the summer of 97 and if you know the Bulls and the Pacers, 1998 with Reggie Miller and Michael Jordan, huge rivalry. And I guess it would have been really interesting if I was the strength coach for the Indiana Pacers as a Jordan and Bulls fan, that would have been some. Them interesting, but nonetheless, I continued my degree at Auburn. My wife finished her master's degree, started doing personal training, but then the baseball players at Auburn did not like the football strength and conditioning that they were doing, and they asked me, because that's what I did, if I would train them during the following summer, so the summer of 98 and then summer of 99 Any baseball player at Auburn who was taking summer school, I trained them at no cost. It was something that I've kind of historically done throughout my career. But anyway, they were so happy, so impressed that they went to the coaching staff, and that they said, "You need to hire this guy, because we are in the best shape we've ever been in, and we think this guy would be great for us. So, Coach Baird was going to retire after the 99 season, and then Steve Renfro, the assistant head coach, was going to become the head coach. And so they called me into his office, and they said, "How would you like to be the volunteer assistant of the baseball team again? And I said, "Why would I want to work for free some more? I've already done that, and I don't see the point. So then they told me Coach Baird was going to retire, Coach Renfro was going to take the job, and then they were going to hire me to be the full-time strength coach for the Auburn baseball team, and that at the time was unheard of. No baseball team collegiately had their own strength coach, and I said, okay, now that you said that, yes, I will take the volunteer assistant job in 99 and then 2000 I got hired to be the exercise physiologist, a physiologist of the Auburn baseball team, because I couldn't be hired by the strength and conditioning staff, because they were basically not, they're going around them, so then 2000 through 2004 I was the exercise physiologist of the Auburn baseball team. We did some research with them while I was finishing my PhD, and then my research, and so my research then was dealing with some of the high school athletes in Columbus, Georgia, and then also Auburn and Opelika, Alabama, and I did that over the course of two years, and that led me into the overweighted, underweighted bats that I'd been doing from the Coop Dorine research, and

then was looking to see how we could increase bat speed or throwing velocity for Auburn baseball players based on the research that I came up with, or the results we found, and it was working really, really well, and my wife had a good business as a personal trainer, and I had a good job working with Auburn baseball team. However, in 2004 we went 12 and 18 in the SEC, and Coach Renfro, unfortunately, was let go. And then what happens? Well, a new coach comes in, right? They want to have their own staff, so I had just finished, I graduated with my PhD in 2004. A new high, a new college baseball coach was recruited and became the baseball coach at Auburn, and I then was told, "Hey, come on into the athletic director's office and let's have a meeting. And at the time, I didn't know what it was. I was kind of naive at that point in my career about that, how that type of stuff worked, but the first question that was asked to me was, Did you finish your PhD? And I said, Yes, I did. They said, Great, because we're letting you go. And so I said, Oh, great. And then we kind of had a conversation about how I thought it went, and I told them all the positive things, and I said, Unfortunately, I think this is a bad decision, and I don't think it's going to go well if you don't have somebody to do this well, they still allowed the coach to hire somebody else, and they had to work with the athletic program, which was fine. And then that changed my life, because Auburn University traditionally does not hire its PhD students to be faculty members. And then I was just let go working with athletics, so I didn't have really a job that I thought would be meaningful in Auburn, Alabama, and my wife, though, was very happy because she had a very fruitful personal training business there. Well, I've.. and this was in July of 2004. Well, most traditional semester schools are going to start in September, or excuse me, August, and I could not find a position to do strength and conditioning in baseball, because I was the only one who was doing it at that time, and there wasn't money for other baseball teams in the SEC or ACC to hire me, so I took a job as a sports performance director in Tulsa, Oklahoma, for one year exactly, basically, and so I went to Tulsa, and my wife had to sell, we had a baby boy, Dawson, who now is here at Louisiana Tech as a senior, and another one was going to be on the way, because my wife was pregnant, and we didn't know the gender of either one of our children, and I highly recommend not knowing the gender of your children, because it's the greatest gift you'll ever have, and make you so excited and happy once you find it out. But anyway, my wife was pregnant and had an infant, and then we had a dog and two cats, and she was in Auburn, Alabama, while I was living in a hotel in Tulsa, Oklahoma, and then ultimately we bought a house there and was working as the sports professional. One's director at a place called Velocity Sports Performance in Broken Arrow, Oklahoma. Well, after you're doing that job for about six months, I learned very quickly that the people who bought the business and ran the business didn't know how to do the financial aspects of it. So I told my wife after I went to a national strength and conditioning coaches conference in, I think, was Nashville, Tennessee, that year. Hey, I'm gonna apply for a coach, a teaching job. All

