

Announcer: Welcome to Hancock Conversations, an Allan Hancock College podcast. Join President Dr. Kevin G. Walthers and members of the Hancock community, as they explore the stories behind the people and places that make Allan Hancock College the unique hub for learning that it is today. You're sure to learn something new, and even have a little fun along the way.

Kevin Walthers: Hello, I'm Kevin Walthers. Welcome to Hancock Conversations, the Allan Hancock College podcast. Today, we're talking with retired Vice President of Student Services and longtime Lompoc manager and executive Dean, Roger Welt. Dr. Welt, how are you today?

Roger Welt: Kevin, I'm doing great. Thank you for inviting me to participate in the podcast. I'm excited about doing this.

KW: Now for folks who are here, now this is, since I've been here for seven years, this is probably the longest continual time you've been in Santa Maria. Since I've been here for seven years because of the pandemic, is that correct?

RW: Yes, that is correct.

KW: Every time we want to talk to Roger it's, "Oh, he's, he's somewhere in Southeast Asia," or "He's in Europe, he's somewhere else." So it's good that you're living a good life with that.

RW: Yes, thank you.

KW: I assume your family's staying safe and everybody's well?

RW: Yeah. Everybody's good. My wife's a retired teacher, Orcutt Unified and she's healthy, and my two daughters are healthy, and so everybody's good right now.

KW: She's probably really happy to be retired and not trying to teach kids how to do Zoom classes on the outside.

RW: Good point. She's still connected with a lot of her teachers that are still active in the profession and there's lots of frustration out there with Zoom, yes, yes sir.

KW: Well, so, Roger. Why don't you start off by, I noticed you went to Idaho State University. Now are you from Idaho or is that the only place it would let you in?

RW: [Laughter] No and yes. I transferred from Modesto Junior College. I'm a Modesto boy, born and raised there. And I had the opportunity to go to Idaho State University to run track, and I ran track for about three weeks. And that was that was my first experience away from home, so I got busy doing other kinds of things. And so I started off going to Idaho State University in Pocatello, Idaho. And I did not do well, Kevin and colleagues, my first time around and it cost me two years in the Army. But then I went back after my service. And then I did really well in, so I had my first degree bachelor's degree is from Idaho State University.

KW: And did they have the dome back then when you were going there?

RW:

Yeah. Wow, good for you. It was under consideration and, and it was in progress I guess at that point, because when I went back two years later we had the dome.

KW: Nice. Yeah, that's a, it's like a relic there. It's, it's such a, you know, what we think of a dome today this would barely be a barn, so it's a cool facility there.

RW: It looks like, it looks like a giant Quonset hut.

KW: Yeah, yeah. So, so let's talk about all the time you were in Vietnam. You got a Bronze Star with two oak leaf clusters, and I gotta be honest, even though I was an Air Force kid, I don't really know what, what the oak leaf clusters stand for.

RW: Well, that just means one more. So, I have three Bronze Stars.

KW: So, a lot of service. So, you saw some, you saw some pretty crazy stuff while you're over there, and that that kind of inspired you to maybe be a little better student.

RW: Yeah, you know, I really did. It's probably the best thing that ever happened to me, the military experience. It gave me focus, it gave me discipline, and self-worth. And boy, when I went back to Idaho State, I was, I was a real student. I was very serious and good grades, Dean's List, elected Student Body Vice President. It was a real, real change in my life, experience the Army.

KW: So, so you get out of Idaho State, and come back. You come over to the Central Coast and go to Cal Poly, and finish up getting a doctorate to San Francisco. Were those back-to-back, or did you have a little career action in-between those?

RW: Well, I have some career action there in the middle. I, I was a national park ranger in Yellowstone National Park while I was a student at Idaho State, and so I did that for three summers, and then I was hired by the Santa Maria Valley YMCA to be the program director. So I came from Yellowstone National Park to Santa Maria. And that's when the YMCA was a two-person operation, it was right across the street from the Paul Nelson pool. So I did that for 18 months, and during that experience I went to Cal Poly and earned a master's degree in guidance and counseling. And then from there I went to Micronesia where I was the Dean of Students for the Community College of Micronesia on the island of Pohnpei. I did that for a couple years, and I was hired at Lake Tahoe Community College, and I did Lake Tahoe Community College for 13 years, I was the associate dean of the college. And from there, went back to Micronesia, the island Saipan, where I was a department chairperson for the social sciences on the island of Saipan, Northern Marianas College. And then from there, to Bakersfield College and Bakersfield College to Allan Hancock College.

