now more than ever
ODESSA COLLEGE

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Odessa College VP has the credibility to lead, desire to inspire

The Permian Basin has attracted a scientist who played a key role in the discovery of the gene for muscular dystrophy, and then in the startup of a healthcare services firm now valued at $100 million.

But the relocation of Dr. Don Wood to West Texas, and his subsequent hiring by Odessa College, are actually about his long delayed interest in other pursuits: golf and teaching.

Don Wood in the mid and late 1980s led a prestigious corps of scientists (see sidebar) that discovered the genetic cause for muscular dystrophy, a dread disease that once killed most of its male victims before they reached age 21.

These scientists were the crème de la crème of molecular biology and genetics research. They formed an elite club of sorts. Many were from the Boston-New York metroplex, some from Texas and others from England, Canada, Israel and elsewhere around the world.

Don Wood, as director of research for the Muscular Dystrophy Association that provided funding for this research was at the center of this elite group. Under his command, competing scientists shared data and ideas, resources were allocated to expand promising leads and new scientists were recruited into an ever expanding worldwide effort to do what had never been done before … find a gene responsible for a deadly human disease when there was no knowledge of what that gene did to cause such devastation.

The effort was successful and in 1986 the announcement that the gene responsible for muscular dystrophy had been discovered caused a worldwide sensation that forever changed medical research into genetic disorders. In the weeks and months following that announcement, Wood gave more than 100 interviews to the world press, including the Wall Street Journal, New York Times and the Today Show.

That momentous breakthrough led to a trail of venture capitalists wanting to partner with Wood and, with the idea of taking discoveries in the laboratory to useful diagnostic and therapeutic applications in the clinic, he did indeed venture into the business world, eventually becoming president and chief operating officer of IntegraMed America.

To abbreviate a rich story, at some point more than 15 years after going into business, Wood decided he had accomplished what he had set out to do in that arena and retired to relax and play some golf.

After a year or so of chasing the little white ball, he decided that golfing wasn't all that interesting on a daily basis and, more to the point, Wood was being gnawed at by a long held desire to teach. He wanted to teach the kind of student he had once been. To wit: a young person smitten by science but without much money for the enterprise.

"We had a house and a car, so we weren't poor, poor, poor," Wood recalls of his Seattle boyhood. Raised by a dad who drove taxis, buses and sold insurance, and by a mom who confessed to him once that as her first born she really didn't know how to raise him other than read stories to him all day, Wood had it in mind that he wanted to teach earnest students who maybe hadn't had all of the advantages. So the scientist took a job teaching biology at Odessa College.

He loved it. And in fact he fell in love with Odessa College and the whole community college idea of non elite education, and was all the more attracted by what he describes as the drive and vision of the OC President, Dr. Greg Williams. The young college president is well known in the Permian Basin for telling individuals and audiences that he intends to make Odessa College the best it can be.

Which is why OC has now taken a professor who loved what he was doing, and with his own eager assent, made him Vice President of Institutional Effectiveness.

Williams says he sees in Wood the kind of credentials that have gained him rapid respect among OC faculty, and the kind of executive ability that can combine fact and persuasion to make Odessa College great.

Wood agrees that Odessa College can be seen as a living organism, and that his job is to study and understand that organism, to help it thrive and, most importantly, make it inspire young minds to reach higher than they thought they ever could.

"We have talented students who I want to inspire to stay in college and get their degree. I've had a great career and life because of my education. And that's what I want for each and every one of our students," says Odessa College's newest Vice President.

Dr. Don Wood's New Job? Help OC to Thrive, Outcompete

"Everything happens for a reason," Dr. Don Wood told an interviewer recently as he discussed his new job as vice president of institutional effectiveness at Odessa College.

As director of research at the Muscular Dystrophy Association in the run-up to the discovery of the gene responsible for the disease, Wood's job was enormously personal at times. He would have to assuage egos, not often, but sometimes battered by the criticism scientists working together will level at each other's ideas. Such is the role of the executive scientist, the guy who holds the purse strings. It was this executive science, this manager of the scientific team, that Wood is most credited for. The discovery itself was huge, no doubt, but it was management of the scientific enterprise that is Wood's real innovation and contribution. It is now a much copied model.

Wood presided over a group of towering intellects at a mission-forming conference at Cold Spring Harbor in New York in 1986. Among the group was the famed Dr. Jim Watson, Nobel Winner and DNA co-discoverer. But there were many others, less famous certainly, but Watson's equal in many respects. Seventy-five in all. It's his experience in working with such people that gives Wood confidence that he will take his new office and be able to help advance Odessa College. Wood, ever the scientist, agrees that Odessa College can be seen as an organism and just as a scientist seeks conclusions from carefully gathered data, this new vice president of institutional effectiveness will proceed to discover what makes OC tick and what can be done to make it further thrive, to outcompete.