

# COACHECast

## S. 1 Ep. 2 // Dr. Nicolle Parsons-Pollard, Georgia State University

### // Intro //

**Pat:** Hi, everyone. I'm Dr. Pat Farrell. You're listening to COACHECast.

Today, I'm thrilled to be speaking with Georgia State University Provost, Nicolle Parsons-Pollard.

**Nicolle:** I've been a faculty member for decades and I really do believe in shared governance, it works best when we fully participate in it.

Coming from a faculty perspective, what we do is often very siloed. To come into a space where you've got a team of individuals, you've got to really figure out how to be a great team player.

When faculty really own the curriculum and own the outcomes, they can get in a room and say, I know we can do better, I know we can do things differently.

**Pat:** Stay tuned.

### // Episode Intro //

**Pat:** Welcome back to COACHECast, 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'll be your host for this episode, as we continue our five-part series digging into the topic of leading higher education institutions through change. Joining us today is Nicolle Parsons-Pollard, Provost at Georgia State University. Nicolle was appointed Provost and Executive Vice President for Academic Affairs in February of 2023, after serving as Interim Provost. Previously, she was Georgia State's Associate Provost for Faculty Affairs. Nicolle, welcome!

**Nicolle:** Thank you very much. Happy to be here, Patrick.

## // Main chat //

**Pat:** Let's get started with a few questions. Since arriving at Georgia State, you have created a variety of development programs supporting faculty in teaching and research, leadership programming for department chairs and other administrators, and more. Is there an initiative you are particularly proud of?

**Nicolle:** Thank you so much. It's a great question. A lot has happened since I've been at Georgia State, including a pandemic and us all coming back to work. One of the things that was helpful for us was our COACHE data. The COACHE survey went out before the pandemic. And so when we received our results, we were able to kind of socialize the information and hit the ground running.

One of the things that we focused on was workload and in particular service, which was also a part of the conversation we were having during the pandemic. If we can remember back, there was an opportunity for us to talk about workload and faculty burnout. And one of the things we realized is that there were certain people who were having a different experience during the pandemic.

Certainly those who had children who were going to school found themselves teaching them at home, but also people who were caregivers, whether for children or for adults, and also trying to carry out their work while at home. And so one of the things that came out of the COACHE data, and has shown up in the literature as well, is that there are some people who are more deeply committed to university service than there are others. And when you look at things like promotion and tenure, whether a non-tenure track promotion or on the tenure track side, we actually recognize it less than we probably should.

That showed up in the data and it gave us an opportunity to tap into the American Council on Education's work on equity minded workload. And so, we really did hone in on that in particular, because we thought it would help people to feel better about the burnout that they were really experiencing as well.

There was a huge focus in that particular area and quite frankly, the results showed us that faculty thought that there was, you won't be surprised, too much service, too many commitments, uneven distribution as well as a lack of recognition when it came to workload and service in particular. **Pat:** It sounds like the COACHE survey gave you not only information about a particular pain point for many faculty, but also some indications of where to begin. How did

that go from identifying the problem to beginning to coalesce around some actions that, whether administration or faculty, could take to help address the issue?

**Nicolle:** The first thing that we did, because the administration of our survey happened right before the pandemic, is we held a series of focus groups. I think there were more than 20 some odd focus groups, to really socialize the information that came from the survey to figure out, was there anything that happened during the pandemic that changed what we were thinking?

And fortunately, we found out, no, it hadn't. The things that were issues actually were just exacerbated during the pandemic. And so, we knew we had good data. At the time, I was in the Office of Faculty Affairs, and so myself and the provost and the Associate Provost for Institutional Research, we did our virtual road show of kicking off the data, sharing the information with people, and starting the conversation.

The other thing that we did was that we did receive the individual college level reports. That information was hugely helpful. So we did a report at the university level, at some high level things. But what we knew for sure was then we got the college level reports, that you would really be able to see which colleges needed to focus on which particular things.

And that gave us a long runway for the colleges to be able to work on their own action plans as well.

**Pat:** I'm just curious as you mentioned that I can imagine colleges seeing their own results and perhaps comparing them to others, whether jealousy, resentment, things that arise. But also perhaps, some things to learn from other colleges in your own institution who may perhaps be doing some things better than you are.

Were there some of those internal things to learn given, you know, different colleges undoubtedly had different experiences?

