

## **COACHECast**

### **S. 1, Ep. 1 // In conversation with Dr. John Zomchick, University of Tennessee, Knoxville**

#### **// Intro //**

**Pat:** Hi, everyone. I'm Dr. Pat Farrell. You're listening to the very first episode of COACHECast and today I'm thrilled to be speaking with University of Tennessee, Knoxville Provost, John Zomchick.

**John:** No matter how much pre-work that you do, if you don't communicate and meet again and again and again with the faculty, then you're at a terrible disadvantage.

There may be really important topics that we disagree on, but can we find common ground by focusing on those topics that we do agree on?

We have to make choices about where our resources go, but never miss an opportunity to say that, without the faculty, there is no university.

**Pat:** Stay tuned.

#### **// Main chat //**

**Pat:** Welcome to COACHECast, a new podcast brought to you by the Collaborative on Academic Careers in Higher Education, 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.

I'm Dr. Pat Farrell, the former provost at the University of Wisconsin Madison and at Lehigh University.

I'll be your host for this episode as we kick off a five-part series digging into the topic of leading higher education institutions through change.

I'm delighted to welcome John Zomchick, Provost of the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, the state's flagship university. John came to the University of Tennessee in 1985.

He has held the role of Provost since 2020, and previously served as Vice Provost for Faculty Affairs, interim provost and senior vice chancellor. Before joining the office of the provost's staff, John was executive associate dean in the College of Arts and Sciences. I'm looking forward to hearing about many of the change initiatives John has led during his successful career at the University of Tennessee.

John, welcome.

**John:** Thanks, Pat. I'm really happy to be here with you

**Pat:** Well, to get us started, you previously shared with me that the University of Tennessee completed a strategic vision exercise that prompted fairly significant change. One goal was to ensure the university has the right set of colleges to meet the challenges of the mid 21st century. Could you give us an overview of that change initiative?

**John:** Oh, sure. I'd be happy to do that. We started this initiative in May of 2021. We'd been working on a strategic vision that got interrupted by the pandemic, after the sort of worst phase of the pandemic subsided, we went back to the strategic vision and it seemed like a really good time to look at our college structure.

In addition to that, we also had just entered a new budget model, which was a big change. We went from incremental historical budgeting to what's commonly referred to as an RCM model. That was a big change for the campus. And there's nothing like money to get people's attention.

So we thought that what we would do at this time was to look at the colleges, and we had, at that time, 10 colleges, including a very traditional College of Arts and Sciences.

**Pat:** So, not a small project then?

**John:** No, not at all, not at all.

Part of our new strategic vision was that we wanted to be nimble and adaptable in order to meet the changing demands coming in a rapidly changing landscape in higher education. So, we convened a task force, we charged the task force with looking at our current array of colleges, and, I have to say that as a product of the College of Arts and Sciences myself, I thought, maybe it's time to look at the College of Arts and Sciences in particular to see if that sort of large structure

with 22 different departments was still serving the needs of our students and, importantly, our faculty.

And so, we set that task force on its way and it was a lot bumpier than I thought it would be. Let me just say that. It was, it was at times surprisingly bumpy.

**Pat:** I'm not surprised when you say college and in the same sentence nimble.... most people don't see those two going together!

**John:** Yeah, that's absolutely right.

**Pat:** So challenging to get people to even think differently. As you were commenting, it did occur to me, in the course of the conversation about strategic vision, were there any things that came from the pandemic experience that made that vision change in any way? I'm just curious if that had an impact or you just picked up where you left off and more or less carried on?

**John:** No, I think that there were a lot of things that changed, because of the pandemic experience. I mean, one that we're all acknowledging now is that before the pandemic, we had very few classes that were offered online here at the University of Tennessee. Of course, because of the pandemic, we were all forced mostly to go online and to sort of learn very quickly how to deliver high-quality instruction to our students so that they would not miss out and not have to defer their dreams because of the pandemic.

And so, we realized then that it was possible to change directions of this rather large battleship of a university, on shorter notice than we had thought in the past. So how that sort of got articulated in the strategic vision was this idea of being nimble and flexible, because if anything, the pandemic called on us to be flexible, to modify long-existing policies, for example, whether it be for admissions policies or grading policies, whatever it might be.

