

CHRIS O'RIORDAN-ADJAH: Well, good morning and welcome to another edition of Let's Talk Ed With Professor Chris. Still trying to get you all the information students. You ask for it. It's my pleasure. I'm gonna get it. I told you I'll do my best to see if we get a special guest today.

We are gonna be talking to the president of the college, Dr. Ralls.

Dr. Scott Ralls: Hey Chris, good to see you.

O'RIORDAN-ADJAH: Welcome, good to see you.

RALLS: Thank you. I appreciate you having me.

O'RIORDAN-ADJAH: Thank you for taking the time.

RALLS: Absolutely.

O'RIORDAN-ADJAH:so, usually the very first question I asked of the people that I interview is tell me a little bit about your journey, how it started. But most importantly, did you see yourself here while you are college.

RALLS: No, no, never, never did. Didn't really think that far ahead, and my career's been a little more, some might say, some have said before, serendipitous than planned out.

So, when I was in college, actually I had an experience in college, that sort of influenced my passions. And then I just kind of followed my passions, which are what led me here.

But when I was in college, I worked in a little manufacturing facility in a town called Mount Airy, North Carolina. And then, after college, I had a chance to take a year and study abroad in Japan in a special business program.

And while I was in Japan, I saw and I toured a number of manufacturing facilities. And this was during the uh, late 80s or... and it was a time when, right, uh... talk about Japan, the robotics, the you know, the automation that was going on.

So, I I saw these places where people were doing things, you know, programming robots and things like that. And as opposed to what I had been doing in my little manufacturing facility, which was all hand-type work.so, I became faced, fascinated with with that, and over a period of time, several jobs that were sort of at the nexus between technology and now, we call more workforce development, they're didn't have that term back then and how those things come together to help people move forward and that's what led me to community colleges.

O'RIORDAN-ADJAH: OK, alright.so, we gotta go back a little bit.

When you finished that did you ever go to the classroom where you and the instructor in the classroom had it...

RALLS: No.

O'RIORDAN-ADJAH: Okay.

RALLS: Now what happened after that...so, I knew what was fascinating to me was this transition because I I kind of grew up in a period, you know, right before computers, where you really like when I was in high school, we didn't really use computers.

So, when I got college, you don't even own your own computer. You went to the library to use the computer.so, we were going through this period of, you know, the initial phase of computerization and what was happening is, you know, I saw with manufacturing was kind of a similar thing.

So, I've just became fascinated about that. I didn't know what kind of job that would mean.

I didn't...so, I went to a PhD program. It was a unique field called industrial psychology, and the reason I did that is because I went to the University of Maryland, told there were certain professors there that were studying aspects of either technology or people that combining the two. And so, I wanted to study under them.

And then I taught the whole time I was at University of Maryland, I thought statistics. I taught a variety... mostly statistics courses at the University of Maryland and then came back to North Carolina.

Well, I well then I I had this kind of fortunate break where the Department of Labor was looking for someone to focus on technology from a people's side. And one of my advisors recommended me and that kind of led to a series of my first couple of jobs before coming back to North Carolina.

So, when I came back to North Carolina, I I then was very involved in the whole workforce development aspects of what we do here.

O'RIORDAN-ADJAH: That's great.

So, I've always told my students and I miss the classroom, I've always kind of figured that once I was in the classroom, I took a director's position.

I took a department head position still, then the school system, but I felt like the more up I was going the more removed I was from my students,so, I do really missed the classroom.

I was very, very fortunate... Ironically, during COVID that I have to step in to help, one of my

professors and I was like great, you know, I really miss the classroom.so, I say that to ask you the same question; Do you miss the classroom?

RALLS: Yeah, I well, I missed connections with students, you know?

So, I was in the classroom during the earlier stages of my career. And then then then I did also, my first time I was president. I've been president now 3 colleges...

O'RIORDAN-ADJAH: I was going to ask you that.

RALLS: The first time I was President...

O'RIORDAN-ADJAH: Right.

RALLS: I tried to teach my first two years. I did teach my first two years, but it was... truthfully I wasn't as good a teacher as I needed to be because of all the other responsibilities I had.

So, yeah, plus, my wife said I kept that up she might leave me.

I had to... at some point I wanna do that again.

Now, I'll tell you a similar the feeling to you is I was the state system president for seven years.so, before I was at Wake Tech, I was president of another college. But before that I was president of the state system of community colleges all 58.

And I said at that time I appreciated doing that but all I only wanted to do that for a shorter period of time because it pulled me away from the campuses and it pulled me away from students and I would often say that you know, that I always called the students the heroes in the hallways and and the more I was... the hallways are very different at the state level when you're doing the state system, it's more like being the league commissioner.

