

COACHECast

S.1 Ep. 3 // Dr. Beau Breslin, Skidmore College

// Intro //

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

Today I'm thrilled to be speaking with Beau Breslin from Skidmore College.

Beau: You have to be a good listener. You have to be empathetic. These are the things that build credibility and build political capital.

Change requires you to be nimble in those moments and to speak different languages to different constituencies.

It's not a linear process, it took me four or five years to realize that any plan that I had put in place was subject to be torn up and start over again.

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.

Pat: I'm delighted to be joined today by Beau Breslin from Skidmore College.

Beau is a professor of government at Skidmore in Saratoga Springs, New York.

From 2011 to 2018, he was Skidmore's Dean of the Faculty and Vice President for Academic Affairs. He holds a PhD in Constitutional Theory in American Politics from the University of Pennsylvania and a BA from Hobart College.

His latest book is a Constitution for the Living, imagining how five generations of Americans would rewrite the nation's fundamental law.

Happy to have you, Beau, and welcome to our podcast.

Beau: Thanks Pat. Thanks for having me. I'm super excited to be here.

// Main chat //

Pat: Let me start by asking if you can provide us with an overview of how you approach change and the change processes you have used at Skidmore?

Beau: I approach change in two ways. I saw the everyday work that I had to do as more adaptive change, these kind of small-scale changes that one could make to change the culture over time, leading up to what I would describe as more broadly as transformational change, these big changes.

As you know from being a chief academic officer at two institutions, you never know exactly when these things are going to come or when you're going to have the opportunity to make transformational change. Yes, there's planning that goes into it, but sometimes the transformational change just falls into your lap.

Let me give you an example, right? When it comes to adaptive change, one of the things that I wanted to do when I came into the office was, I took seriously the fact that I was Dean of the Faculty first, right? My title was Dean of the Faculty and Vice President for Academic Affairs, and I took the fact that the DOF part was first, my goal was to make faculty's lives richer and more meaningful through small and large changes.

So we immediately reallocated money for faculty to do the necessary research that they needed to do. We immediately implemented a program, called Helios, where we gave credit, financial and otherwise, for independent studies and senior theses.

These I see as adaptive changes, things that we could do. It took time, but things that we could do small, then we would lead up to these transformational changes and I have four or five of them. The one I'm most proud of is changing the face of the faculty. We diversified the faculty in my time in 2011, but we also utterly changed the service system. We built a science building. We did curricular change. We did middle states accreditation and strategic planning. These are transformational changes and you can't get there without the small adaptive changes that you're doing to help faculty understand what your priorities are and changing the culture.

Pat: I really like that kind of viewpoint. I found that useful for myself as well, that notion of adaptive change, we might argue we know how to do these. We just need to make them happen. And transformational where maybe we don't really know how to do it, but we have to get started at whatever learning process it takes to get there.

Obviously, I think sometimes it's hard to tell which are which, and that is of course part of the challenge. Let me kind of carry on. I'm sure we'll come back to this range of topics, because I think they'll recur throughout our conversation.

But to help set the stage a little bit more perhaps for listeners, as maybe people gathered from the brief bio, you've pretty much been at Skidmore for most of your career. So in some sense came up through the institution to take on the role as you say, Dean of Faculty and the Vice President for Academic Affairs. How do you think that was helpful to you? That fact of being at the same institution and then taking on that leadership role or perhaps challenging? Can you tell us a little bit about both sides of that, being more or less an internal person and taking on that level of responsibility?

Beau: So, a lot of chief academic officers, a lot of provosts are nowadays coming up through the institutional ranks. I was one of those and I have spent my entire career at Skidmore. I do think overall, there are more virtues to that than vices. That said, there are some challenges one faces from being on the inside.

But let me first talk about the virtues, right? One of the things that's great about coming up through the ranks is that you know where the skeletons are in the closet. So much of what a chief academic officer has to do is communicate with faculty, know who is a player on the faculty and who isn't. And what I was able to do is I knew who the power centers were, I knew who the leaders were in the institution. And as you go about collaboration and transparency and communication, it was important for me to cultivate those relationships. And so, I had a base there.