But also we realized that, because we could exploit this digital universe more than we had been doing, we, as an institution, now had an opportunity to offer our instructional riches to a much larger audience. And so we started thinking about, for example, adult learners in the state of Tennessee, and the fact that we had not traditionally been a destination for adult learners in the state of Tennessee.

And so those are a couple of the things that I think the pandemic changed.

**Pat:** That's really interesting. I don't think anyone would call that a fortuitous circumstance, but nonetheless it was, sounds like it was quite eye opening for you all as well as I think it was for lots of other institutions. I want to carry on a little bit with implementing your strategic vision.

Sounds like getting that moving, getting some of these ideas underway, whether or not they actually came to pass, called on you to learn and maybe exhibit some leadership skills that were perhaps, not the traditional ones you had come with.

Can you talk a little bit more about that, how as the vision began to unfold and you sort of appreciated your role in helping to make that happen, how did that challenge you from a leadership position?

**John:** I think as leaders we all go into this with an idea that we have great ideas.

**Pat:** Mm hmm.

**John:** We have great ideas that we would love to see implemented. And, we don't always anticipate that not everyone is going to share our high opinion of the ideas that we have.

You know, when we were working on the college structure, I thought we had done a lot of prework to prepare the university for considering these changes.

And what I learned was that no matter how much prework that you do, if you don't communicate and meet again and again and again with the faculty who are most concerned about changes to their daily work life, then, you're at a terrible disadvantage. And so what we did was, we learned very quickly that there were good ways of meeting with faculty and not so good ways of meeting with faculty.

For example, we had a town hall. We hosted a town hall. And the town hall very quickly devolved into not an exchange of ideas, which we had hoped it would be, sharing where we were going, but also hearing from the faculty, to a kind of opportunity for making a statement of position. And that was not the most productive way of engaging the faculty.

So we moved to instead having smaller group meetings so that we could have substantive and meaningful conversations with the faculty. What I learned from the experience was it's so important to be humble and to listen. Sometimes they suspected that we had a sort of preordained outcome. It didn't matter how many

times we said we do not have a preordained outcome. But to keep making the point that we're here to better your working life, and at the same time to make sure that we're serving our students and all of our stakeholders to the best of our ability. So let's come together, let's work together, let's see what we can do in order to reach those goals.

**Pat:** Well, I gotta applaud you for that attitude. I wouldn't say it's rare, but I feel like I hear from a lot of leaders, where you started with have an idea and feel like they need to simply push the idea, as opposed to stepping back and say, well, this isn't working. How do we make progress in a different way?

So that sounds like it was both educational as well as drawing a lot of your leadership history to be able to do that.

**John:** Yeah, and if I could just say very quickly. Going back to the notion of is the College of Arts and Sciences too big, which is something I had thought in part because as a member of the College of Arts and Sciences with about 800 faculty, I know that we had not had a college faculty meeting in 20 years, because it was just too big. It would be unmanageable.

And I thought, well, would it be better off for the faculty? Would there be more actual shared governance if there were smaller units so that we'd have a division of sciences, a division of social sciences, a division of arts and humanities, and they would have representation to the provost directly with a dean, and they would be able to meet with the dean?

Well, I thought that was a great idea. Faculty didn't think that was a great idea. In fact, I think they thought that was a terrible idea, and so as I listened more and more, we actually were able to come to a compromise, and the compromise was we maintained the College of Arts and Sciences as an organizational unit, but we reorganized slightly within so that there would be divisions and they would have divisional deans.

And I think that came from a real intention of let's work together. Let's find a common ground here so that maybe we can do incremental change that would, I think, still, forward the notion that shared governance is a central part of how we operate in higher education.

**Pat:** But the beauty is you took on an almost untouchable topic and it didn't end up the way you thought it might. But it got on the table, invited people to think hard about something they probably don't think about very much. So to me, that in itself is victory, ask people to think hard about how have we configured

ourselves, and if we like what we have, that's great. But not just because it's what we have, it's because it's what we want. That's really good.

I'm going to change topics a little bit. When we talked earlier, you said one thing that is top of mind for you is the way that some people feel about or perceive higher education today, and that it is, unfortunately, really changing.

Can you tell me more about that? What are the biggest challenges for you, Provost, navigating during these times of increasing pressure and scrutiny? You're at a state's flagship university, public university, quite visible. How do you see these in your path forward from a leadership position?

**John:** Yeah, this is something that I think about just about every day, and it certainly has been in the national news in the last several weeks since we've talked Pat. I mean, it's in some ways even more prominent now than it was the last time that you and I spoke and so I think about it all the time.