KW: So, we're glad you made it back to the Central Coast. That, Bakersfield College seems, seems a lot. I was in Lake Tahoe, I was in Micronesia, then I went to Bakersfield.

RW: Yeah, exactly. I don't tell many people that.

KW: Our friends in Bakersfield, we love our folks in Bakersfield. They keep our hotels full on the weekends. So, talk a little bit about the experience of working in the community colleges and, and what you think this higher ed sector brings for our community.

RW: Well, that's a good question. Thank you for that, Kevin. So, as an 18-year old college freshman at Modesto Junior College who really was unconscious about everything around me just about, I had, I took a geology class, and I had a teacher, and all of a sudden, I woke up. In the class one day and I thought, "Okay, I kind of like what this guy's doing." Am I sure I followed the lecture? But kind of liked

him, and I kind of liked the way he was projecting what he was talking about, and how he engaged the students. And so that was my first taste of a community college experience. And a takeaway was, I think I really liked this this level of education and maybe I might want to be a community college person at some point in time. So I got I got that I got the bug early on, and I stayed with it, I always wanted to be with the adult learner. And so it was important to me to kind of focus my career in that direction. And I was lucky. I was lucky to be able to have many opportunities come my way, and here I am a retiree from the system so I feel very fortunate.

KW: So, you were in Lompoc when the when the facility was built, or did you come right after that?

RW: Oh no, no, I was very much a part of that. When I came in 1992, it was just a dream at that time. Mr. Jacoby, who was our trustee from that area, was a mover and shaker. And he was able to, with the help of many people, and certainly a team effort, orchestrate the transfer of property from the, the prison, and the base to the college. And then we were able to get the state legislature, with the help of our local legislator, and we were able to secure \$19 million. At that time, and then we start we broke ground on September the sixth, 1996. And the rest is history. We have that beautiful Lompoc Valley Center, so yes, I was very much a part of that.

KW: I, you know, Jack O'Connell, every time I see him, reminds me that he was integral. You know, as a political science teacher, you know, in, in theory, we disdain the idea of backroom deals and horse trading, but when they actually happen and they benefit you, they make for great stories. And Jack tells how he worked out a deal with the speaker of the assembly, Willie Brown, at the time. Willie needed something from Jack, and so Jack said, "Well, I need something from you." And I love that story when Jack tells it. So.

RW: Yeah, Jack, Jack was really our hero. He's the guy who led that whole charge through the legislature and secured that \$19 million. You know, we need to have a 12-foot bronze of him in the middle of that beautiful Lompoc Valley Center.

KW: Don't tell him that. He's gonna have an expectation. We've got his name on a plaque prominently displayed right as you walk in.

RW: Good.

KW: So, so from there you moved over. You, you became the VP of Student Services and, you know, we were joking about you were, you had a hand in building the new Student Services building. That was called the One Stop until it actually, actually stopped progress for a while. So, what was it like being VP of Student Services back in those days?

RW: Well, it was pretty exciting and, you know, part of the excitement was all around passing Measure I in securing that in June of 2006. And then we had to do with that successful bond election was, a, we had to gather the troops together and start to planning, the serious planning. So we were able to get everybody involved, and everybody had the opportunity to touch the planning and, and talking specifically about the Student Services building. And we spent a lot of time, a lot of hours designing that building. Of course we had the input from our architects, and it was it was quite exciting, everyone was excited. It was, it was a real sense of achievement and real sense of gratitude that we were doing this. Then to watch the old building B come down and then equipment, heavy duty equipment come in and start the building that was, it was very exciting.

KW: So, I don't know how much you've kept up with what's going on in the world of Student Services today. I mean it just, it just seemed 2009 seems like yesterday, but we've got a Great Recession and pandemic in-between. I mean, can you imagine the kind of things that are going on in Student Services today that in 2009, were not even on the radar?

RW: No, I can't. I thought about that. I thought about what your life is like over there now, and that's you're living a whole different experience than I had back when I left in '09.

KW: You know, and we're fortunate because of, you know, it's really, and I don't want to sound like I'm sucking up to you, but, but you know the vision you had for the facility has really allowed us to serve students in a way that's so much better when I got here in 2013. You know, I was in the old building B and the old building A, the old Quonset hut buildings out front, and you, if a student wanted to see a counselor, they had to sit outside. They literally sat outside in the courtyard waiting for their counselor. And if they wanted some other kind of services, they might have to walk all the way across campus. It was scattered all over the place, and it was really difficult for students to figure out what they should be doing. And now with one building that's modern and accessible to them. You know they can come in, they can get services as a veteran, they can get services as an EOPS student. It's really phenomenal, the impact that you've had on just the mechanics of providing services to students, and you, I'm sure you're proud of that, and you should be proud of that.