The other thing that was important about being from the inside was I knew how the structures and the organizational chart worked on the faculty. So much of the challenge for chief academic officers was on the service side, right? How do you deal with a faculty senate? How do you deal with what we call here, faculty executive committee? What's the relationship between the chief academic officer and the tenure committee and the promotions committees?

These sorts of things take a while to get to understand, the culture takes a while to get to understand it. I knew how to play in the sandbox, if you will. I knew the rules of the game beforehand.

Vices. That said, one of the problems was that you don't have a honeymoon period. People expect you to hit the ground running. And I didn't have a whole lot of time for me to recognize where and how I should go about, making this transformational change.

I was just a faculty member before I got thrust into the DOF position. And, as a result, I hadn't really given a great deal of thought to these big institutional changes.

I would've liked to have had the honeymoon period. I would've liked to have been able to think through those. And because as you know, keeping the trains running at a place like Skidmore or Lehigh, it's tough. It's not always easy. And so finding the time to really think about what are good strategies for transformational change, I think was a little more complicated.

Pat: I can totally understand both sides of that. Maybe I'd ask you to elaborate a little bit more in one element, kind of other people's expectations of you as a, I mean those who knew you perhaps pretty well, those perhaps who didn't, at your institution. Do you think they saw you differently as a new leader being a person from the college as opposed to someone who may have come from outside?

Beau: Yeah, a lot of people were familiar with me. I remember a funny story. I was, I'm kind of a casual guy, right? So you very rarely ever see me in a coat and tie. I'm much more of the flannel shirt, jeans kind of guy. And my first faculty meeting as chief academic officer, I got up there in a coat and tie and somebody screamed from the audience like, who's this? Reintroduce yourself! Because I looked so unfamiliar, immediately I abandoned that idea.

So, yes. Faculty did know what to expect from me, right? So that's one of the problems that you face when you're coming from the inside and you have friends, right? You have alliances that's difficult to make more objective. And so, there are real challenges to coming up from the inside.

Pat: Well there certainly are, as you say, both ways and as many provosts who find themselves either way, just have to deal with both the advantages and disadvantages in the situation they find themselves in.

In earlier conversation with you, Beau, you told me that provosts think that they're in the higher education business, but they're actually in the communication business. You have alluded to this already, but can you tell me a little bit more about that and kind of your perspective of kind of how important

that is and what are the key skills that you think provost need to be able to really fulfill that communication responsibility?

Beau: I had been provost for maybe four or five years at the time, and what I typically would do was I'd always have dinner with my family. So I went home, after a long day and I went upstairs, changed into my sweatpants, got ready for dinner, but I had been home Pat for probably 10 minutes, no more, and I came downstairs, and I opened up my computer to see if any emails had come. You know that...

Pat: Of course, yes!

Beau: Right? No 10 minutes goes by without an email or two from a faculty member. Anyway, my wife turns to me and says that she had listened to an NPR story about a CEO who had written in her tagline, her email tagline, that she was not going to answer emails between, I can't remember the time, but maybe six o'clock at night and midnight, something like that. I don't remember the exact time, but my wife, Martha, turned to me and said, "Can you do that? Can you put that in your tagline that you're not going to answer emails at certain times?"

And I said no, because it dawned on me that I'm not in the higher ed business. I'm in the communications business. And if faculty do not see that I am communicating with them immediately, the trust that I built up will start to erode. And so my rule of thumb was that every email that came my way, no matter who it was from, would get a response within 12 or 16 hours. And often the answer was, I'll get back to you. But, what was critical, Pat, was this sense that you could tell people that they were valued in your eyes. All faculty want to do, or most of what faculty want, is for you to value them and to hear them, and if you are not communicating with them, you ultimately, start behind the eight ball.

