

## **COACHECast // S2 EP002 - Dr Mark Rieger**

**// Intro //**

**Todd:** Hi, everyone. I'm Dr. Todd Benson, and you're listening to COACHECast. Today, I'm thrilled to be speaking with the Executive Vice President and Provost at Florida Gulf Coast University, Dr. Mark Rieger.

**Mark:** We should be more accommodating that, it's not just the job that you take and the description that was put out at that time. But as you progress in your career, maybe the types of workload that you choose to pursue should change as well.

It would be great if people would stop calling folks non tenure track. Nobody wants to be described by what they aren't, you know? "Hi, I'm Mark. I'm not a good tennis player.

The superpower is the people you hire. It really is. These jobs are far too big to be done by one person. And so you've really got to have a good team around you.

**Todd:** Stay tuned.

**// Main Chat //**

**Todd:** Welcome back to COACHECast, brought to you by the Collaborative on Academic Careers in Higher Education, or COACHE for short. We're a research practice partnership at the Harvard Graduate School of Education.

Each episode, we're going to be joined by guests from across the higher education sector, as we explore the faculty experience and leadership in higher ed.

Again, I'm your host, Dr. Todd Benson, the Executive Director and Principal Investigator at COACHE.

I'm delighted to welcome Dr. Mark Rieger. He's the executive vice president and provost at Florida Gulf Coast University, where he's been provost since January of 2021. Mark previously served as Dean and Director of the College of Agriculture and Natural Resources at the University of Delaware, and has held leadership positions at the University of Florida and the University of Georgia.

Mark, welcome.

**Mark:** Thankyou Todd. Good to be with you.

**Todd:** Alright, so let's jump into some questions here. Your discipline is in plant physiology and agriculture, but you've held a range of roles in your 30 plus year career.

Could you briefly describe the journey that led you from a faculty position to your current role as provost at Florida Gulf Coast?

**Mark:** Yeah, thanks for the question. Yes, it was quite a long journey it's been, I guess starting out as a faculty member, I always thought that I was built to serve students and serve the community. And we tend to think that way in agriculture and natural resources. We are out off campus quite a bit. And I think the administrative thing gave me a chance to serve faculty and staff in some of the same ways that I was trying to serve my students and stakeholders out there.

It started about 20 years ago when I was encouraged to apply for a department chair position and other than being somewhat offended that somebody thought I should be a department chair I actually bid at it and said, wow, maybe this administrative path is something that I should pursue. And while I did not make the finals in that, it did lead me down another path of professional development related to leadership and getting into a leadership program, becoming the equivalent of a faculty senate president, and so on and so forth. Then just by doing the Forrest Gump routine of saying, yes, when opportunities arose, I ended up at Florida, then after that, Delaware, and then after that, I ended up here and have never looked back with any regrets .

**Todd:** Forrest Gump is a great analogy for the way that these academic leadership positions creep up. People don't necessarily go into their graduate program saying, I think I want to be a provost, but we still get a bunch, so I think it's great to use that analogy.

One of the interesting things about Florida Gulf Coast is that your faculty model doesn't have any tenured roles. Your roles prior to joining Florida Gulf Coast were at institutions that do have tenure, so you've worked at and held leadership positions in both kinds of institutions.

Can you tell us a bit more about the background and setup of Florida Gulf Coast and how the model came into being?

Do you see this as having any particular advantages or challenges?

**Mark:** Yeah, thanks. Thanks for that question too.

So FGCU is relatively new. It was founded in 1991 and the doors opened in 1997. And at that time in the nineties, I think it was thought that FGCU being the 10th university in the state was going to be innovative. It was going to be different. It was going to not have dorms, for example, it was going to be largely online. And of course, while some of those things didn't happen, the idea of not having tenure stuck with it. And so that's always been with us. So we have not awarded tenure, since the doors opened back in 1997. If you think about the 1940 statement of the AAUP, if you go back that far, it talks about tenure as means to ends and the ends were academic freedom and some reasonable semblance of job security. So they would attract the right people into the, academic profession.