RW: Well, thank you for that, very proud of that, and certainly very proud of the team that made that to become a reality for everybody that was involved. Again, there are a whole lot of people that touch that project and so, hats off to them.

KW: You know, today we've got a whole crew of people over there that, you know, are taking full advantage of that. I'm sure you've seen the stories that you know, our enrollment of high school freshmen is setting record levels, our freshmen originally from high school. And then, this year we we graduated more than 1,300 students, which is almost twice what we were doing 10 years ago. And it's really because our counselors and our staff over in Student Services have really put an emphasis on getting students in and getting them completed.

RW: That's great. From my viewpoint at 30,000 feet, you certainly have a very dedicated staff, not only in Student Services, but you know all along the waterfront. You've got a tremendous crew over there that is dedicated to student success, and they know what they're doing and they love what they're doing, and so, Allan Hancock College is a wonderful institution. And the other thing Kevin that is really, really resonated with me was the fact, at how much the community has always embraced the college, the college is very special to the community and, and that's huge in the success of the college.

KW: Yeah. Judge Flores told me, Geez. Now, it's before the pandemic, pre-pandemic I guess, that's gonna be our new thing. But Judge Flores, we were visiting and he said, "You know, there's two organizations in the community that are critical for the future. He says, "One of them's the hospital, and the other one's Allan Hancock College."

RW: Yeah.

KW: You know, it's a big responsibility. It's great that our faculty and staff and administrative team really, really take that seriously, and think about how what we're doing here is going to change the odds for our students for years to come.

RW: Yes, you're absolutely right, and now that you know it's your turn to shine, and so you certainly have done a wonderful job over there. So, you need to stand up and take a bow.

KW: No, no, we're, you know like you say, it's a team effort. And so, so let's talk about, you know, besides the facilities though, what, what have you seen change about, about the college? From I mean, that means if you were here 14 years prior, you got here in '92. So, you know, so that's, you know, almost 30 years of the college. You know, what do you see that's different, in this change over time?

RW: Well, number one, obviously be the facilities have changed. So what we had back in the '60s, it was probably adequate at the time. But because of Measure I, we were able to upgrade everything and maybe bring it into the 20th century. So, that's been important. And also one of the things that it was very important about Measure I is, we use some of that bond money to upgrade the computer system. And that that was huge because, we were before that, we were kind of struggling with trying to keep the internet, keep the computers going. But now, then with that money, we were able to make the necessary upgrades.

KW: Yeah.

RW: So anyway, so in addition to that, what I've seen is a real increase, push support for student success. And I mean by adding more programs, more kind of service-oriented programs. One of the things I was impressed with was the program you guys put together for, you have a food bank over there, and you're supporting people that are in need and people that need food. I thought, well that's, that's clever that's a great idea. And again, beyond that just adding programs that provide more and more support for students that are deserving, and I think that's huge and you increase the odds of success when you do that.

KW: I think you're right in our, our student leadership. You know, a lot of people think of a community college is, you come in and take a class, you go home, or you go to work. And, you know, our students treat this more like a traditional four-year college and they come and they stay on campus and get involved in activities and we, uh. That whole food program, Stephanie Robb and Henry Schroff are providing mentorship and helping with that. But the student leadership in that is unbelievable. That you see our former trustee, Heidi Mendiola, kind of heading everybody up and putting that together. And yesterday, the line for the Food Share. You can pick it up on the North side there of building A, and it wrapped all the way, past the IT building, down College, back onto campus and into the parking lot in front of the gym. That's the kind of need that our students are, are supplying. And there are now over 150,000 people in our community served through that, through that program.

RW: Wow.

KW: it's transformational. It's so important for those people, and you know, we, we watched that program, grow. And yesterday, when I was out there they had, there must have been 15 families standing in line that had come from the apartments across the street, who were just walking over. And we've even started providing them with like, little grocery carts, like, here's your trolley. And, you know, we, it's so important that when these families are trying to keep their kids in school, and keep them on on track and, and still, you know, maybe don't have a job that they can afford the food. Our students and our staff over there are really just making a huge impact on our community.

RW: Well, you're certainly making a difference that's for sure on many different levels.

KW: So, you know you, you've been in the community a while, and talk to us a little bit about, because it's not just about the college here, we want to talk about the community. Tell us about some of the things you've been doing, you know maybe out at the Air Force Base, and what some of the support you've done as serving in your community.