So, at that point I I when I left to become president of NOVA, I did so, because I always said coming in, I will be here for a period of time, but at some point I go back to a college because there's nothing like being at a community college.

O'RIORDAN-ADJAH: Right. OK.

So, here are the two questions that students usually ask; the first one is what does the college president do?

RALLS: It depends on the day really.so, you know, I I would say at least a lot of my time is things that are... well I was talking this to somebody yesterday... we were talking about how do you spend your time?

So, I would say probably about 40% of my time is dealing it in external community type things that are related to the college.

Our college has a big role in the community, which is a lot of it's around workforce opportunities.so, I will be meeting with at least one or sometimes two companies a day about, you know, programs or connections or partnerships.

We are always planning for the future, so, sometimes that deals with multiple different types of strategies, sometimes about, you know, today we're talk a little bit about you know future in terms of buildings and things like that.

Sometimes it's very programmatic. A lot of time... a lot of times it depends on the time of the year.so, you know this is the busiest time of the year going right into graduation.

So, I'll have a lot of stuff... And then June, July... kind of you know comes down as it does for everybody else and then you really pick back up in August and you just go, you know... so, a lot of times there are things on campus that I'll go to... I need to be at.

There are meetings in the community, so, like I'll, you know, we'll have a president's meeting this week. I'll go to the Cary Chamber, where all of the elected officials will be.

We'll have, you know... this is the second podcast I do today.so, there you know, every day is a little different and it it's no two days are ever the same.

O'RIORDAN-ADJAH: The second question is what should I study in college if I want to become a college president?

RALLS: Uh, you shouldn't study anything to be a college president. There is no... there is no route to being that and you know, again, I never planned what that would be.

I think the thing about being a college president, you know, you go where your passions are, you know, and that's the thing I always... you know, that that... it's an easy thing to say when you've done that, but when you follow your passion, you know your work does not just become a job at work.

If it is something that's more to that and I I think you know, find your passion and and for many people you know, you may find that passion is a community... is community college, and if so, you know, you may find yourself in that type of role.

But don't... I used to say I used to work with a lot of colleges when I was state president, who were hiring community college presidents and sometimes the folks you wanna be more careful about are those who you know at a very young age are... I want to be in this position, you know, and I think sometimes the best if the job of being a kind of prison or whatever are not those who, like, started plotting it out 25 years ago.

But it just kind of emerged because of their passions for what they did. And that's what happened to me. I never plotted out to be anything. You know, and honestly, I worried about it a lot when I was a kid, because what I chose to do there was no... there wasn't... there wasn't, like being a job that you know... OK, here's the five steps to this.

I wasn't even sure how you even make money and what I was interested when I was young.so, but um actually I have quick story. I with the University of North Carolina that as an undergraduate.

O'RIORDAN-ADJAH: Which one?

RALLS: University of North Carolina Chapel Hill.

O'RIORDAN-ADJAH: Chapel Hill, Okay.

RALLS: I was in the same graduating class as Michael Jordan at the time.

O'RIORDAN-ADJAH: Nice.

RALLS: And the head basketball coach at that time was a man named Dean Smith and one time I just happened to have a 5-minute interaction with Dean Smith and I shared with him, you know, I was kind of concerned because my interest, I wasn't sure what that would mean in terms of a job some day, and I still remember, he looked at me and said, you know, you do what you're passionate about and that will work out for you. And that meant a lot to me.

In fact, I keep his picture on my desk just to remember that, you know, you do want to think about you know what sets you... you know, you set up your own luck, right?

So, you wanna be thinking that, but you don't want to obsess about.so, you know, just put yourself in a position where you're doing what you love. It does help with what you love is actually a job, you know?

So, you can make a living, but you don't have to figure it out all at once and give people you know, but whatever you do, put everything you have into it and people will take notice of you and your opportunities will come.

That's what happens for a lot of folks.

O'RIORDAN-ADJAH: That's great.so, you gotta help me convince, uh students that you are regular normal person. What do you do for fun?

RALLS: Ohh boring person but, no, no, I I am very normal. Um, but you know, I have a family, you know, I've got three boys at home right now or not at home two are... one is in college... one's,

one's, uh, at work.so, you know, we like doing things with them, although they kind of got to an age where it's not the same as it was a few years ago when they were all around.

I like to. I don't look like it, but I am on the weekends, but I'm probably more of a weekend warrior cause I don't really get a lot of exercise during the week. I typically most nights I'll have a dinner... you know, I'm just as likely to have breakfast or dinner meetings as I am to be at home,so, I don't really have time for that.

So I'll... you'll see me on Saturdays running with my two dogs at North Campus, you know?so, I'll be running around North campus... if you ever see a a little dog and a and a Big Blue pit, that's me running around the campus.

