

COACHECast

S. Ep. 4 // Dr. Lisa Sullivan, Provost and Dean of Faculty, Mount Holyoke College

// Intro //

Pat: Hi everyone, I'm Dr. Pat Farrell. You're listening to COACHECast. Today I'm thrilled to be speaking with Mount Holyoke College Provost and Dean of Faculty, Lisa Sullivan.

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The opportunity to hear those different voices, to make them visible in processes that have garnered trust, it's a critical element for institutional improvement.

Pat: Stay tuned.

// Main chat//

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. I'm delighted to welcome Lisa Sullivan, Provost and Dean of Faculty at Mount Holyoke College.

Lisa has been in this role since July of 2022. She previously served for six years as Vice President for Academic Affairs and the R. Michael Shanahan Dean of the Faculty at Harvey Mudd College, as well as a Professor of Economic History. As an economic historian, Lisa's research focuses on the question of meaningful work, and she has written on faculty career satisfaction, the political economy of utopian communities, and work in identity.

Lisa has been at the helm of a range of change initiatives, many of which I hope we will learn more about today.

Lisa, welcome.

Lisa: Thank you very much. I'm looking forward to it.

Pat: To get us started, as you look back at how you've led through change at various times in your career and at several institutions, is there a particular change initiative that really stands out to you, and why?

Lisa: I think the most exciting changes are the ones that are institution wide and really touch institutional culture. So I was fortunate at Harvey Mudd to lead a reaccreditation team that found itself at the kind of leading edge of a fundamental transformative moment for the institution. Reaccreditation is not always that kind of vehicle, but in this particular case, the team, in one of its very earliest meetings, stumbled on a theme, which was healthy excellence, that proved a key to unlocking an entire set of initiatives around improved work life balance for faculty and staff, a better understanding of work commitments in the classroom for students.

Ultimately, accreditation takes a couple of years to unfold. We were able to involve almost every person at the college in one way or another, our Alumni Association, our Board of Governors in the effort, which ultimately called for some policy changes and a real deep institutional re-examination of what it meant to commit to the work. And that was particularly exciting. So everyone involved, fundamental change around something that had been hidden in plain sight.

Pat: So this sounds from your description, something where almost the pieces were there and it took a little bit of work to coalesce them into sort of a cohesive theme. I don't know if I have that wrong. So in some sense the change was perhaps already underway but not recognized as such. Is that a way to think about it?

Lisa: I think that's right. I think sometimes, the moment of change is when the connective tissue is recognized. So there are these needs and inclinations across an institution. There are pockets of interest. There are a variety of different kinds of commitments in different ways. And there's a moment in which they all become visible simultaneously.

And it was really wonderful for me and for my team, which was led by an extraordinary director of institutional research, to be able to put in place those final moments of data gathering, analysis, synthesis, and decision making that were part of a reaccreditation effort, which was ultimately seen as a really wonderful, joyous, institutional moment.

I can't promise that every reaccreditation effort will look like that.

Pat: For a lot of people that feels more like paper pushing and filling in, ticking boxes than it does kind of a moment of discovery for the institution, so that's really exciting to have made it more of a moment of discovery than simply managing the academic bureaucracy.

Well, you've completed now two cycles of the COACHE Faculty Job Satisfaction Survey when you were at Harvey Mudd, and have now started working with a COACHE at Mount Holyoke.

Through your work with COACHE at Harvey Mudd, you successfully built a connection between data, needs, and solutions, and the results in implementing several change initiatives.

What were some of the challenges in putting that together and doing that, and why do you think that particular process was valuable, even in spite of those challenges?

Lisa: So anecdotes are very powerful and they feed institutional narratives that can create real resistance to change. I know this to be true. It's clear to me that this is true.

And one of the advantages of drawing a community into processes of data collection and data analysis and data transparency are the opportunities to bring to the fore perspectives that are silent. Or to disrupt majority opinions that are resistant to change, or simply to bring into the light a missing need.

And at Harvey Mudd, and it's clear this will be true at Mount Holyoke as well, the opportunity to hear those different voices, to make them visible in processes that have garnered trust, it's a critical element for institutional improvement.

And so at Harvey Mudd, one of the sets of voices that we were able to hear very clearly through the COACHE survey were the voices of untenured faculty. While I think the prevailing institutional narrative was that the process of acquiring tenure was transparent and low stress, the data showed us something very different and because it did, we were able to make some important changes that we were able to see improved satisfaction for faculty, diminished stress levels from one COACHE survey to the next.

I think the same will be true at Mount Holyoke, where there's a history of participation in the COACHE survey. There have been signals around things like improved support for research that we're already able to attend to. We're very excited to be embarking on the next survey with a new set of questions that will help us bring things to light.