**Nicolle:** Oh, absolutely! In particular, mentoring was a big effort and when we asked faculty, I think it was like more than 60 some odd percent said that they did not have a formal or informal mentor. And so, we knew that that was an area where we could actually focus. And so, we put in some efforts at the university level.

But, of course, when we got the college reports, one of the things that we found is that one of the colleges, the College of Arts and Sciences, generally the largest college, and the most diverse, had some really solid things put in place for mentoring faculty. So it was not only helpful to the other dean colleagues, but it was helpful to the university level efforts as well.

And they had already started their own process of, instead of the one-on-one mentoring, how to create mentoring networks. And that really became a game changer. And I think for some of the other colleges, when they thought of mentoring, they thought of the one-to-one relationship and was trying to figure out, how do you do that and how do you do that to scale?

Well, understanding what was happening in the College of Arts and Sciences was actually helpful for them to figure out how to make the mentoring networks also operate in their areas as well. So, that was one of those opportunities where it was great to see that it was working in some areas across the institution and we were able to share that information.

**Pat:** Well, I gotta love it, because it also is a great opportunity to say to the rest of the campus the usual, that will never work here. Well, it is working here. We have examples on the ground at our institution. So that's wonderful.

Let me carry on. So as the project unfolded you moved into being the provost, interim provost and then provost. How did your role change in helping this move along and bringing it to fruition? What did you see your key activities as now provost in helping this whole project come to completion?

**Nicolle:** So certainly as provost, I had to relinquish some of the rein. Some of the projects were directly under my control in the Office of Faculty Affairs. And so, fortunately I hired a great person to take over and take the lead. And we really did see eye to eye on the vision for the institution and for the office. So that was extremely helpful. But the other part is that I think my having come in as the associate provost, actually had given me some connections with faculty that I might not have had had I come in as the provost. To this day, I think sometimes when people are talking to me, they can't remember the time period when the switch happened. And so they'll say, oh, and you did such and such. And I go, no, that actually wasn't me. That was the former provost.

But I do think that it gives me a very different touch point with faculty and being in faculty affairs is probably one of the best jobs, because you really do get to work with not only departments and faculty on some hard things, but you

get to work with them on some things that are fun as far as recognition of faculty and those kinds of things and some things that are helpful.

One of the biggest impediments is how to do really good hiring in higher ed and you get to help people to see some of that through. And so through that work, you build a different kind of relationship with people. And I was fortunate to be able to carry that over into, I believe, the provost position.

**Pat:** Right, and it's certainly likely people see you differently, even if, as you say, you've switched positions in a little bit. They got to know you, maybe personally as well, in a different role. So that's, you're right, that could be very helpful.

Let me carry that on with a little bit of a bigger context.

You had just mentioned your background, faculty affairs and the different positions you've held at Georgia State. Now thinking broadly across your role as provost, how do you think that, what you just described, your background, your history, your experiences, has shaped your view of what your role could be or should be as provost?

**Nicolle:** Fortunately, I have always worked in the provost office. It was my first administrative role out of the department and so I've always had an opportunity to see the institution from that 30,000 foot view, and not siloed in a particular college or school or department for very long.

I think that part was extremely helpful in the transition. I think the other part is being able to take those relationships that you build. Again, Faculty Affairs gives you an opportunity to spend a lot of time with legal. And when you're in the provost seat, you spend a lot of time with legal.

And so, some of those relationships are already built. I will say that I am extremely fortunate, because I've been at a few institutions and Georgia State probably has one of the best administrative teams I have ever seen in higher ed.

I have not worked with a more dedicated group of individuals, and everyone sees their role as supporting the entire institution and the mission of the institution.

When you come into a role with that being the case. Everyone just rises up to support you, and so I realize that can be very different depending upon where you land, and so I think having the previous experience here in that role as well

as having such a great team to be able to actually work with, it makes all the world a difference.

**Pat:** Totally agree. That part about feeling like you're part of this team, may or may not have your own internal disagreements, but you come to conclusion, put those aside and everyone pulls together is extraordinarily helpful. You're right. Not every place is like that. So that's a wonderful thing to both appreciate, build and recognize.

A core part of the conversation we've been having with leaders is the importance of engaging faculty in key change initiatives like you just described.