One, because I am a firm believer in the value of higher education and that we have a wonderful system here and that has done enormous good for this country and that we need to continue to support higher education.

For me, the biggest challenge is to navigate a divide between an internal campus audience on the one hand, who has come with certain ideas and certain experiences really of having been able in the past to work without much interference from a public on the one hand. And on the other hand, a kind of newly engaged public. Both in terms of our elected representatives, but also our stakeholders, our families who are asking about what the return on investment is for when they send their children to the university.

That to me is the biggest challenge. Managing expectations from the outside, on the inside and seeing if somehow we can come together and find, say that there may be, and there are, really important topics that we disagree on, but can we find common ground by focusing on those topics that we do agree on?

You know you mentioned that we're the flagship. We're also the state land grant institution, and if you think about the history of the land grants, how important they have been as engines of opportunity for what used to be called the laboring classes, for example, with the Morrill Act.

I mean, I just think that if we can look at that particular aspect of our mission, and say, how can we work together to make people's lives better and make the

economic success of this country continue, which has always been a remit of the land grant institutions. That's where I try and find that common middle ground.

It's a struggle. It's a struggle. When our state legislature goes into session, I wouldn't be honest if I didn't say tension didn't go up on the campus, because our internal audience is wondering what's going to come out of our legislature this year and what we try and do is we try and work with our elected representatives, show them all of the good that's coming out of the university and try and find a way of answering their concerns, without betraying our mission.

**Pat:** And I think, as provost, you sit at the nexus of many of these, what I would call constituent groups, a lot of whom have a fairly narrow perspective on what the university is or should be or ought to deliver or whatever. And in my view, or at least in my experience, trying to open those conversations a little more broadly than what people brought with them, whether the parents are focused on jobs or the legislators are focused on something in particular, helping people see it's a little bigger conversation than what you just brought in is a challenge, but to me that's, as you say, a path forward.

And having worked at a land grant, actually the land grant is quite a gift in the sense of being a touchstone that most people will agree with. They may diverge from there, but at least it's a place where most people find agreement, and I'd always found that to be enormously valuable in kind of those conversations.

**John:** That's so well said. The way I feel about this is that I'm privileged that we have it all here at the University of Tennessee, just as you did at the University of Wisconsin Madison in the sense that if you like sports, we've got athletics for you. We've got sports. If you like music or theater and the plastic arts, we've got that. If astronomy is your bag, we've got that. It's just such a rich array of offerings that are both academic and co-academic, if you will, I can't imagine my community without this institution being here and all that it offers.

**Pat:** It is, as I say, quite a gift and I congratulate you in a sense for sticking with the challenge, because I think the result is so important that it's, even though it's maybe tempting sometimes to not stay with it, but that the impact on particularly students whose futures are different because of their opportunity to be at your institution, some of these other institutions, is just so valuable. I appreciate your work in that.

Let me ask a little bit then on that topic of amongst the many stakeholders and people involved in this conversation are your own faculty, who may listen

carefully, or perhaps not, to what goes on in legislature, off campus, on campus, and so on and they themselves may feel some frustration, lack of appreciation for their work, how do you handle that in a way that in some sense helps, but also doesn't try to, in my view, isolate them or ignore the fact that there are other influences besides the internal ones?

**John:** You know, one of the things that I've tried to do is be accessible to the faculty and there are a couple of things that I've done.

For example, we started something called Coffee and Conversations, where once a month during each semester, I make myself available to whoever wants to come and usually we have 30 to 60 people come and we sit around in a circle and we talk. Mostly I listen to what's on their minds, I listen to their concerns. And it's everything from parking, I can't find a parking space, to child care, dependent care, to not having appropriate laboratory space. So, I try and make myself available to that.

But the other thing I think, and some of this has come from my exposure with COACHE, is to realize that we can't say enough, I can't say enough as a leader, how grateful I am, how humbled I am by the efforts of our faculty. And so what do we do to acknowledge that?

We started several years ago a Faculty Appreciation Week in which we have shout outs to faculty in video and free giveaways. We have something called a Faculty Pub that the provost office sponsors, where it's just come and sit around and talk to your other faculty. We do that three times a semester in our football stadium.