And I think a key here building institutional constituency support for the methods of data gathering. And I think COACHE does a lot to help institutions make clear its value. But there are also other ways in which an institution can develop a culture of data use and data acquisition. Starting with local groups that have specific questions, putting the power of an IR office at their disposal.

At Harvey Mudd, we were able to unlock some time use studies among students that gradually served to build a kind of confidence in the process that we saw had some strong positive spillover effects.

Pat: I like how you started your answer, because that has been my experience as well. While anecdotes are powerful, they tend to come from only a subset of a group, faculty for example, and are perhaps articulating only a certain portion of the of perspectives, and others get kind of lost if we're going to rely solely on anecdotes.

So I like the way you began that, and I totally agree that the kind of building more nuanced view of data perhaps gets people away from not so much just the anecdotes, but allowing those to exist, but recognizing there's a lot of untold stories if we only go with the loudest voices and the most articulate storytellers.

That's great.

So, as you started to mention a little bit, Mount Holyoke and Harvey Mudd are very different institutions, but both have very strong unique missions. How has your approach to leading and driving change differed between these two institutions and why?

Lisa: So Harvey Mudd, as you may know, is a STEM institution in a liberal arts context, a member of a consortium. Mount Holyoke is a gender diverse women's college. On the surface, you might expect that the missions would be very different, and they are in some ways, but it's the similarities, I think, that are most striking to me.

Two very student-centered, mission-driven, faculty-research-forward institutions, both with visionary presidents in place. And so as I thought about this question, it really was clear to me that the difference is the one that resides in me, and there's a big difference I've come to discover between being an insider provost and a provost from outside of the institution.

And there are definitely pluses and minuses, assets and challenges in each of those. Coming into the dean's position at Harvey Mudd after many years on the faculty department chair's position, chair of the faculty, I really knew the institution quite well, I felt. And I probably did have a holistic sense of lots of the institutional concerns, and I certainly had good networks of communication that I could rely upon in the faculty and elsewhere.

All of those are strengths, but they are also blinders in some way, because all of those networks are the ones that are built from a position. So a position as a historian, my close colleagues, a position on the faculty rather than the administration. So all of that set of lenses carries forward, and I think I was able to accomplish a lot at Harvey Mudd, because of great collaboration with colleagues, but there are limitations into what I would see, I think, on the basis of where I came from.

Of course.

Pat: In terms of size, faculty size, student size, how different are Harvey Mudd and Mount Holyoke?

Lisa: Mount Holyoke is about twice the size of Harvey Mudd.

Also situated in a consortium. Some of the same consortial advantages and concerns. Facilitating faculty collaboration, student cross registration, those things are the same on the two campuses.

Pat: Did you find that, particularly at Harvey Mudd as a sort of an insider moving up into positions, as you say, the dual-edged sword, you knew people, but they knew you as a colleague, and now you weren't exactly a colleague? Is that problematic, or does that turn out to be not particularly difficult?

Lisa: I fretted about that when I took the position, but I would say it was a great stepping stone to a lot of collaborative endeavors. And I think I was already very much in a kind of collaborative mix at the institution and had led in some other ways. So it felt in many ways like a very natural transition.

I think the question for me is whether very sharp, institutional, revolutionary, radical change can come as easily from a homegrown leader. And I'm not sure about the answer to that. I think there's also the question of where an institution is and what it can accomplish.

Pat: For certain, and where it really institutionally thinks it wants to go, aside from where perhaps you as an individual would like. I'll ask in a little while more about developing a next generation of leaders, but that's one of the things that I hear people worry about is, I like my colleagues. If I'm an administrator, they're not my colleagues anymore.

Lisa: And that's very clear to an external dean. You're an external provost. You come in, I think you have the advantage of fresh eyes. You have the advantage of being able to ask the naive questions, because that's what you have. You have the questions about how things work and why. And there are some advantages to that position.

I think you see your way to opportunities for institutional change. And you also carry with you a toolkit of experiences, things that have worked and things that have not from a prior institution.

What you don't have are the strong networks of collaboration and communication, but it seems to me, my experience has been here, that building those is in itself a kind of opportunity for a provost that lets you see things that you might not otherwise see.

Pat: For sure, for sure. Well, when we spoke earlier, you shared that Mount Holyoke College recently refined its mission statement. And while the mission itself remains constant, there will be a fairly substantial re-examination of the curriculum and departmental structure.

Have you learned some things about change management from the past and your past experience, either at Mount Holyoke, Harvey Mudd, that will help you in this significant effort looking forward?