What's your approach to getting people involved and engaging diverse stakeholders and, frankly, the challenge of building consensus in a community, given typically the wide variety of viewpoints faculty have?

**Nicolle:** I think you're absolutely right. I think it seems that we end up at different poles oftentimes, but I think the first thing is trying to figure out what can we all actually agree on. And so, finding some area that touches a particular group and is important to them, I think is often key to that.

And sometimes it's as simple as students. I think, you know, by and large, many of us have their best interest at heart. And so to say just that will often get people to the table. I do think that there are other things that allow us to be able to pivot and make sure that people see themselves in it.

And sometimes it's also just about the fairness of the process. I've been a faculty member for decades now, and I really do believe in shared governance, and I think it works best when we fully participate in it. Even if it's reminding people that our system really doesn't work without us all trying to come together to actually do something better. I think that is also part of getting people on board.

And then I think through the process, providing as much transparency as possible. I try to make it clear to people that, when I know, I'll make sure you know. And I will also tell you when I can't say something as well. I think it's just important to be transparent with people as it is to let them know that you also understand confidentiality, because there will be times when they want you to hold things confidential and they need to understand that works both ways.

And so I think that people will start to see some of that as you start to work on really hard problems. I will tell you one of the things that came out of our COACHE data that we still struggle with, was related to compensation and the

president had the foresight to come in and say, let's do a university wide study about compensation so that we can try to be more competitive, but trying to remind people that we didn't get in this position overnight. It happened over a series of years. It happened through recessions. It happened through years of no raises. And we won't get out of it and into a new space overnight as well.

Really having the difficult conversations, even when it might not be the best information that you can provide, is also helpful to the process as well.

**Pat:** Yeah, I think that your last point is a really good one, because sometimes, transparency is easy, relatively easy, when we're being able to tell good news. But as you say, whatever the outcomes of the compensation study, it may be that we simply don't have the dollars to do what we would like to do.

And it's not a very happy result, at least in terms of the action people would like to see. So you're right, the transparency is important, even when the message isn't perhaps what you know the audience is hoping to hear.

When we spoke earlier about potential headwinds for the change process, you shared with me the issue that keeps you up at night.

So I'd like you to share that with our audience. What keeps you up at night?

**Nicolle:** Enrollment and student progression. I have on my desk right now the infamous DFW report, and I think, you know, we've been talking about the enrollment cliff now for a decade. I do believe that the pandemic pushed us a little bit closer to the cliff than we had all expected, but I also think that while many of us are back to work and those kinds of things, that there are indeed still families out there that are hurting and have not rebounded.

And I think that you see that in some of the enrollment trends. I think that it's not just about whether or not students want to go and get an education. It's about, can they stop doing something else in order to be able to do that. And often times that is working full time. Maybe taking care of a family. Sending money back home. And so I think there's that.

I think there's also the conversation about incurring debt and whether or not that is going to be possible for some students in order to be able to progress. And I think also the students are still struggling and many of us are seeing the impact that the pandemic and other things have had on their health and wellbeing. And so ensuring that we have as many resources available to be able to support them through this, I think, is also helpful.

That's one of the things that keeps me up at night. And then I have the moments where I have the glimmers of hope. We have, again, some awesome faculty who have decided that, in particular who teach mathematics, that they weren't happy with the math progression and how students were doing.

I always say no one wants to do their job badly. People want there to be good outcomes. And we have a faculty led math task force for our downtown campus and our perimeter college campus, which is the two year associates programs. And they have come together to look at best practices in teaching mathematics and how they can also meet students, where they are, in order to provide assistance.

**Nicolle:** As a part of that, I did my part administratively as well. We were in desperate need of a third, we call it the MILE lab, our math emporium model. And so, we're going to have a new one of those that should be opened either in the spring or the fall. I think these are all great opportunities, and it really does show how when faculty really own the curriculum and own the outcomes, they can get in a room and say, I know we can do better, I know we can do things differently. It's my role to be able to support them in that process in order to be able to help students.

**Pat:** So you're describing what I might say is not easily identified, but still characteristic shifts perhaps in student and families too. Attitudes towards higher education, is it possible, accessible, am I well prepared and so on. It sounds like you're also starting to see faculty appreciating that the students of 2023 are not the students of 10 or 15 or 20 years ago and what might be needed from faculty, is likely to be different. Is that widely shared?