right, so now it's January of 2005 and I'm gonna apply for jobs. And my wife's like, what are you talking about? We just moved to Tulsa, Oklahoma. We had just bought the most expensive house to that date, that was the height of the housing market also was 2005 and I said, well, I just think we need to change our stars, as Heath Ledger was told in *A Knight's Tale*, if you know that movie, and I'm kind of famous, I guess, for telling movie analogies in my classes, but anyway, I applied to a couple different schools, Louisiana Tech being one of them, and so in 2005 in July, I interviewed here in Ruston, and was offered the jobs by Dr. James Heindel, who was the department chair at the time, and then soon thereafter, Hurricane Katrina hit the state of Louisiana, and there was a hiring freeze. Well, I had told the people in Tulsa, Oklahoma, that I was not going to return, so they fired me, and I just had signed my contract, we'll say fortunately here at Louisiana Tech, because had I not signed it, I would have lost my job in Tulsa and would not have been able to be hired here at Louisiana Tech, and then because of Katrina there was many people from South Louisiana who are moving up to North Louisiana or to East Texas. Well, we couldn't find a house that we wanted to live in in Ruston in 2005 so I lived in my office in Memorial Gym, August, September, October, November, until december 17, literally five months. I lived in my office, showered downstairs in the men's locker room, and anything that needed to do, that's what I did. While my wife and my kids were trying to sell a house for this, we'll say the second time now in Tulsa, Oklahoma. When we sold the house in Oklahoma, we didn't have a house here, so my wife, the dog, the two cats, and two babies moved back to Seguin, Texas, to stay with Mom and Dad, her mom and dad, while I was starting my job here, and so at that time I was teaching not only a regular load but also an overload, so I was teaching five classes as a, as an assistant professor in the fall of 2005 and I literally was working around the clock and stayed in my office all day long, and so when students would email me at 11 or 12 o'clock at night, I'm literally sleeping on the floor next to my computer, I would email them right back, and that's probably where maybe my somewhat of a reputation as being a tenacious professor comes from, where I would email these students immediately once they did it, like why the heck is this person doing it well. I had no family here, and I kind of had no life at that time. It was just school, and that's what I did. And that's how that started in again the fall of 2005 and then eventually again december 17, because that's the day we closed and moved into our house. That's when my family all moved here to the house that we live in, and we've been living in it ever since. And Grandma and Grandpa helped us move stuff from Seguin, also to Ruston, and that's where we'll say, well, my career at Louisiana Tech started. Yeah, and now been here 21 years, and about to start my 22nd year, I believe.

Gavin Kelly: Yeah, very—thank you by the way for the very in-depth explanation of all that. And the sort of pieces of kind of what the kinesiology program has become under your

leadership and kind of the focal points of the program, they start to make a little bit more sense when you kind of hear that backstory. So I appreciate that. So obviously, you know, you go from assistant professor, you're still teaching but, you know, as we speak now you're department chair. So talk to me about the kind of thought process behind taking on increased leadership roles. I mean, it's kind of obvious talking to you why you were kind of like, yeah this is something I can do and I'm willing to do it, but talk to me about kind of those steps that came throughout your career and why you've now decided to be leading the kinesiology program, whereas like you said 20 years ago you were kind of sleeping in your office and teaching an overload.

David Szymanski: so as a an assistant professor at Louisiana Tech, you go through the tenure and promotion process, which is five years of work, and then your six year, you're submitting your dossier for consideration, and because of my time here, I was working with at the time Wade Simoneau, who was the head baseball coach, and we were doing baseball research with the tech baseball team, and he also asked me to be at one time the volunteer assistant baseball coach here, and I actually did that for two years. Years while being an assistant professor, and then that transitioned into being a strength coach for the team, because I really couldn't help satisfy their needs during baseball practices the way they would have liked, and so they ended up having some other person be the volunteer assistant, but to do the strength and conditioning, I told them that if we can go earlier in the morning before classes start, then I'd be happy to do that, and so that's what I did for the tech team at that point in time. And then after classes, we'll say in the afternoons, I would go out to the field, and we would do other testing or other observations that we would try to look at how the skill of baseball, is it actually correlated, or does it have a relationship with any of the things that we're measuring, such as strength and power and speed and height, weight, body composition, and all the other things that we continually do today with Tech's baseball team. And then once I became an assistant, go from assistant to associate professor, then there's another five or years or so process to become or be considered for a full professor, but during that time Dr. Lainey Dornier was the department chair, and she asked if I was interested in being an associate department chair to help her do some of the administrative things, and I said yes, I'll be happy to do that, and so for that year I ended up doing a lot of things that our graduate faculty currently all split up and divide these responsibilities now, because there are not currently advising undergraduate students, but they have graduate faculty responsibilities that take place or replace that. But anyway, after doing that for one year, it really made it very challenging for me to continue to work with the baseball team, be a professor, and be an associate department chair. So, after one year of doing it, I said, "Hey, I really wasn't as productive as I would have liked to have been in the research area. I just don't think this is the best thing for me at this point in time. So, I'm