And so I realized that I'm actually in the communications business and it helped, as I did my final four years to remember that faculty expect you to respond. And the easiest way to fail as a chief academic officer is to forget that you're in the communications business.

Pat: That's a great story and parallels my experience of thinking that the essence of response was the substance. And of course, yes, it is. I. But you're right. The biggest part is saying, I heard what you said. Maybe I can't provide a substantial response right now, but I heard what you said. I completely agree.

Beau: Right.

Pat: It's clear that you are deeply committed to being responsive to faculty and through that building trust. How did you manage that while maintaining any reasonable work-life balance?

Beau: I would say two things about that.

One is, there's great joy in the job. I had a phenomenal time. I'm sure Pat, you had a phenomenal time too. There is great satisfaction and joy in the job despite the fact that it can be taxing at times.

That said, what one has to do in order to create the work life balance is think about work differently. There are moments where you can, maybe it's in the middle of the day where you can be going on a hike with your wife and so on. I don't want to make this casual, but it's not a 9-5 job and the bulk of your work may in fact happen after five, but you have to make space for your family, for yourself, for your own health. That doesn't follow the normal 9-5 routine. So I was always able to do pretty well on the balance between life and work, because I didn't see the job as 9-5. I seized opportunities where I could to do things that were outside of work with family and so on. They don't come in a routinized way. They come at various times during the day and week, and you've got to seize them.

Pat: Also, part of the importance of that question is your faculty are always looking at you. Not necessarily want to model their behavior after yours, but you're in a certain sense, the model. If you never step away from the job, they're going to assume that's what's expected.

If you very publicly say, look, I'm not available here. If there's an emergency, here's how you can get ahold of me. It also signifies, oh, that's a thing we can do as well.

Not that everyone follows your lead, but they are particularly younger faculty are looking for a hints of, what are you expecting of me? And if it's, we own you, the best people will leave. And that's not good for you and not good for the institution.

Beau: True.

Pat: Any other sort of characteristics that you found to be really useful in building that level of trusting communication between you and faculty and you and anyone else in the college?

Beau: Yeah. Conceptually, it's not rocket science, right? You're talking about communication, transparency, collaboration. Deflecting credit. I think a lot of what makes provost successful is when, even if it's their idea, they give others credit for it. Those sorts of formulas, those sorts of characteristics. You have to be a good listener. You have to be empathetic. These are the things that build credibility and build political capital, so that when you decide to do transformational change, you've built up enough in the war chest to be able to use it.

I'll give you an example. One of the things that was critically important to us was the idea that we could change the service system here at Skidmore. COACHE was instrumental in helping us to understand that there was great faculty dissatisfaction with our service system. This is a transformational change. We fundamentally changed after a year's worth of conversation with lots of other people, transparent, being collaborative, I would go back to the faculty and tell them updates on where we were. We changed it to what we call a service cycle, where for three years in between sabbaticals you have to be in the service system, so you have to be part of a committee. But for the additional two years in between sabbaticals, you're out. And when you're out, nobody can ask you to be part of the service system.

So we fundamentally changed that service cycle. The only way to get there was through the transparency, collaboration, communication. Credit sharing and so on, that made it possible for us to think about different ways to structure our service system.

Pat: And that is certainly a big change. If only because smart people recognize who is going to be doing the service and what's really important to us, even if we're providing a benefit to some of our colleagues, others are going to have to pick it up. So yeah, that's comprehensive change, not just one that benefits a handful of people.

Let me come back to a thing you mentioned a little bit before and I think we've also talked about in the past, and that's the challenge of how do you carve out space, and I'd say time, to really think creatively about a vision for change and in fact to nurture that?

As you've mentioned, in the typical case for a provost, the day is full of keeping the trains running and getting the day-to-day done and can easily eat up all the time and energy you might have for thinking bigger or into the future.

What strategies have you been able to develop that hopefully help you at least have some time, some energy to devote to those bigger picture topics?

Beau: I think you have to prioritize it. And it sounds so simple as you know, the idea that you prioritize what we would describe as these transformational changes, these big changes, these visionary moments, I think you have to prioritize it in your day-to-day or at least week to week life.