Lisa: I hope so. I hope so. Mount Holyoke is poised for a period of exciting change. It seems to me there's been a shift in leadership. There's a brand-new president who I think is going to be an extraordinary force for good at the

institution. All of us in higher ed are in this post-pandemic moment where we're coming back to campus and I think that gives fresh eyes to a lot of us, seeing what's going on at the institution. We have a strategic planning effort on the go. All of those things suggest it's exactly the right moment for stock taking. And we see it both within the faculty governance structure and in the president's office. It's willingness to embrace the moment of planning and to look for the next initiatives that will lead the institution in its history.

So all of that's great for a provost who's interested in supporting change. And I really think what I've learned is that the first role of my office is to look for ways to reach into the infrastructure and make sure that it's ready to embrace what's needed in those moments of change as the initiatives are identified.

And so for us, at Mount Holyoke, that means looking to rebuild some numbers in the faculty, taking a look at our physical plant and making sure that it's ready for what's next and all of those things, so that the foundation is solid when the ideas come to us.

I think beyond that, responsibility of the provost is to create these moments for collaboration and synergy, providing resources for them, the space for them, which can be physical spaces, or space within a teaching schedule, so that people have the opportunity to do the thinking that will signal the right elements of what's next institutionally.

I think the last thing is helping an institution decide what can be let go.

So these moments of change and looking forward, institutions of higher ed tend to be overburdened by things that they don't want to relinquish and there can be some assist there too. What is it that we need, what do we need as individuals in our work to set aside as we look forward? What do we need institutionally...

Pat: I agree, that's a huge challenge, particularly even the language where people imagine what we're saying is let's stop doing things that are bad and I find, no, no, we're going to stop doing things that are really good, because we have things that are even better that we want to do.

I wanted to ask a little bit more about change, just from your perspective and given what it sounds like you've embarked on at Mount Holyoke.

What would you say are sort of high-level indicators of progress? You know, for this has got to be a multi-year effort that sometimes takes a while to get moving and engage people and begin to see some result and yet, you and

everyone else are probably looking to say, okay, here's how we know we're making progress.

What do you look at that tells you you're making progress?

Lisa: I think in this early stage you're looking for these kind of signal projects that come to fruition and shine the light on what's possible going forward. These new synergies in areas where people thought that things could not be done.

So, I will say my favorite project of the moment of this sort is happening in Mount Holyoke in a restoration of the old fire station. So on the edge of campus there's a historic building that had fallen into pretty grave disrepair. It was certainly slated for consideration for demolition, but through a side of connections between our Professor of Architecture and our facilities folks and our Center for the Environment and Sustainability, we've been able to launch a project around that space.

The Professor of Architecture, Naomi Darling, and her students are planning a net zero restoration of the space that will ultimately become studio in architecture for our students. It's now shining light at the edge of campus, a building that was, I think, emblematic of the pandemic years, when many things were not touched is now a kind of bright white, soon to be showcase building at the edge of campus around a synergy across constituencies.

And I think it's these kinds of moments where new partnerships are developed, things that had not been seen to be possible are possible and something beautiful comes out of it.

So those are the things I think we're looking for right now, while in the background, some of these broader, curriculum-wide, institution-wide changes are being planned.

Pat: That's really cool if you can catalyze new and creative thinking or innovation, that perhaps would not have happened absent kind of this sort of overall rethinking of what the mission is and you're seeing early indicators of that. That's really exciting.

I mentioned briefly before, what I would call the challenge of drawing people into leadership positions, like yourself and others in higher education.

Has this been on your mind, as sort of one of the things as a senior leader responsibility? And how do you see your role in helping to prepare and support the next generation of leaders?

Lisa: I think the higher education landscape and the challenges it presents for leaders has just been very much in the public view of late. I can imagine that many people who might have been considering a presidency or a provost position are having second thoughts, after the resignation of Penn's president and all of the news that's been swirling as we tape this.

I think that's really just a view into a situation that has become increasingly challenging for higher education leaders for some time, that the job is not simply about institutional improvement and vision creating, but it's about interfacing with all sorts of changing demands that relate to higher education in the broader landscape.

And so it's a daunting job. I don't think it's become less daunting in the pandemic years. So drawing people into higher administration, seeing the potential for doing good, for accomplishing great things is very much on my mind. And the responsibilities for those of us who are currently in leadership positions of making sure that door is open to the next generation of leaders.

I think there are a couple of responsibilities there that we want to attend to. One is access. I think higher education benefits from inviting as diverse as possible a set of new voices to the table for consideration of what's next. And that can be setting up very open recruitment possibilities into positions of junior leadership, associate deanships, and department chairships and the like. But I also think it means providing the mentorship and training that makes those individuals successful in the position, so that they get a good chance to feel what it might be like to achieve.

Pat: That is a challenge. Let me go a little further on that, at least certainly what I've experienced, is finding ways for folks to get both the experience, the practical experience, as well as the personal experience to say, "is this something I like and feel I'm successful at?"

Have you put together specific programs to try to help do that, to open those kind of doors up, even if it's just to give folks a taste of what senior leadership looks like?