going to say I don't want to do it anymore. Well, then the following year she actually came back to us as grads, the grad faculty, and said, "Well, I still need someone to do this work. What if we divide it up? And so that's what did happen. So each graduate faculty member ended up having different responsibilities that I had done as an associate department chair for that previous year, and that worked out basically fine, and helped give some people administrative experiences. Well, then later Dr. Dornier stepped into an associate dean position, if I'm not mistaken, in our college, and then I was asked to be the interim department chair, and then ultimately was I interested in being the department chair, and then I said, initially I said I didn't want to do it, because I thought it would impact my ability to continue to do the research, and again, a movie analogy, the movie Gladiator, Maximus was asked to be the leader of Rome, and he said I don't want to do it, and then Caesar actually told him that's exactly why you should be the leader, because you don't care about the politics, you don't care about the money, or whatever other people are taking these jobs for, you're here for the people of Rome, and the then you're in your, your army, right, you're your leader of them, and that's why you should be, that's why you'd be a great choice, and so I thought about it. I mean, at the time, I believe I was the only full professor in our department, and so I thought, well, for senior leadership, I think I can do that. I just wasn't sure how that would impact my ability to do the teaching and the research and anything else that I might have been doing, because my two boys, as they're growing up, I was also coaching them in their baseball world, and soccer, and basketball, and all the things they were doing with my wife, but then ultimately I talked to my wife about it, and I said, I think I'm going to do this and make the choice, because I think I can allow the faculty, who I all know very well, let them do the things that I feel they are really strong at, and then provide some guidance, but also try to have a democratic leadership where, hey, what do you all think? Provide, let them provide feedback, and then if I thought it was a really good idea or in line with what my ideas might have been, then let's do these things. So I've always tried to lead by example, but also help people share in the governance, so that everyone felt connected. So it was really trying to build a team of faculty who liked being at Louisiana Tech, liked working with each other, enjoyed the classes that they were teaching, and so it was a really conducive atmosphere, where as faculty, at times people are wondering, How do I fit into a department, can I make an impact, am I doing the things that I want, and if I can, then it should be a win-win for everybody, and so I think that's what I've been able to create, and I hope that's what I've done, is create an atmosphere for faculty and students, undergrad and graduates, to do the things that they like and develop it. So, again, another movie analogy: robots see a need, fill a need. Well, if we don't. Have something. How can we make it better? And so, with faculty, we've created again different undergrad minors or certificates because of faculty's input, and I thought they were a great idea. So, let's go with it. And then we've created different classes at times. So, in particular, right now we have a

new research methods and statistics class at the undergraduate level that we've never had for all the years I've been here, and that was Dr. Drew Parks, who said, "Hey, I think it'll be a really good class for us to do, because if we want to get more involved with our student undergraduate students and have them present at the Undergraduate Research Symposium, this is a way, as a sophomore, that they could take this 200 level course to get them excited, hopefully, about research, let them know what different faculty are doing, and then maybe that will have them gravitate towards undergrad research, but then also lead to our graduate program, where they might want to be a master student in one of our two concentrations. So I thought that was a really good one, and then we've had other classes that we've added as well at the undergraduate level, such as a biomechanics class some years ago, and so Dr. Chow teaches that course, and then a the sport and exercise psychology became part of both undergraduate curricula, because at one time it wasn't, and so that then helped that program grow as well, and so to me it's very rewarding to see people enjoy what they're doing and build something that's greater than ourselves as individuals, and I think that's one of the things that I've really helped our department with, and I hope we continue to do those things, because for me personally, as a person who never became a professional athlete, I consider myself a professional professor and now a professional administrator, and so now, How do I help not only myself as a faculty member, but others reach excellence at some level, and then everyone gets better because of it, and then you create this atmosphere where the students now know that, and now students gravitate, whether they are in Kinesin initially or they're coming from other departments, and they're taking a 200 level class, for example, like our 290 course, or 292 course, which are personal and community health and fitness and wellness, or preventative preventative wellness. It kind of teaches you all the bad things that can happen with your health, and the other class teaches you all the things you can do to take care of yourself, and so those students learn, hey, I can take those skills that I have, maybe in math, and put them into kinesiology. I have these skills in engineering, but I can put them towards biomechanics. I can take my skills in psychology, but I could go work with athletes or military people. This is pretty cool. And so these students learn that through our faculty that they have these opportunities that are again directly or indirectly related, and then there's a wide open area, so when people are like students and their parents come visit and they meet with me, I always will tell them kinesiology is a Renaissance degree, because you have English, math, social sciences, humanities, biology, chemistry, physics, and then all the Kinesis courses, so I said, "What can't you do? Right, it's kind of like being Michelangelo or Leonardo da Vinci. You learn all these skills in all these different areas, and you can speak this language to these people who are experts in them. So it's very fun.