RW: Well, I really got involved when I first landed here in 1992. I was invited to be on the board of directors for the Lompoc Valley Chamber of Commerce. And I did that for about 12 years, as I've had a long tenure on the board of directors. And that gave me the opportunity to really get out into the community and make some real serious connections, and that was very beneficial when we were building the brand new, beautiful Lompoc Valley Center because people were able to identify, not only with the new campus, but with staff. And so that was huge and then the base, of course. Back in '92, we had quite a, an active program, academic program, and Student Services program at the base. But with the demise of the Challenger accident back in I guess that was, '87, Vandenberg started to wind down and so we were losing airman, and contract workers. And so our program at the base kept getting smaller, and smaller, and smaller. We used to have, Kevin, we used to have morning classes, lunchtime classes, and evening classes at the base and we had very good enrollment out there. But again, with the Challenger demise and the base winding down, we lost students. And so we switched over to primarily a nighttime program, but we had a good connection there. And through that, I was able to serve on several committees base-wide, and one of them was on the Space Command Commanders group. And so we provided advice, counsel for the base leadership, and so that was important again. Wonderful connection with the college. And then over on Santa Maria, I got involved with the very first Santa Maria Valley Chamber of Commerce leadership program. I was part of that in the very beginning. So yeah, and then also out in Santa Ynez Valley, I got involved with that community, because we opened up a program there in the summer of 2000, at the high school and also at downtown. So that was again, another wonderful connection for the college. And so yeah, I spent a lot of time in our district, trying to establish relationships.

KW: So, tell us a little bit. You told us about Katherine, retired from working as a school teacher, what are your kids doing?

RW: well, Brittany is our oldest daughter, she is in the wine business in Sonoma, and she's currently here, and that's because of the fires. So, as a matter of safety she decided to evacuate and come home, and she did this back in 2017 as well. So she, she's here. She's working from home, from her room here. And then Chelsea, our youngest daughter, is in the food business and she is living in South Lake Tahoe, so she's living the dream out there, and mom and dad are just jealous of that.

KW: Yeah, I bet.

RW: Yeah, girls are good.

KW: Good. Well, Roger. What else you got to share with us? Anything that I missed on the way?

RW: You gave me an opportunity to kind of put it out there. I just in, in, in reflection about this conversation about my experience at Allan Hancock College, I, you know, my journey has been wonderful and I'm grateful for every day of it. And I'm grateful for the staff and the friendships and the relationships that I made, and I'm grateful that I live continue to live in the community. I look forward to

watching the college, under your direction continue to grow, continue to serve students, and you're doing a great job. So, keep it up. Go Bulldogs!

KW: That's kind of you to say. We're not quite done. I just wanted to be sure I didn't miss any of the heavy stuff. But I want to ask you just a couple of, the staff thinks it's cool to ask questions that don't make any sense.

RW: Okay, good, I'm used to those.

KW: They make some sense but they, they want to know if you would prefer black beans or refried beans in your burrito?

RW: Refried are good!

KW: Right. And so, since you've traveled all over the world, where's your favorite place to go?

RW: Oh man, good question. I'm a, I'm an island boy, so give me anything in the in the South Pacific and I'll go there. I don't know if you saw my vita, but I did have the experience of about, I don't know like eight different accreditation teams in the Pacific and so I, I enjoyed every one of them. So yeah, take me to take me to a little island in the South Pacific with palm trees and coconuts and I'm in good shape.

KW: Yeah, I want to get on one of those trips. I've been talking to the commissioner about that ... get me on one of them.

RW: Tell him you're a friend of mine.

KW: Oh! Well, I'll tell you, Roger. It's always great when, when we get to see you in the community. And I appreciate the fact that we can we can rib you a little bit, and kind of make fun of your opulent office that Dr. Ornelas gets to enjoy right now over in building A. But we're grateful for the foundation that you put the college on. That crew that was here in the, in the early 2000s into the, into the up to 2010 and really set the stage for the kind of success we're having now, and we're, we're fortunate to be following after you guys and are grateful for, kind of the good tailwind that you gave us. So we'll, we'll say thanks for that and give us one more "Go Bulldogs."

RW: All right. Go Bulldogs! Start here. Go anywhere.

KW: That's right. Alright, well this has been Hancock Conversations with Dr. Roger Welt, longtime community member and former Vice President, Student Services here at Allan Hancock College. We look forward to seeing you next time on Hancock Conversations.