If you allow yourself to get overwhelmed by just keeping the trains going on time, you'll never have time to do this sort of thing. So what I would do is I'd literally have my administrative assistant carve out some time for me every day, if not every day, certainly every week, where I could sit and reflect on where we were with some of these large transformational changes.

I'll give you an example. At one point, COACHE had demonstrated to us, we had used the COACHE data to demonstrate that one of the biggest frustrations, again going back to the service cycle, one of the biggest frustrations we had was that faculty did not enjoy being chairs of departments. They thought that being a chair of a department was onerous, taxing, not rewarding enough and so on.

Pat: Yeah. Very unappreciated. That's right.

Beau: Very unappreciated. I took that COACHE data that faculty had seen lots of times and I said, okay, how about if we try, what I called the divisional dean model, where we have five divisions at the college. We have the natural sciences, social sciences, humanities, arts and pre-professional program. And I said, can we imagine a situation, can we imagine a model where there's one leader, divisional dean of each of these divisions. And I had the time to craft the model, using people around me. It's always great to have really smart people around me and I had really smart people around me. And we brought it to the chairs and they roundly defeated it. They roundly rejected the idea. That said, I had enough time. I had built in enough time to be able to present that. And I didn't take that as a loss. There was no ego there. I took it as a victory that they did not want that and that we ought to do something different.

And what we did, we implemented the associate chair model to take some of the pressure off the chair. So now every department has an associate chair to take pressure off.

So COACHE helped us get there, but I had the time to be able to craft a really good presentation about the divisional dean model that ended up being rejected, but ended up in a good place.

Pat: What I like about that is, again, from my experience, it also illustrates a few other subtleties of kind of you put a new idea on the table. Okay, that wasn't the one everyone got on board with, but it also illustrated that we could do this

differently. If you don't like the idea we put on the table, let's find something else different.

And sometimes I think, it sounds like in your experience, that almost breaks the log jam of we can't do it differently. Okay, you don't like this different idea, what other different ideas are there?

Beau: That's right. In that one situation, we had some resources that we had available to be able to pay associate chairs and it worked out well.

Pat: That's a really good example. So let me, since we've talked about frankly success stories, without trying to be negative, often in the conversation around change comes up the topic of resistance, whether individuals or groups resistant to change.

I am sure you have encountered this in the various things you've done at Skidmore.

Is there any overall strategy that you've adopted with regard to at least addressing resistance, I won't say overcoming, but addressing resistance to change?

Beau: Yeah, I would take this in kind of compartments.

One is faculty resistance, but also I would suggest that there's resistance from other constituencies. And sometimes the most interesting resistance comes from constituencies you don't expect.

One of the major projects that I oversaw was the building of our \$160 million science building. We designed it in the beginning of my term, and construction had started by the time I ended the term, my time in the office. That said, there was resistance on all three fronts when it comes to other cabinet members who didn't think this was as big of a priority as I thought it was. Board members who were worried about the price tag.

And so, what I came away from that experience understanding is that you've got to meet those resisters where they are, because the faculty resistance wasn't about price tag, it was about office size or lab space or things like that.

And the cabinet members were about institutional priorities. Should we build an athletic facility as opposed to a science building? And the board members were worried about price tags. So you've got meet the resisters where they are and not assume that everybody's resistance is the same.

Change requires you to be nimble in those moments and to speak different languages to different constituencies. We were successful on that one, but there were fair number of times where my administration was not successful in dealing with one or all of those constituencies.

Pat: I am also hearing a little bit of an element of your previous comments around communication about acknowledging that those are legitimate concerns. They maybe should not carry the day, but that's a thing to be worried about. You're right.

Beau: Absolutely. And the other thing, Pat, that I'm sure you encountered when you were leading these institutions is, the question of "can you change your mind?" So a lot of chief academic officers will come in and they'll put their feet in the ground and claim territory without being willing to see that there might be a better way to get somewhere.