Gavin Kelly: Very nice. Yeah, yeah, it's, and it's easy to listen to you talk about the program and get fired up about it because it's clear that you're passionate about the program, about the people, about the students, about your faculty. So thanks for that. One more question for I'll let you go, I think I kind of hinted at, we talk about this a little bit. So, hearing your story now, you were also kind of a testament to this mentality, in terms of, you know, you got a separate degree, you know, you had a little bit of career experience before you decided to start fresh and then go on a long journey, and so, we were talking about a mutual friend of ours, Josh Walker, a buddy of mine we go way back, and he, you know, graduated with an engineering degree and has, you know, decades of engineering expertise in his, in his career but recently decided that he had a new passion and wanted to start over and pursue education in the kinesiology world and connected with you and said you were very helpful about, you know, sort of talking him through what that looked like. And I can see now why because you kind of did your own sort of starting over, right? But my question is, for somebody like that and I'm sure you've seen plenty in your 20-plus years here, plenty of cases of again students changing their minds, switching majors, you know discovering a passion halfway through. And it can be a scary thing whether you're, you know, a sophomore or you've been, you know, having a career for 20 years to decide suddenly, "well I think this is something that I like and I'm hesitant to jump on this wagon so quickly because, you know, it's a big change." But having been through something like that yourself, having seen it come and go and having people like Josh, you know, being able to talk somebody through something like that, what is your message to sort of the, a person listening, a student whatever, who is at that point in their lives where they're discovering that they, they might want to change, they're looking towards something new, whether it's specifically kinesiology or something else. What is your message to somebody like that and how have you and Tech been and the kinesiology program been a resource for people who are going through that change?

David Szymanski: I appreciate that question, because I think it's a really good one. In the case for Josh, in particular, yes, he's been working as a professional in the engineering world, but to me, engineering is kind of like biomechanics, right, for the human body, and how can you use your math skills and engineering knowledge to help with the engineering or re-engineering of the human body? And once he started talking to me about what he wanted to do, and some of his health challenges for himself, I said, this is a perfect field for what you want to do. You just need to find out what's the path that might be most beneficial for you. So I did recommend to him, in particular, to take what we call undergraduate leveling classes. So you, because you didn't take in these courses when you were an undergrad, I recommend that you take a specific number of undergraduate courses, so that you can get your foundation, and then you learn, and then when you have the right GPA,