Yeah, I love to read. I always have like 3 books going at one time. I'm a huge sports fan, so I go sports. Um, but you know, I'm a terrible golfer, but I enjoy being on a golf course.

So, you know anything that's active like that. My wife and I enjoy being with friends in the community.

So, you know, I'm pretty normal when it comes to that.

O'RIORDAN-ADJAH:so, I must have admit that students do know you, they just haven't interacted with you because they've senior events and I I really commend you for... I know every events that students are having you're there.

RALLS: I try to get there.

O'RIORDAN-ADJAH:so, no, that's great. That's great.

I've had my fair share of different presidents at different colleges, and I have to share this one story with you... How important it is for students with presidents.

This was... I'm not gonna mention the name... back when I just started, one of my students on graduation, they were so disappointed that the president unfortunately wasn't feeling well and was not going to be at graduation to shake their hands.

And they were so disappointed because and I said, well, you've seen the president like... No, I haven't seen the president for years. This is my day to get that picture, to frame it up, right?

So, I'm sure you relate to that and that's just one example of how close students feel like they need to be with your president.

RALLS: Yeah

O'RIORDAN-ADJAH: But I always say you're busy, right? But I try to make all the excuses, but like in your case, you are always out there. You and, and I really... Again, I really commend you...

RALLS: I appreciate that, and I have to tell you that sometimes I feel a little guilty because I go to events... and because I wanna go to events. That's the kind of stuff I love, and sometimes it'll happen like... I like going to our sports events, you know?

And so, I'll go to a game and someone will say "wow, thanks for coming to the game" and I am not at the game because, you know, I feel like I need to be at the game, but because I enjoy being around that I'm... that's the part of it I enjoy the most.

Now it's very difficult for me sometimes, because we have 6 campuses.

You know, we have 70,000 students, so it's not as if we were a small campus of 3,000 students, we could almost have an interaction with everybody.

So, that's a little bit challenging, but the interactions with the students is what I love the most of this job and I try to every week, you'll tell me what's going on. And like last week, you know, there was a small little event on campus on the North campus, which was with our science faculty and related to a pollinator for creating a new bee garden on campus.

You know, and there weren't a lot of students there, but that's fine. I don't it, you know, just having that's the kind of stuff I love doing and I try to schedule them in when when I can do those things, but...

O'RIORDAN-ADJAH: That's great. So, we're getting very close to a amazing interview here today.

The other question students always wanna know, is when I have an issue because you hear students say I'm gonna go talk to the president, right? And I hear that all the time.

And I say... I'm not trying to prevent you from going to talk to the president. One, here is very busy and there's protocols in which to follow.

But you, on the other hand, you've made provisions for how students can reach you like I'm surprised when students are like yeah, I sent Dr. Ralls an email they go well, nothing against that, but do realize that there are people...

RALLS: Right. Right.

O'RIORDAN-ADJAH: And I'm trying to make sure...

RALLS: ... and you have to make sure you know, because there may be things that they want me to take care that I really can't take care of because it's not something you know or it's something that, you know, if it's about a class, you know, there may be that I've got a problem

with this class... But there is a department head and a Dean and, you know, chief academic officer and so, they, they're the best ones to address those types of things.

If it's an issue on campus, you know I don't mind, you know, there can always be things that I can help navigate. Sometimes it's it's kind of rare that there's something that I can resolve on my own.

You know the way it works, I think if people have any kind of issues of, you know about the college that they don't feel comfortable expressing to someone.

You know, we're very fortunate the way we have this set up where we have an ombudsman where anybody, you know, students or faculty and staff can go to them ombudsman and keep it private. And he can kind of... if there's things that he needs to let us know about.

That's another way which I think has been very helpful at at the college.

So, there's different ways and the truthfully, because we're so, big, they're they're always is something that somebody's concerned and and somewhat upset about and you know we just have you know... people... I tend to be I think, people say pretty approachable. Sometimes people said I'm overly approachable.

I don't know if that's the case or not, but you know I I have no problem... people sending me things they want to be looked into, but rarely will I be the one who can resolve it because it's an issue that I just, technically someone else, has to to have the capability to actually figure out the can it be solved or not.

O'RIORDAN-ADJAH: Right. I'm happy you didn't declare that, because when I'm talking to students about the right channels to go to, they think I'm trying to prevent them from getting to you.

RALLS: Yeah.

O'RIORDAN-ADJAH: So, I'm very happy that you were able...

RALLS: Yeah. And one thing that rarely do I get involved in are issues around grading of anything that's not just the, you know, I'm not gonna get involved in grading-type issues or anything like that.

O'RIORDAN-ADJAH: Any closing remarks for our students? Any motivation? Stay in college.

Do good... that type of thing... you wanna share?