And so ego plays an important role. I was always trying to check my ego at the door and figure out a way in which others could change my mind. And nine times out of 10, whatever initiative we were trying was better because of the input from all of these constituencies.

Pat: Well that's a really valuable attribute, which as you point out, some individuals struggle with, but being able to let it not have to be your idea, sounds like you have found really, really valuable.

Beau: Yes, definitely.

Pat: Beau, you left the role of provost in 2018, and some of our listeners might be saying, but he didn't live through COVID, didn't have to deal with that. It's really not the same world now as it used to be. What would you say to those people?

Beau: I think there's some genuine authenticity to that criticism. I do think COVID shifted things in higher ed, so that it was a different landscape. And in particular, I think when you think about the foundational or these sort of pillar changes that have come around in the last five years since I've been a provost. I would not just include COVID. I'd also include a lot of schools went through budget constraints, partly because of COVID. A lot of schools are seeing an uptick in student unrest and protest and that sort of thing. So I do think it's a bit of a different landscape than it was when I was a provost.

That said, I think the recipe for success is still the same. Communication, transparency, collaboration, these buzzwords, and they're buzzwords for a

reason. It's a little clichéd for a reason. But these are the building blocks of a successful chief academic officer, a successful period of time, leading the institution, leading the academic side.

So I would emphasize that the landscape might have changed, but the recipe for success is still exactly the same as it was back in 2018 when I left the position.

Pat: In fact, as it sounds to me like your description, we might say that recipe's even more important of, how do you prepare for the unexpected? And obviously if it's unexpected, you can't prepare for that particular event, but to the extent your campus is trustful and open and communicating, you're as prepared as you can be.

Beau: And when you think you've communicated enough, communicate more. It's all about making sure that people feel valued and heard and part of the conversation.

Pat: Exactly.

Let me not quite shift gears, but a little bit. So it's been a few years since you were in the position as provost. Now you're back in the faculty. What was that like? You probably had other possibilities. How did you think about that transition out of the administrative role?

Beau: I thought differently about it than it actually played out, right? So it was a bit of a humbling experience and again, checking my ego at the door. It was humbling, because few people cared what I thought anymore, literally on the day after I stepped down, I was done in January of 2018 and communication went silent. And I thought, wow, I have some insight into, and there are some things that I had started, some initiatives that I had started that were kind of midstream. But the reality was nobody cared what I thought anymore. So the transition was more humbling than I thought it was going to be. I thought actually, I'd play a little bit more of a role.

So I made the right choice Pat, not to go somewhere else. And many chief academic officers have opportunities to go somewhere else, whether it's presidencies or provost elsewhere. I decided I didn't want to do that for a couple of reasons, right?

At the time I was in my mid-fifties, and I thought that it might not be better, the grass might not be greener elsewhere. And I thought largely about the long-term consequence of leaving. I couldn't imagine giving up my tenure line position at

Skidmore, because I just didn't want to go back to the faculty at another institution.

And so was there part of me that wanted to maybe continue being a chief academic officer elsewhere? Sure. It was outweighed by the reality that what I have here is a pretty good gig. And so I decided to stay at Skidmore because I would've had to give up my faculty position by going elsewhere. These are just family decisions, individual decisions that each chief academic officer has to play out. And the reality is, I think I made the right decision in staying at Skidmore.

Pat: Well, that's really great to hear that it's worked out well for you. Because of course, in the moment it's never quite clear exactly what the years will bring. So that's great to hear as well as your thinking process to get there.

So a few final questions. If you could give yourself one piece of advice, what piece of advice would you give yourself as you started your career as provost at Skidmore?

Beau: The piece of advice I would give myself is nothing you do as a chief academic officer is going to be linear. That is to say, there will be times, virtually every change that one makes, there are going to be moments where different influences, different power centers, different voices come into the mix and you have to be able to pivot.

It's not as, if you can imagine, say, curricular change. Let's take that as an example. Curricular change, starting at one point and ending linearly at another point. We had to make so many pivots when we did things like curricular change and strategic planning and middle states accreditation and so on.