We have a faculty and family gathering at the end of the academic year, so the faculty can bring their families to campus. I think what is so important is to acknowledge their efforts and also to give them an opportunity to voice their frustrations to know that, yeah, there are going to be frustrations. This is a large organization. We have to make choices about where our resources go. But never, never, never miss an opportunity to say that, without the faculty, there is no university. And that we acknowledge how hard they work and how committed and devoted they are.

**Pat:** I like your faculty and family thing. What struck me about that is, I'm sure you've seen this too, is I would say, without trying to stereotype generations, but a generational shift in faculty attitudes themselves about what is the job, what's the expectation, how integrated or not should this be with the rest of my life.

And to me, that's an element of recognition of that sort of change of today's faculty aren't the same as we were, perhaps, when we started on the faculty. Different people with different expectations, and I think acknowledging that is really important.

**John:** Yeah, very well, said. That work life balance is really key.

**Pat:** Well, it gives me a great segue into talking about COACHE for just a minute, since you've gone through a number of cycles of the COACHE Faculty Job Satisfaction Survey. What would you identify as the biggest takeaways that you've gotten, the value that you've seen from the COACHE process and the data, and how has that helped you with your change process?

**John:** You know, first of all, there's just a value in the survey itself and the very fact of the survey to let the faculty know that, yes, we are interested in getting their feedback about what's working and what's not working, what we need to focus on.

So the fact that we've been doing the survey since, I think 2012, has really helped communicate to the faculty that we care about their opinions and we want opportunities for them to share those opinions.

So much so, in fact, that the University of Tennessee System, four other campuses have signed on also to become members of the Collaborative and to use the survey and I'm really happy about that.

As far as the data itself goes, some of the things that I mentioned in the last response Pat, came out of the COACHE data.

For example, there was a sense that we were not recognizing faculty effort enough. And we heard that and we said, okay, what are some really concrete ways we can say, we understand how hard you work, we recognize and we want to find small ways to show that. We have, as most universities do, university-wide awards and we have award banquets where we recognize stellar faculty and students each year.

We've always had that, but it's the smaller, social opportunities. One thing that I didn't mention is that we have every semester, something called Mic Night. And Mic Night is a PechaKucha-based format, it's where you've got 20 slides to get your point across. 20 seconds per slide. Each slide advances automatically.

And so we, we hold that off campus in a venue where faculty can buy adult beverages and the provost office provides pizza and chocolate chip cookies. And we have seven or eight presenters, faculty presenters, who share their work.

I think COACHE helped us think in creative ways about how to engage faculty, how to make them feel like when they come to work here, it's a place where they can share what's important to them, but also meet others and to help them understand that we are appreciative of their efforts, which, in my mind, go above and beyond. The other things, obviously, it's always good to hear from COACHE about how faculty feel about their leaders. And so, COACHE helps us understand if we need to communicate more. I think we always need to communicate more.

**Pat:** Always...ha, ha, ha, ha...

**John:** That's an ongoing challenge and it helps us also identify areas and for example, we have struggled with dependent care here on this campus for many years, and I'm happy to report that we are now in the process of looking for a commercial partner to help us expand dependent care opportunities.

All that comes out of the COACHE survey.

**Pat:** Well, that's really neat and I am sure you're thinking this way that, the fact that you've taken action, you take action on kind of the feedback is further signal to your faculty that this isn't just a survey. This is actually, we're going to do something with the results and people really see that.

So I think that's, that's quite commendable.

Let me ask one more kind of big question and that is about you in the job, not you personally, but we've talked quite a bit about major and complex challenges. How do you keep up energy, enthusiasm to continue in the provost role that can be difficult, challenging, sometimes underappreciated?

**John:** I sometimes ask myself that when the alarm goes off in the morning and think about, okay, what's this day going to bring to me? I mean, there are a couple of easy answers there. One is that, I derive a great deal of energy from the young people on our campus.

One of the things that happens, or certainly happened to me, I don't know if it happens to all provosts, is that you move into this position and your daily sort of

connection with students tends to atrophy quite quickly, unless you're intentional about getting out and meeting students, then you might not see them for weeks on end, because you're dealing with other issues.

So, actually getting out on the campus, walking the campus during class change, seeing, feeling, the energy, I mean, it's contagious. And just to get that sense of, here are these young people marching off, talking to one another, laughing, getting ready for the next class, going to the dining hall, whatever it is that they're doing. Feeling that energy really is something important to me. Going to sporting events is important to me because I get a lot of energy from watching the student sections in the sporting events.

