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Executive Profile

Robert Nelsen: Texan has big plans for Sac State

New president stresses building character and integrating business

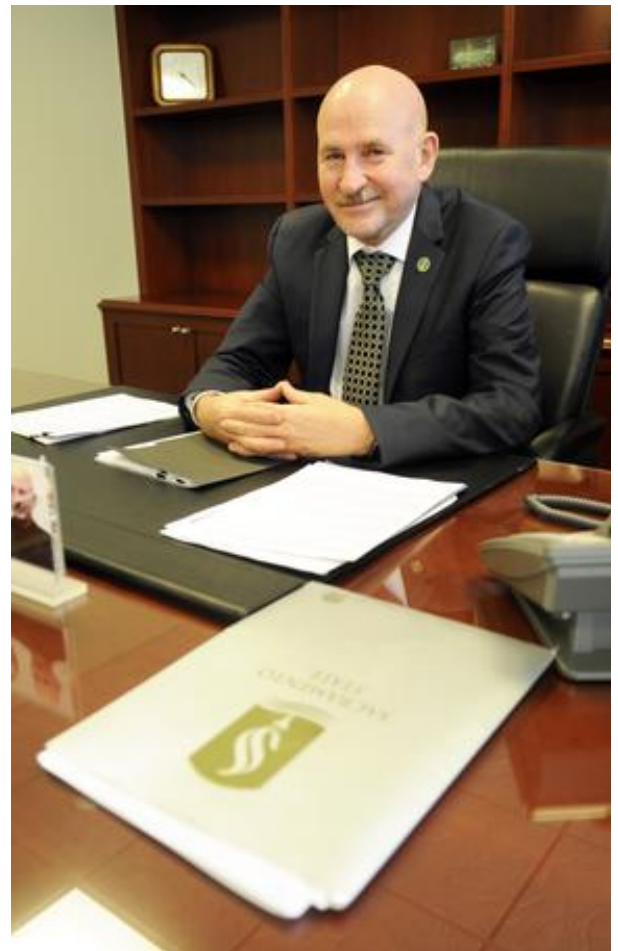
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In his public persona, Robert Nelsen strikes a balance between no-nonsense cowboy and a sensitive educator. Ask the new president of **California State University Sacramento** about his polished black cowboy boots, and he'll tell you he's a proud Texan. Ask him about higher education, and he'll talk about the importance of helping young people grow into enlightened adults.

University officials involved in Nelsen's hire said his empathy for students helped him get the job. The new president also has big plans to integrate local business into the school. But he is clear that Sacramento State will never become a factory devoted only to workforce training.

"We're not about vocational education where you teach nothing but skills. That is not what



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Robert Nelsen, president, California State University Sacramento

a university will ever be, in my opinion,” said Nelsen. “I still think (education) is about building character and really becoming human.”

On July 1, his first day as president, Nelsen said his chief priority would be to graduate more students on time. Moving them rapidly through the system allows the university to serve more students while reducing costs for graduates.

Only 9 percent of freshmen graduate from Sacramento State in four years, he said. Nelsen proposes to offer students more online courses and perhaps financial incentives to take on more units. At University of Texas Pan American, where Nelsen most recently was president, he established a successful program that gave students \$500 in the form of tuition credits for taking on more coursework.

Nelsen also wants to increase internships with local businesses. Over the next five years, Nelsen believes he can increase the number of students with internships from one-third of the student body to half. He wants to better work with the region’s top industries — such as health care and agriculture — through applied research, rather than “visionary theory.”

Another goal for Nelsen is to create a business advisory council to help the university understand workforce needs and help with fundraising. When it comes to raising private funds, Nelsen said he’s fond of building relationships with donors over small, intimate dinners.

“It’s ‘friendraising’ — and we’ve got to do it,” he said, adding that another major priority is keeping tuition affordable. “We can’t keep putting (budgetary needs) on the backs of students.”

Nelsen grew up in a small Montana town outside of Yellowstone National Park. He said he would be shoeing horses in Montana if not for an English teacher who convinced Nelsen he could do better. Nelsen worked his way through Brigham Young University while working as a janitor.

Nelsen met his wife in 1974 and the couple married a year later. They had a son the following year, Robert Seth, who committed suicide in 2001 at age 25.

Nelsen is now an advocate for gun control, and the couple established an endowment in their son's name to give financial assistance to students in crisis.

Throughout the 1980s, the couple lived in Illinois while Nelsen studied philosophy and writing at the University of Chicago. He wrote his dissertation on Flannery O'Connor and James Joyce.

After earning his Ph.D., Nelsen was hired as a creative writing professor at University of Texas at Dallas. For the next two decades, he taught writing and held several different university positions, first at UT Dallas and then at Texas A&M University Corpus Christi.

In 2010, Nelsen took a job as president of University of Texas Pan American. Four years later, he helped orchestrate a merger with University of Texas Brownsville.

Carol Rausch, who worked with Nelsen at Pan American, said he impressively built a coalition supporting the merger that included politicians, academics and other local power brokers.

"He was instrumental in building collaboration and collegiality," she said. "Everybody fell in love with him."

Earlier this year, Nelsen also charmed the hiring committee at Sac State. Lou Monville, who's chairman of the board of trustees and has helped hire 20 of the system's 23 presidents, said he was impressed that Nelsen came from "humble beginnings" and could identify with first-generation college students.

"I find him to be someone who has a great deal of personal care and ... empathy for our students," Monville said. "For me, that was meaningful."

Jody Nelsen agreed that her husband is a softy.

"He grew up on a cattle ranch in Montana, but he prefers to be vegetarian — he only eats meat occasionally. He will catch a spider in the house and take it outside with a newspaper," she said.

How will this tender cowboy change Sacramento State?

Since becoming a university president, Nelsen said he has developed greater appreciation for a university's responsibility to elevate its students' economic standing, as well as their intellectual capacity. However, the purpose of education is to examine life, Nelsen said.

"We can go too far to the extreme in vocation, and in rhetoric ... when we push that we want to create jobs," Nelsen said. "I look at Sacramento and I think, we can really do something amazing within this place, and so sometimes you think too much about the economy, and not enough about the soul."

Robert Nelsen, president, California State University Sacramento

Age: 63

Education: B.A. and M.A. from Brigham Young University; Ph.D. from University of Chicago

Career: A long-time educator, Nelsen was a professor and vice provost at the University of Texas at Dallas from 1990 to 2008. He spent a year as an English professor and associate VP for Academic Affairs at Texas A&M University Corpus Christi before serving as president of The University of Texas Pan American from 2010 to 2014. He spent the past year as a special adviser to the executive vice chancellor for academic affairs at the University of Texas.

Personal: Lives in East Sacramento with wife, Jody

Biggest misunderstanding about the job: "Presidents have their hands tied behind their backs most of the day and have to depend on others to help get the work done."

Dream job: "As a teenager, I dreamed of being a rodeo star. Today, I would settle for being a ditch rider (someone who rides a horse and is in charge of monitoring creek water use for irrigation in Montana)."

Something colleagues would be surprised to learn about you: "My favorite book, the one I reread most often, is Shunryu Suzuki's 'Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind.' "

Allen Young

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