Lisa: We're fortunate here to have the five college consortium collaborating around a set of leadership training opportunities for folks stepping into their first leadership positions, either as department chairs or someplace in the deanship ladders. Sessions that unite a whole cohort of 20, 30 new folks from across all five of the campuses here with mentorship, provided as part of the program, as well as speakers and opportunities to collaborate over a couple of years.

And that's a fairly new program, but our early assessments suggest it's going to be very successful in helping people enter those positions feeling well supported, with the knowledge they need to launch themselves, but also with a cohort of folks within a small geographic circle ready to sit down and have a cup of coffee and talk about what's going on.

Pat: Yeah, that collection of peers who are wrestling with the same issues you are and no one has an easy answer can be really valuable, even if that's the only conclusion is, this is difficult and none of us have an easy result, but at least we all understand it's difficult. That's really valuable. That's great.

Lisa: I think that's right. I think that the sense of being in community around these challenges is critical.

Pat: Yeah, I feel like there in the past there was sort of the impression that some people knew how to do these jobs easily and the rest of us were struggling. I think the reality has come to be much clearer that, no, this is hard for everybody.

So, following a little bit along that line, looking back, if you could give one piece of advice to someone in their first week as provost, whether at any of the institutions you've been at or elsewhere, what would it be?

Lisa: I think if you would ask me for advice for the first month, I might have a different answer. But I think in the first week, you should take a moment to enjoy the fact that you've reached that moment in your own trajectory and settle in and listen for a while.

Listen to your staff, listen to the first people who cross your threshold, because there's going to be a moment very soon. If you're lucky, after the first week, when the concerns come to your door and the tasks are there to be done, but there's a moment right at the beginning where you can just exhale and listen and get your bearings. And having done that, I think is very helpful.

Pat: So since you raised it, let me pursue that. How about the first month then? So if the first month is a little different from the first week?

Lisa: I think every leader in higher education needs to be out and having conversations with as many members of the community as possible. Insider or outsider, what you need are the set of views of institutional opportunities and challenges that you can begin to assemble a picture of what the community is looking for you to accomplish.

Pat: That can be challenging because you mentioned this before and my interpretation of some of the challenges in leading universities and colleges and universities are there are a number of constituent groups, all of whom feel they need or deserve to have a pretty strong voice in what happens. So hearing from them, but then somehow reconciling what probably are going to be pretty divergent views sometimes about what the world should look like. Have you found a way to sort of manage that, kind of multiple constituents, but they aren't necessarily particularly well aligned in their views of what should happen?

Lisa: I think those conversations, again, insider or outsider, can help identify the groups of people you want to sit around a table and give a task to. And so, if you hear, as I've done here, that there are a lot of diverging views about the use of space, then there's a moment to bring those folks together around a planning project where there's an opportunity for something to be done, there's something real at stake and reaching some reconciliation of views and establishing priorities is what's looked for.

And I think those opportunities to collaborate around real outcomes are one great way to bring those perspectives into conversation with each other. And not everybody, will get exactly what they want, but I think seeing how that process unfolds and being a legitimate player in it, that's an important thing.

Pat: I totally agree that, you know, real projects, in fact, where you say, when we're done, we have to have one result, not multiple results, and get somewhere from these wide variety of viewpoints to frankly choosing what we feel is the best single way to go forward. You're right, that's serious work.

Is there anything you'd like to plug or brag about? How can listeners find you?

Lisa: I'd love for people to keep an eye on what's going on at Mount Holyoke over the next couple of years as we enter our implementation of strategic planning phase, and you can find me on the Mount Holyoke College website.

Pat: Excellent. Well, I really appreciate your conversation. There is one last question that we've asked all our guests in each episode, and I'd love to ask you that.

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

Lisa: That's a great question, and I think it speaks to the way that COACHE has involved many of us in shaping what's next.

I would love to see COACHE look carefully at the post-pandemic effects on faculty sources of satisfaction. It is my sense, to come back to anecdotes for a second, my sense is that the ground is shifting in terms of what faculty look for as sources of satisfaction in their careers.

I'd be interested in whether that's true and if it's true, are we looking at an effect that's transitory or enduring?

Pat: All right. That would be an interesting thing to think about, both as you say, with time, that is post pandemic, generational shifts, new generations of faculty joining institutions, and perhaps changes in attitudes of even those who have been there. So that would be a great topic.

Pat: Lisa, thank you once again for joining me on COACHECast and for sharing your insights with us.

Lisa: Thank you so much.

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.

Tune in for our next episode when we'll speak with Dr. Susan Carlson about her time as Vice Provost for Academic Personnel and Programs at the University of California.

I'm Dr. Pat Farrell. This is COACHECast. See you next time.

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