And we still do that. We absolutely still do that. We have academic freedom as a founding principle and we have a continuing multi year contract as a means of providing some sense of job security at their three year rolling contracts.

And so we have done what tenure was designed to do, but without having the label of tenure. And maybe that's good, because tenure is somewhat under attack in this country, it seems anyway, from different legislative bodies. But, I think we've done well with it. The main advantage I believe is that the culture of FGCU is unique. You really have to want to be here. You're not coming here to take a tenure track job as you would somewhere else. You want to be part of something different. You want to be part of something innovative, something young and fresh. This is the place for you. The main disadvantage, however, is it relates to recruitment retention. So sometimes, some of the best recruits that we have, if they have another offer at a tenure bearing institution, they will take that position. They're a little bit afraid. They see too much risk involved with taking a position that does not have tenure, even though our system, again, gives you a good degree of job security with that.

And on the retention side too, sometimes some of our best faculty who start here early on in their careers, they will choose to take a tenure track position at another university. So we have some issues with recruitment and retention because of that. But overall, I think we've done really well.

In fact, just last year, our non retirement retention was down to six, or turnover was down to 6%. So I feel like that's pretty good. I like to see it below five, but I think we're holding our own pretty well.

**Todd:** it's interesting to think about this idea of how tenure is designed to serve a purpose and to focus on the purpose, regardless of the structure of rank and appointment types at your institution is certainly worthwhile.

Now, one of the things that you had said to us in our previous call was that a non tenure model can be innovative.

Why do you think it can be that way?

**Mark:** I think that the idea of not having tenure was to attract a different type of faculty member, someone that really wanted to be here and wanted to do something new and different. The state had nine universities at that time, several of them very, very good universities.

Look at UF, look at FSU. And so it didn't want another University to follow in those same tracks. And I think it didn't want the negative connotation that was catching up with tenure, even though you may or may not agree with that connotation there. It is in the public, out there as the leisure class, right? The tenured faculty.

So I think that the whole idea of innovation, doing things differently was part of the FGCU's founding there, and I think we're ahead of the game if you think about it. What we're seeing is that the state legislatures are imposing post tenure review on a lot of institutions.

It just happened in Florida, actually, and it's always better to develop something yourself rather than having something imposed upon you. So by choosing to go without tenure in the 1990s and going to a continuing, multi year contract system, I think we dodged the recent bullet anyway, of a post tenure review, which has been difficult and a real challenge to morale throughout the Florida system recently.

**Todd:** That's a really interesting way to think about it. I do think that the emphasis of making sure that you're creating developmental opportunities. It sounds like it's a really conscious, structural choice, and I'm wondering if you could talk a little bit about the way that the multi year contracts work at your institution and how that emphasizes that idea of faculty development?

**Mark:** It's a rolling contract and I know that some national labs have it. So basically every year that you have a satisfactory evaluation, you meet or exceed expectations, you get three more years. It's just the way it works. It rolls all along. If you get a year where you have an unsatisfactory evaluation, the first

thing is you go on a performance improvement plan, and it gives you that next year to be able to rectify any deficiencies that were identified.

And then if, at the end of that year, you're not able to do that, you get a terminal year, as you would in a tenure system, a terminal year to find a job and to move on because perhaps it's not working out there.

So that's the way our rolling contract system works. So there's a fair degree every year that you roll along literally with this contract that you've got three more years, you can have a longer planning horizon. You can get into some longer term activities as far as teaching and scholarship.

**Todd:** That's fantastic. While Florida Gulf Coast model of having no tenure roles is still somewhat unusual in higher ed, every institution has some non tenure roles. What do you think that other academic leaders like yourself can learn from your model and apply at their own institution?