then you can be accepted into the master's program, and then you have to decide on which one of the two concentrations you want to go into, and ultimately, he's from our conversations, he'd like to go into the sport performance academic concentration, but still wants to know the sports psychology side of things, which then become electives. So, you can create that degree out of the 36 hours and tailor it to what you want to do, and then you can meet these faculty members and see where that leads you, because it might lead you into research opportunities with them, or just knowledge that you have through the coursework, whatever they may do, which is always more than tests in our department. There's plenty of hands-on opportunities at the undergraduate and graduate level, and for me, that's what kinesiology allows you to do: work with people and make an impact, because typically somebody made an impact on each person's life. Now they want to pay it forward, and they're trying to find out the best way for themselves to do it, so that you can have a job that's meaningful to you, that has purpose, that you can make a good living at, hopefully. And then really enjoy what you do. So, for Josh, it was once he told me his story, and all the things that he wanted to do is relatively easy for me to see a pathway for him, and then once I shared that with him, he's like, yeah, this is great, let's go for it. So last spring quarter he took my undergraduate exercise physiology class, and it certainly was challenging because it was something that wasn't things that he had had, like the prerequisites for it, like an A and P class, for example, in biology, but you have to do the extra work, so make sure you have the book, and make sure you read the book, in addition to the PowerPoints and the lectures that I have, and then there's some other courses that he's going to take at the undergrad level before he moves on to the graduate level, but it's all leading to where I think he wants to go, and so for me, I'm always asking whether it's a young person or someone who's older, maybe what I would at one time call a non-traditional student. What do you really want to be when you grow up? Yeah, that's the question that I initially asked people, and once they tell me that, or we go through a series of questions that allows me to kind of figure out where they're going with it, then that allows me the opportunity to say, hey, this is here a couple different avenues that you could pursue after I talk about all those. What do you think? Or, if I'm not the appropriate person, hey, go talk to this faculty member, and that could be a graduate faculty member or an instructor, because they all have their own personal experiences professionally, in addition to working at Louisiana Tech, that might provide them with insight. And then the other thing that we do that I think is really great in our department, because we have many of us have been at Louisiana Tech for 20 plus years, we know 20 plus years worth of graduates from Louisiana. Oh, yeah, so now we have this infrastructure that will say that hey, if we don't know something specifically about a field, we know one of our alums who's doing that, and we actually have their email or their cell phone numbers, and please reach out to them. Yeah, and we do that all the time. And then we have seminars every single quarter where

we invite people back to campus, and then they talk about their careers. And I always ask the people, talk about the good, the bad, and the ugly, and so that students have an idea of what it is, and then hopefully they'll learn, but having said all that, they can also go to the Facebook page and other places where we have all this information, and they can learn more about it. I try to help parents understand if they're having a young son or daughter who's not sure exactly what they want to do. I do tell them my story, and I do explain how I went from being a fine arts person to a kinesiology person, and I'll say the why did I choose fine arts back in the day. My father was a percussionist and played with the place called the Candlelight Dinner Playhouse, and played the Chicago Symphony at times, so I was in that music world. My mother never finished college, but she had her. Own business, where I consider her a sculptor, so she was an artist as well. So I always came from an art family background, and that's where that led me to do that, and something that I still enjoy to this day. But I tell moms and dads it's okay if your son or daughter doesn't really know what they want to do yet when they come into kinesiology, there's again things that are directly or indirectly related, as they meet with their advisor, and they meet with faculty, they're going to figure out something that they really like. And then, at the end of their undergraduate program, they have to do an internship in both our undergrad and our master's program, which will either confirm what they want to do, or, hey, I don't really think this is for me anymore, because I didn't know that I had to do, you know, these various things, and I don't really like that, and sometimes maybe it's the day to day, some might say monotony of something, or they, or they love that, and so that changes their mind about what else can they do. So we try to provide them with as many opportunities as possible, and then where do you think you would like to go with this, and many times it works out really well, and then sometimes it just doesn't, and someone will change their mind, and they might even change from being a kinesiology major to something else, because maybe they want to go into nursing, for example, or maybe something else, and they decide they want to change, but I think anybody who visits us, when they meet with our faculty, they will have an opportunity to address what their concerns are about what kinesiology may be. We do have posters all over our walls at Memorial Gym, and so we describe what kinesiology is, for example, and here are the professions that are associated with this undergraduate degree or this other one. Take a picture of it, it goes to a URL code, and now it takes them to the web page, and so they can now see what the courses are, and how that might relate to what they want to do, and I tell them, even if you change your mind, it's okay to do that.

Gavin Kelly: It's not personal.

David Szymanski: It's not. And if kinesiology and health science isn't really for you, because you're not as successful in the sciences, well, then you can pivot and go towards the exercise and health promotion undergrad program, and then for those who are in the