It's this sense, this really clear sense that when we look at the students on our campus, I know that good things are happening and good things will continue to happen for them. That's one thing.

The other thing, and this goes back to what I've been saying all along, is to look at the dedication of our faculty. Whether it be in research scholarship, creative activity, or what they do in the classrooms. The fact that they give their all, they give more than their all every day. I am really convinced about that. To see so many dedicated people, I guess you would say, I'm like a parasite, because I feed off the energy of others.

I don't know how else I would do this job, because there are certain parts of this job that you say, oh gosh, no, I don't want to do that today. Do I really have to do that today? No, I don't want to! But it's the sense that it's, you go ahead and you do those parts of the job as well, but the good, that kind of you can feel and see all around you. Yeah, that's it.

**Pat:** Well put. I always felt like same thing. I'm walking around campus. I'm just looking at potential. Everywhere I look, I don't know where it's going to go. I'm just, but you're right. That is really exciting. It's a great way to express it.

So, along that vein, if you had the chance to talk to a new provost on their first day, what advice would you give them?

**John:** First, never surprise your boss. Never surprise your boss! That's the first bit of advice I would give them. And second, I would say, make yourself available. Listen, listen, listen. Make yourself available to the faculty, to students, make yourself available to the faculty senate sometimes! The faculty senate relationships are rocky, but that's all part of the job.

Third. Surround yourself with people who will let you know if they think you're heading in a direction that might not be the best for the university. None of us have all the answers. And I like to think that, in my career I've learned more from others than others have learned from me.

And so I think just surrounding yourself with people who aren't afraid to speak their minds, who work hard, and who have the same values as you have.

**Pat:** Sounds like great advice. Great advice.

Anything else you'd like to brag about, to plug about yourself or about the university?

**John:** You know, this morning, we have something here called the Chancellor's Associates, which are a group of community members who meet monthly, and learn about the university and the Chancellor addressed the Associates this morning, and talked about the University of Tennessee. And over the years that I've been here, and I've been here almost four decades now, the University of Tennessee has really, really changed and I couldn't be prouder of where we are.

We've seen an enormous increase in the number of applications. We're in admission season right now, as our listeners probably know, and we've had, about a 50 percent increase in applications over the last five years and there's just a sense of momentum.

And despite all of the concerns about the direction of higher education, about the liberal biases in higher education that we're reading about in the press, I think at the end of the day, people still want what we have to offer. And that is a pathway to self knowledge and to useful knowledge to help better our communities.

You know, Pat, I was just thinking, you said something I think that's really important. I was a first-generation college student, and going to Penn State University, which is my alma mater, really exposed me to things I had never been exposed to before. Things in the arts, things in the sciences, and my life is so much richer for that experience. And I think that's what the public universities in this country have to offer. And, you can't go wrong if you choose Tennessee.

**Pat:** Very good.

Well, thanks, John. It's been wonderful to talk with you today.

There is one last question that we'll ask all our guests each episode so I'd love to wrap up with that.

As a collaborative working to improve the faculty experience and support leaders in this effort, what should COACHE study next?

**John:** Yeah, that's a great question. One of the areas where University of Tennessee has struggled, I think, in the COACHE survey is the faculty sense of how easy it is to do interdisciplinary work. Given the changes that are cycling through our society and through higher education in terms of the domains of knowledge.

I really do think it's time for us to think about, not only do we have the right organizational structures, what about the disciplines? Are there ways in making it easier to get out of our silos, to collaborate, whether it be team science or whether it be new ways of thinking about humanity's and art's contribution to medicine, I really do think that we need some serious sort of thought leadership in what a truly interdisciplinary higher education institution would look like. And how the faculty would be involved in that.

**Pat:** Right, that might be really interesting, because it does, at least to me, feel like just tweaking around the edges is unlikely to produce the kind of real interdisciplinary gains that seem possible. And it'd be kind of interesting to see what might be possible.

Well, that's our show. Thanks so much for joining us. Be sure to check out the show notes for the transcript and links to any resources that were mentioned today.

John, thank you once again for joining me on COACHECast and for sharing your insights with us. Make sure to tune in to the next episode when we'll speak with Dr. Nicolle Parsons-Pollard, Provost at Georgia State University. I'm Dr. Pat Farrell. This is COACHECast. See you next time.

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