**Mark:** The first thing I would say is, it would be great if people would stop calling folks non tenure track. Nobody wants to be described by what they aren't, you know? "Hi, I'm Mark. I'm not a good tennis player. Good to meet you." You nobody wants that. And I take this page out of the UD playbook, the University of Delaware, they changed the name from non tenured track to continuing track. And maybe continuing track is not the best term, but in recognition of the great value that those folks added to the university. So getting away from that moniker is probably one of the most important things.

Now we have two tracks here at FGCU. We have the instructor track and the professor track. So instructor functions a little bit like a non tenure track would at other institutions. You can have a master's degree. You don't necessarily have to have a terminal degree. Your workload is largely teaching. There's no scholarship expectations, things like that. But what I find is that some of our instructors are outstanding and what I'd like to do with many of them is to provide a path to move them into an assistant professor position if they meet all the criteria.

So, a lot of times, you take the job that's available to you, especially if it's a spousal situation. You know, your partner has a job, you take the instructor job. It's not what you wanted, but it's what was available at the time. And as you meet all of the criteria, you engage in scholarship, you do a number of different things, you have a terminal degree, I'm trying to provide a way for those folks to move over on the assistant professor track, because we don't want to lose them.

Folks that are willing to work hard and go above and beyond, those are the last people that we want to go out on the market and look for a job elsewhere.

So that's what we're doing right now with our instructor track to try to reward them. If they want that, not all of them do, they may want to stay in the instructor track. That's fine. But there's several that do, they want to go above and beyond and we want to reward them for that.

**Todd:** Yeah and the flexibility in career tracks, one of the things I think that more and more folks moving into the faculty labor market are struggling with is that those tenure line positions, they're unicorns. The number of PhDs we're producing is growing and growing. The number of tenure line positions we have, not so much.

And giving folks an idea that they can have a successful fulfilling career, feel like the institution is still connected to them, that they still care about their development and their growth. And have, maybe the ability to move not just from an instructor position to, a broader position, but the ability to move back. Because sometimes life happens and you have to focus on other things.

**Mark:** Yeah, we like to treat everybody as the whole person. It's who you were before you showed up at FGCU and who you want to be later in your career. I know in my own career, I really changed as time went on. My research foci changed, the way I taught the courses I taught changed. So we should be more accommodating that, it's not just the job that you take and the description that was put out at that time. But as you progress in your career, maybe the types of workload that you choose to pursue should change as well.

**Todd:** Yeah. And I think that the idea of just having regular, focused conversations about the career direction can be just as impactful. Asking people, are you still happy doing what you want to do, is a really good thing to ask. We see that oftentimes with associates who feel stuck in their rank or in their position and it's because their vision of what being a successful faculty member is, has changed over time.

And wouldn't it be great if we rolled with those changes and allowed people to follow these different paths.

**Mark:** I agree. I couldn't agree more.

**Todd:** So let's talk a little bit about the COACHE process. So you've been through the COACHE process with your faculty over the last couple of years.

You had a really terrific response rate to the survey and I'd love to hear a little bit more about the process. Was there any sort of a specific approach or a message that you found resonated with your faculty to get them invested, especially this first time?

**Mark:** Yeah, a lot of credit to go around to other people here too, but I think just agreeing to do COACHE, I think there was a group of faculty that wanted to do some surveys and they felt like we could do an internal survey, come up with our own. And I said, if we really want to do this right, let's go with the best in the nation. And I'm not just putting in a plug for you here, Todd, but I really think that it is and it allows you to benchmark against other institutions that have done it before.

And so we got past that. We decided to go with COACHE and I said, there's one condition here. I really want everybody to fill this thing out. We need a high response rate. We need good answers and high authenticity and participation in this, or it's really not going to mean much in the end. And so we got through that. And then, two champions emerged. Andi Clemons, who works with me and Lindsay Rhodes, the faculty Senate president.

They took this ball and they ran with it. It was wonderful to watch that. Even use a little bit of game theory where sending out the response rate on week two to all the deans and one dean seeing that they're scoring a little bit lower than the other college. And so, you know, use some game theory to get them going. And we got over 50 percent of all of our faculty. I think it was closer to 60...