master's degree, they tend to know what they want to do, but sometimes their minds still change because they don't know all that is available to them, and if a student happened to study with me, for example, in particular at the graduate level, and they wanted to work in pro baseball, I could probably.. I don't.. I can't guarantee them a job, but I can say I'm pretty confident I can get you a job in pro baseball, whether it's the strength and conditioning world or whether it is now the sports and data analytics world, because that has evolved. And going back to the beginning of this conversation, at the beginning I talked about how everyone thought I was crazy and kind of a kook, or kind of nutty, because I was looking at doing research in baseball. Now everybody does it, and so the Chicago Cubs have come to Ruston, Louisiana, to check out our program. The Houston Astros have come here, and these are three to \$4 billion baseball teams, and assistant general managers are coming to visit here to see what we're doing, because we are doing some things that they are not doing, and they were trying to find out more information about what they could do, and then I'm also introducing them to either faculty or students. Hey, these students might be someone that you might want to consider, whether it's an internship or maybe a job position in the future that could be very helpful. And then we have people that are in pro baseball, so last night, for example, I was watching the Phillies play the Mets, and the head hitting coach for the New York Mets is Jeff Elbert, my first graduate student from 2007 that finished, never played a day of pro baseball with the major league team, is now the hitting coach for the New York Mets. That's pretty damn cool. And then Alexa Garcia, and now she's married, Alexa, and has a new last name. And I'm sorry, Alexa, I don't remember your last name, I apologize, but she is working with the Houston Astros. And then we've had other graduate students that either have done that or now are professors at other schools or are starting their own businesses and doing things where they're creating their own sports performance facilities, and that's also really rewarding, and also have that connection with them still. And then when we go to the National Strength and Conditioning Association annual conference, and this year it happens to be in New Orleans, I usually see all those people, then we take pictures and reminisce, and then I like to show on our social media, what are these folks doing now, and then we try to highlight them and make them a centerpiece for what's going on, and hey, if you come to Louisiana Tech, you can do this too, and then because I'm talking about this, and you asked it, I just spoke to a gentleman from South Africa yesterday, and he and his wife are both interested in the sport performance and, and rehabilitation world, and I don't.. I never asked him how he's found out about us from Louisiana Tech, but in my constant emailing with him, he's like, I'm really interested now, because you are taking sports science, you are working with a team. One, you are practically applying it, and then you're doing research with, yeah, and then that could lead to what I ultimately want to do is do a PhD somewhere else, and then my wife wants to work in the rehabilitative world, and so with our baseball team, in particular, that

we are using the Biodex device, which is an ISO kinetic device, and I know some people may not know what that is, but I always reference Rocky Four, if you saw Yvonne Drago using that machine, where he was going that internal and external rotation, you saw the numbers lighting up. We have a machine like that, and so we test the shoulder and then the forearm, and we give information to Coach Fouts, who's the pitching coach, and then Coach Burrows, the head coach, and then Chris Watson, who's now working with them full time, who's one of our former graduate students. We give that information, and now we give them a green light. This is, you're healthy, you're strong. A yellow light, hey, you're okay. Red light, you're really weak. Hey, these are some exercises we think you should work on, so you get better. Well, the wife of the gentleman, his name is Alberta, us from South Africa. His wife, she likes to do that biodex type of research. Well, if they came here, I could put them into our program right away and hook them both up. Yeah, and then then that could help them, you know, come to the United States. They potentially could be graduate teaching assistants, so they can teach courses, take classes, work with the graduate program...

Gavin Kelly: And do what they want to do, ultimately.

David Szymanski: And then do the research, and then again, it's like a one-stop shop, you can do all these things, and then you can do the same thing in our sport and exercise psychology area at the master's level, because we have faculty who do something very similar to what I do, but they're in their respective areas, so I think it's Louisiana Tech, Kinesiology is a unique place to come, and I think we offer things that other Kinesiology departments may not, or at least the personal service that maybe sometimes students, when they come visit here. Hey, I didn't get to meet with a faculty member when I visited some other school, maybe in Louisiana, whereas when they come here they do meet with faculty, and they meet for like 45 minutes to an hour and a half, and we, in my opinion, throw out the red carpet, and, like, hey, we want you to come here because we think this is a great program, and we think you'll like it here, and then it's up to you to decide whether or not this is the place for you. If you feel comfortable here, you want to live in Ruston and go through this program. So I'm really excited to be here, and that's one of the reasons why I've never left. Here is that any place that I ever have thought about leaving to go somewhere else? I never had all the opportunities that I have here. Yeah, and so I said I don't want to go somewhere because I already have here what I thought I was longing for. Yeah, and I don't need to go somewhere else to go do it.

Gavin Kelly: Yeah. Well, we're glad you're here. We're happy to have you. I appreciate you making time for us today. I really appreciate your very candid and very thorough responses to the questions too as well. Again, like I said earlier, it's easy to get fired up talking to this

stuff cause it's clear you're very passionate about it. So I appreciate that. Uh, so thank you Dr. Szymanski for being here on the podcast today. And hey, Go Dogs!

David Szymanski: Absolutely. Thank you for having me. Bye.

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