I wish I had been better at understanding that it's not a linear process, that it is much more chaotic. It took me four or five years to kind of realize that any plan that I had put in place was subject to be torn up and start over again.

So that would be one thing. The other thing that I would say is, so much of my time was spent trying to enhance and advance the ideas of faculty that sometimes I neglected other constituencies, like the board and other cabinet members and I wish I had been able to keep all of those balls in the air and keep my perspective on the bigger picture more often. But that's hard to do. Generally, I'm proud of what we did at Skidmore, under my watch, but I could have definitely done some things differently.

Pat: Well, that's true for all of us, but of course there are so many hours in the day to be able to do what you can, where you can. Sounds like great advice. Can't resist asking though, given what you learned about the, I wouldn't call it chaotic, but unpredictability of some of the plans, does that change the way you made plans?

Beau: Yes! What I would've done early on is kind of scripted what I imagined things were going to happen. One month, three months, six months, 12 months down the road. And by the time I got towards the end of my career as the chief academic officer, I didn't script more than a few weeks in advance.

Pat: We'll see what happens.

Beau: Exactly, that's another thing that comes with experience, right? So you now know how to pivot and lead change towards a successful outcome, even if you didn't script more than a few weeks in advance.

Pat: Yeah, my experience is that's a not-so-subtle learning for even an entire campus is, be less focused on confidence in the plan, and more focused on confidence in ourselves in the process. So a pivot's not a loss. A pivot is, oh, we got smarter and we'll do it differently.

Well, thanks so much Beau. 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 coach study next?

Beau: Oh, that's a great question. thanks for asking it. And I'm going to go off on what I think COACHE would say is a little bit of a radical tangent. Because COACHE of course, as you know so well, COACHE studies most of what is important, if not all, of what is important in terms of job satisfaction for faculty and COACHE is the best in the business that way.

But what I think would be really interesting for COACHE to spotlight, even if they're not studying it, is what I would describe as the Thomas Kuhn paradigmatic changes, right? Kuhn famously argued that science doesn't evolve gradually towards truth. The paradigms of science are not constant. When someone offers a radical solution to some wicked or intractable problem, often there's a paradigm shift, right? A seismic scientific revolution.

I think we need a Kuhnian paradigm shift in higher ed. And what I specifically mean by that is, I think the way we go about business with the faculty has run its course.

So let me give you an example or two, right? Remember, you'll remember, I don't know, it was maybe seven or eight years ago when Pomona College made headlines by adding to teaching scholarship and service, adding a diversity element to their tenure process. All faculty had to advance some diversity initiative in the classroom in order for them to satisfy the standards or the requirements for tenure. That was a huge deal when Pomona did that. What I think is important is, I think we need to kind of shake up the traditional paradigms and I'll give you an example. There is study after study of groups out there, groups of faculty who have a steeper hill to climb when it comes to, say tenure.

Whether they be women in science or faculty of color or international faculty. There are studies that say they have a steeper climb than I do as a white male. And yet, most colleges will still use the same formula to evaluate all groups, whether they have this steeper hill to climb, because of bias or not. I think we ought to eliminate, or at least, rethink the radical egalitarianism that dominates higher ed. And if COACHE could spotlight that by having some of these case studies on these kind of radical changes in the way in which we do business in higher ed, it would be amazing.

Pat: All right. That seems like a great suggestion.

// Outro //

Pat: Well, with that, let me wrap up. That's our show. I really want to thank you for joining us, Beau, and encourage our audience to check out the show notes for the transcript and links to any resources that were mentioned.

Thanks for joining us and I really appreciate your participation in the COACHECast series and for sharing your insights with us.

Beau: Thank you so much, Pat.

Pat: Join me next time when we'll speak with Dr. Lisa Sullivan, Provost and Dean of Faculty at Mount Holyoke College. I'm Dr. Pat Farrell. This is COACHECast. See you next time.

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