**Todd:** I was gonna say it was right around 60, yeah!

**Mark:** Yeah, it was wonderful. And so just prodding along and using some game theory and a lot of encouragement and really not coming from me was a good thing. In many cases, it was coming from the Faculty Senate President, it was coming from one of our Faculty Affairs staff members, and so it didn't seem the Provost from on high asking people to do something else, but that was the key, those folks.

**Todd:** That's fantastic.

So what are some of the things you've learned so far from the COACHE survey administration experience and thinking about the results, was there anything that surprised you?

**Mark:** Yeah, we've been through two task forces already. One was to distill the information and the other was to make recommendations on a path forward. So we spent most of the last year doing that and I was surprised. I was really surprised that mentorship came out to be one of the most positive things, because we don't really have a formal mentoring program here.

We pair new faculty with mentors when they come in the door and we go through the new faculty orientation and all that, but there's no requirement to have a faculty mentor. And I think that's probably good, is that organically, from the grassroots up, people are finding others and they're getting a good colleague and developing camaraderie and getting some coaching going on that way. So that was surprising to me that was happening. On the downside, I think internal communication. I would just say that over and over again. We did great places to work for survey. And then we did an internal communication survey, we did that ourselves.

The same things kept coming up. There's a lot of myths and misperceptions about some of the things that the administration is doing and then vice versa, what's coming back to us. And I think these information cascades, I call them where I'm talking to the deans are supposed to go talk to the chairs and the chairs are supposed to go talk. I just think at some point in an institution's evolution, when they get a certain size, those things just don't work very well anymore. And so we need to do a lot more direct communication, and we're starting to do that. I have vowed to go to every department meeting next year. That's 30 visits, but I'll start checking them off here in late August and try to make it through the year. That one on one, that small group, interaction is the best thing. It's not, you know, the larger format meetings and the emails, the constant stream of emails.

**Todd:** We always say faculty leadership is retail work, not wholesale. You really have to be knocking on doors, otherwise you don't know quite how the message is being received. That's a serious effort, 30 department meetings in a year, especially knowing how busy your calendar is going to be any other day of the week.

**Mark:** I think it's probably the most important thing that I'll do meeting wise next year, that's for sure.

**Todd:** Let's talk a little bit about another thing that you mentioned during our previous call.

You said regional public universities are the new land grant university. And that really stuck with me, first of all, because it's pretty clear, and I think this might be an agriculture background thing, that you know a lot more about the history of land grants. You've done your homework. But what did you mean by that statement? How do you see regional publics serving in that role now?

**Mark:** Yeah, thanks for the question, and this is an idea that's shared among a lot of people like me that spent most of their careers at land grants, and nothing wrong with that. I don't want to certainly have your listeners believe that was tired of that system and I wanted to leave it. I did want to move on to something new, that's for sure, but I do have a lot of respect for the land grant mission.

Back in 1862, when the Morrill Act was passed and signed by Lincoln, it was decided that there would be a system of public institutions for all social classes, not just the elite. Everybody could have a chance to go to college. And what did they need back then? They needed to feed the country, so they wanted to have agriculture. They needed to build the country, so they had engineering. They needed to protect the country, so they needed military science, which later became ROTC. And they needed an educated citizenry, so they had arts and sciences and the good liberal arts background that, for many decades before the Civil War.

So that's what we needed then, but I bet you, if you wrote the Morrill Act now, or if there was a new Morrill Act in this century, what we would see probably is heal the country, right? Heal the country with health care. Look at all the problems that we're having with health right now. People are aging well into their eighties and nineties. There's all kinds of different types of diseases that we didn't know we had, at least back then. Rebuild the country. A lot of the infrastructure in the 19th century and the 20th century needs to be rebuilt at this point. And so we have to do it in a smart cities type of a way with technology, with artificial intelligence. So rebuilding the country is going to be something we need to do. And then, of course, protecting the planet.