RALLS: Yes, you know I... one of the reasons for me to be at Wake Tech and I think one of the things I love about being particularly at a community college.



So, I've been a president of three community colleges and the state system of community colleges.

But you know to be here is is... one thing I think that's very important and you realize this when you get to the later part of your career like I am, is that there a couple things are really important.

One is community and the other is being around people who inspire you, you know, and that's the wonderful thing about a community college. Because, you know, first we are part of a community, you know, and that's something, and if you look at what my job is with the college, we often say we're our communities' college.

So, while this is a community that has any universities, it's kind of built around higher Ed.

A lot of ways you know, this is the higher Ed Center. We're the only college that was built for specifically this community.

You know, we are Wake Counties' College in terms of how we're built, what we do, that's what you know, that's what drives a lot of the stuff I do externally because we're expected to be Wake Counties' college.

But it's also, neat in that we are part of a community that you can kind of get your arms around, you feel a part of.

And even though we're 6 campuses and technically the biggest college in North Carolina in terms of the number of people we serve, I think we're at our best when we do everything we can to keep ourselves kind of small, you know, to to kind of keep that community feel.

And so, that's something that, but being at a Community College is important to me for that reason.

The other reason is, you know, I think that when you're younger, someone who once wrote getting David Brooks said, you know, when you're younger, you worry about what's on your resume. But as you get older, you worry more about what your eulogy is going to say.

You know, you know, there's the resume virtues versus the urology virtues and you know ,so, a lot of times, you know, people when they're they're thinking about the climb up, they get to a certain place and you kind of realize that not everything about that is important, you know and um to me what's really important that that I've seen that can get undervalued is surrounding yourselves... surrounding yourself with inspiration. You know how you are in... what inspires you. That's really what drives passion, right?

Because when you feel a passion for something, you're inspired because you're around

something that kind of speaks to you in a different way, and that's the to me, you know, I know it sounds like I may be playing to the community college student crowd, but that's what community college students do for me.

I have been most inspired in my life by community college students to watch how they strive to seem... some who have just overcome most amazing obstacles to achieve and to to achieve not just for themselves, but for their families.

And to me, it's that inspiration around being around, you know, faculty and staff who are here because of their love for the students and students who are just, you know, so, inspiring.

Community college students are not entitled people. You know, sometimes people will say, you know, they'll talk about ah college students act all entitled. Not here.

You know, this is a place where, you know, people are here for a purpose. And when they're here, they inspire the rest of us. And that's why I love being at Wake Tech.

O'RIORDAN-ADJAH: That's great.

So, I do once again want to commend you for all your initiatives. I'm gonna give you the opportunity to talk about... you do have a podcast as well.

RALLS: I do. I am getting ready to record it right after this.

O'RIORDAN-ADJAH: OK... so, if students, you know you wanna listen or hear more about Dr. Ralls has got his own podcast. You wanna talk a little...

RALLS: Yeah, yeah, yeah, it's called We Are Wake Tech.

O'RIORDAN-ADJAH: OK.

RALLS: And you can and you can also, pick up all the previous podcasts. And so, we try to pick a topic a month.

This month is about we just opened, but perhaps the best automotive training center in the country, called the Hendrick Center for Automotive Excellence.

So, Dave Favre, who's the dean of transportation, will be on this month's podcast.

But you can go back and review all the others.

The other thing I give a plug for is every month I do a student forum, a staff forum and a faculty forum. And you know, sometimes the student forum is not... There's not as many students

there, and we'd love to, but we have it every every month, whether there's, you know, 20 students or two students. So, you know, sign up for that.

I'm trying to do them hybrid now, so, we're actually you can do be in person and connect virtually whichever you prefer.

So, we probably will not we'll slow down a little bit as we get to June, July... um, but we basically have, but we'll pick up and have a student forum every month and rotating campuses as we are now, which we haven't been able to do during COVID.

O'RIORDAN-ADJAH: Good. So, I usually close with why can't students find you, but you've already told us exactly how they could find you.

RALLS: Yeah.

O'RIORDAN-ADJAH: Get on the forums.

RALLS: Forums are the best way to connect.

O'RIORDAN-ADJAH: Yeah.

RALLS: Yeah, it's a great opportunity just to to dialogue about anything that's on the student's mind.

O'RIORDAN-ADJAH: Sounds great.

Dr. Ralls, it's been my pleasure.

RALLS: Thank you. I appreciate all you're doing for us.

O'RIORDAN-ADJAH: Thank you.

Thanks again. It was a pleasure talking to Dr. Ralls.

If you haven't subscribed, please do so.

Students get on Dr. Ralls' forum.

Any questions you can put on there. You have your one-on-one that you have been requesting for.

Thanks again.

RALLS: Thank you, Chris.