**Nicolle:** I think so, and I think the wonderful thing about being in higher ed is that you do get to spend most of your days with young people, the next generations. But the longer you do it, the more distant you become from the generation that you're teaching.

**Pat:** We're getting older?

**Nicolle:** Yes, indeed.

And the odd thing is that you don't always notice it when it happens.

And then there will be these certain moments, whether it's the pandemic, whether it's the influx of social media, whether it's artificial intelligence. And then you start to see the distance between you and them. That's when it's

important for us to make sure that we can pivot. I always remind people that when calculators came out, there were some math professors who were probably pretty ticked off and presumed that it was over for math, and we know that wasn't the end, and so I think there are some opportunities for us to learn from them and then to continue to learn from us, oddly enough, I've seen from some of the faculty, who are probably more distant from the generation, really embrace some of these newer technologies and have an interest in how to be able to meet students exactly where they are.

**Pat:** Well, it may expose some of the things that perhaps we could have done better all along and now need to really do better. So, agreed.

Looking back, if you could give one piece of advice to someone in their first week as provost, what would it be?

**Nicolle:** It would probably be that you can't do it all alone. You need other people. Those other people are around you for very good reasons. Whether it's your assistant, your associate provost, your deans, your other colleagues who sit on the cabinet with you. And really embrace the fact that together, you can really move the needle on things, where seldom can you do it all by yourself.

And, coming from a faculty perspective, what we do is often very siloed. It's my research. It's my class, it's my curriculum and I get to decide how I'm going to teach that. To come into a space where now, you've got a team of individuals and you've got to really figure out how to be a great team player and you cannot do any of it by yourself.

**Pat:** Great advice. I couldn't agree more. Anything else you'd like to brag about, to plug about yourself or about the university?

**Nicolle:** The one thing I would love to plug is the work that we did over the past 18 months and developed our latest strategic plan. It is going to be our blueprint to 2033 and it is foundationally built on some things that Georgia State is well known for, which is student success and continuing to decrease the academic gap, for students of all races. It also pushes those levers to the graduate space and what barriers can be removed in order to help graduate students also continue to persist.

We plan to increase research and support research and provide a variety of infrastructure to be able to do so. We are in the middle of designing our newest research tower, which will have lab space and instructional space. So we're

extremely excited about that. It will be the third building in what we consider our research triangle here on campus.

As well as a series of recognitions. One of the things that the COACHE data showed us is that people wanted to be recognized more for the great work that they were doing.

We just had our Ignite awards, which was our inaugural research awards. We came up with a host of recognitions from faculty researchers to administrative individuals and it spanned the gamut from the humanities to infectious disease. And so we wanted to really create an environment where people saw themselves as a part of the research agenda of the institution and could see that come to fruition.

So I'm really excited about the hope for this new plan and what comes next.

**Pat:** Sounds great. Lots to do.

**Nicolle:** Yes, indeed. And you, of course, can find us at [gsu.edu](http://gsu.edu) and we've got lots of information out there for people who are interested.

**Pat:** Can take a look and see what to learn from your own plans. That would be really interesting, I think, for a lot of people to take a look at.

Well, I want to thank you so much for joining us.

Great to speak with you today. There is one last question we have asked all our guests at the end of the episode, so I'd love to wrap with that.

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

**Nicolle:** I think one of the great things about the COACHE process is that it is iterative and it takes you through the administration, to the planning, to the implementation, to then that feedback loop. There's probably a good opportunity to explore the universities that do it best and how do you make change really stick, because part of the reason we do this is so that we actually can hear from the faculty and create change.

I am sure that there are some institutions who struggle with that and a road map to be able to help people understand not only how to go through the steps, but how to really institutionalize those changes in a way that are meaningful, so that

people see value in doing the survey each and every time you do the administration.

I think that's going to be vitally important.

**Pat:** Sounds like a great suggestion. Sustainable change that's sustained beyond any of us is a great thing to search for, to aim for.

**// Outro //**

[00:25:29] **Pat:** 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.

Nicolle, thank you once again for joining me today on COACHECast and for sharing your insights with us.

Make sure to tune in for our next episode, when we'll speak with Dr. Beau Breslin about his time as the Dean of Faculty and Vice President of Academic Affairs at Skidmore College.

[00:25:55] **Pat:** I'm Dr. Pat Farrell. This is COACHECast. See you next time.

**// END //**