I think we realized, and I do, particularly being from agriculture, that many of the things that we came up with had longer term effects that weren't so great for the planet. And a lot of the urbanization, a lot of the agricultural things. So now we really need to look at environmental stewardship, sustainable development, those types of things.

So a new Morrill Act might include those types of things, in addition to some of the original tenets of it. But I see that going on at regional publics. I see

healthcare and business and engineering and things like that as being the predominant workforce oriented majors that we have here.

I see us connecting to the community and wanting to make a difference in our communities. And I see us taking the average student from high school, not necessarily the high school valedictorian, but the average student. Find them where they are and take them where they need to be. So that's why I think that these regional publics are now functioning as land grants .

**Todd:** Anything that you found to be particularly challenging about leading a regional public university?

**Mark:** Probably the razor thin budgets. The land grant flagships that I was working on. I guess I got used to having a healthy dose of resources coming in from the state, coming in from the federal government and the local government in the case of ag and natural resources. So what we do here is amazing, that we're able to run this entire university on 350 million a year, for example.

It's a shoestring budget, but we make it work and everybody has to pull together for that. We have a wonderful core of adjunct faculty that help us in that mission.

And we live in an area where a lot of people retire to here in Naples and Fort Myers, Florida. We can tap an incredible talent pool. I mean we have retired university, former presidents that live here, that we can tap to be adjunct instructors in our classroom. So we're able to do it, despite the economic challenges.

Yeah.

**Todd:** Would you say that there's any particular skills or approach that you've found useful in your leadership role, particularly as provost now? What's been your superpower?

**Mark:** The superpower is the people you hire. It really is. These jobs are far too big to be done by one person. And so you've really got to have a good team around you. And I've been blessed with a lot of people that, I've been able to hire and inheriting some of the people that had been here for many, many years.

I've always seen that as the best structure, is the institutional memory and the people that have been here a long time, then also hiring in some new people and having that sort of 50 50 blend of people at the conference room table, that can

give you new ideas and also, talk to you about how it's worked or hasn't worked in the past.

I think I've been really fortunate to have the folks available to me that I've got.

**Todd:** Fantastic. and I will vouch your people are good. I've worked with so many of them and I really do appreciate them all. So anything else that you wanted to plug, either of your own work or anything coming up at Florida Gulf Coast that you're proud of? Anything that we can share with the listeners?

**Mark:** Yeah, sure. I think that for those of you out there that are interested in alternative credentialing, it's really an area that we lead, I believe. We just had some folks get back from a conference, giving papers on badges and micro credentials, some baccalaureate certificates, those types of things, hire ed's changing. Not that everybody needs a bachelor's degree. It sounds antithetical for a provost to say something like that, but we believe in something called the power of and, that you can actually get a bachelor's degree and you can embellish that with badges and credentials that display competencies that the employers want, that they really desire.

And so we're trying to have a good blend of those different types of opportunities for all different learners. The people that have been out of school for 20 years, to the 18 year olds that are just leaving high school. So I'm very proud of the work that our folks have done in that area.

And, it kind of is a through line for how you talk about your faculty, you're going to develop in a path that makes sense for you and you're gonna do it in ways that serve the bigger goal, rather than just focusing on a degree. Yeah, that's the regional public. We go and ask the community what they need and then we develop programs around that. We don't try to come up with our own ideas and put that out there. So it's worked out really well for this university.

**Todd:** That is fantastic.

**// Outro //**

**Todd:** Well, that's our show. Thank you so much for joining us and be sure to check out the show notes for the transcript and links to any resources that we mentioned today.

Mark, thank you once again for joining me today on COACHECAST, and for your candidness and your insights about your work and your career.

**Mark:** Thank you for having me, Todd

**Todd:** Make sure to tune in for our next episode Listen wherever you get your podcasts and be sure to follow us.

**Todd:** I'm Dr. Todd Benson. See you next time!

**// END //**