

COACHECast

S. 1 Ep. 5 // Susan Carlson, Professor Emerita, UC Davis and Vice Provost Emerita, UC Office of the President

// Intro //

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

Today I'm thrilled to be speaking with Susan Carlson, Professor Emerita at UC Davis.

Susan: It's really hard work. You're changing culture in this work, and you're often redefining academic priorities. There's a lot of sensitivity when you raise issues of maybe everything's not right.

Administrators come and go, but policy stays.

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 be joined today by Susan Carlson, Professor Emerita at UC Davis.

Susan has over 20 years of experience in a wide range of higher education leadership positions, including Vice Provost for Academic Personnel and Programs in the University of California, in the Office of the President, and as Associate Provost for Faculty Advancement and Diversity at Iowa State University.

In these positions, she led major change initiatives, and I'm excited to hear more about them and her extensive experience in this space. Susan, welcome.

Susan: It's great to be here with you, Pat.

Pat: One of the reasons we're so excited to have you as a guest is the powerful work you've led with faculty diversity and how it has resulted in real change. I'd love to hear more about that.

Susan: I want to start by saying it's really hard work. You're changing culture in this work, and you're often redefining academic priorities. I have so much I could say, but I wanted to focus on a couple of key factors to me in succeeding. I think everyone knows and understands it takes committed leadership. It takes time. This doesn't happen overnight. But I wanted to focus on the importance of policy and the importance of funding these efforts. And I think I can best do that with a couple of examples.

My first example is from my time at Iowa State University. And I was privileged to be the PI on an NSF Advanced Institutional Transformation Grant.

Many of the listeners will understand what those were, but that this was over 3 million dollars from the NSF to enable us to put together programming and activities that would help us increase the diversity of the faculty at Iowa State University.

The external validation and the accountability of that funding was really important. It also enabled us to recruit the people we needed on campus to take part. Deans, department chairs, faculty leaders and to get the really visible support of the president and the provost, all of those were crucial. And it did enable us in the end to bring about real change at the department level.

My second example is from the University of California where I saw the importance of depending on policy at the same time we were funding things appropriately. So the two together.

UC has a very powerful policy that credits faculty for the work they do on contributions to diversity, equity, and inclusion. It's been in system-wide policy since 2005 and it's really foundational for all the work we do at the institution in this realm.

So that policy underscores everything. The program I want to talk about was a program that began in 2016, this is the funding part, when the state of California, the legislature and the governor allocated to UC 2 million and said

specifically, spend this money on increasing the diversity of the faculty, we're disappointed at your numbers and you've got one year. We all said, you can't do that. You can't change this in a year, and you certainly can't change it on 10 campuses with 2 million dollars. But we did it and in fact that incentive initiated a program that's still going, and it's in its eighth year, that is changing the nature of the institution's practices and is allowing us to both bring in and retain a more diverse faculty.

Two keys I'd say to the success. One is that we put together a competitive proposal process for allocating that money so it didn't get spent equally among campuses, but on very specific programs where we thought we could succeed. And the second is we built a community around the program. Not only the individual programs, but we created events where we brought people together from across the campuses.

Pat: You mentioned NSFs, institutional transformation advanced grants, we've had those as well. And one of the subtle points, which I'm sure you emphasized as well, is while it's wonderful to have additional money, at the end of the day, when NSF money has been spent and we've built programs and so on, it's going to be our own money, and we're going to have to figure out how to reallocate our own priorities to continue what we wish to continue.

And in some ways, for me, that's where the real rubber really hits the road, is we're not spending someone else's money. Was that a key part of your work or did that, you have to wait, be patient and let that evolve?

Susan: That sustainability question is always there. And I always felt that as one of the leaders of these programs, it was my responsibility to collect information that would allow us to make the case for sustainability. So keeping data, recording other details of events and support was going to help us make the case, because it's always hard. There's always competing priorities.

Pat: I totally agree, but one of the other things you mentioned, which I, again, I think many of us have found useful, is along the way you're always building a larger cadre of supporters, helpers, enthusiasts, and hopefully those voices which maybe started out as only a handful are now overwhelming when it's time to make your case to the provost or whoever about continuing the program.

Susan: And I think when you have the long view. You can also see that some of those fairly junior faculty who might have participated in these programs end up being leaders in other realms.

They become deans, they become department chairs, they become vice provosts. And then you've also got people who are committed to these goals who are leading programs that you wouldn't call a diversity program.

Pat: So what advice might you give for, let's say someone else who might be listening to us and saying, wow, I'd really like to see that on my campus, maybe I don't have the advantage of an NSF grant. Any one or two kinds of pieces of advice you might give to others who'd say, I want to get this rolling at our institution.

Susan: In addition to thinking about policy you might need ways to secure funding, both internal and external, I would recommend keeping this work in the academic affairs, in the realm of the provost.

Obviously you need partners outside of that, particularly if your chief diversity officer is outside of academic affairs, but keeping it integral to the academic work, I think is absolutely essential.

And then second, I'd say take care of the people doing the work. It's hard, it's stressful, it takes time away from other things those faculty and staff might be doing. So release time, teaching release, summer support, even sometimes administrative stipends make a difference.

Pat: Totally agree. And even celebrating a little bit, because sometimes the wins don't happen as quickly as you'd like, so when you get them, make sure all the players know that their work is appreciated.

Susan: I agree completely.

Pat: That's great. I'm going to move on a little bit to a few different topics.

In your career, you've worked at at least two major campuses, at the campus level at Iowa State and system level at the UC. Looking back at your career, how did you approach those changes?

There's personal expectations as well as what I would call cultural expectations, as you move into that, and how did you look at those changes and prepare yourself for moving into different levels and in fact different institutions?

Susan: Well, I never started by saying I want to change things. So I've had to think about, what was I trying to do? And I think the way it always developed was I would be doing many other things and recognizing, wait a minute,

something's getting in our way here. Getting in the way of quality work or getting in the way of the mission.

And then I target that, because obviously it needed to be changed. So things like family accommodation issues, partner accommodation, which we all know is a big one, diversity issues, definition of research, the increasing importance of multi-disciplinary, trans-disciplinary research. And where do those faculty end up at the institution? And core academic issues, even the best pedagogies, community-engaged scholarship and I even spent a lot of time thinking about faculty misconduct in this realm.

And so the thing I would always ask myself, is why would anyone want to be an academic administrator if you didn't want to make your institution better? It wouldn't be worth it. It wouldn't be worth all the work.

Pat: I can't disagree with that. I think you're right. If you don't feel like that's something, not only that's important, but it's a way I can contribute.

Susan: Exactly. In terms of also managing change, I also found COACHE a really important partner. When I was at Iowa State, we did the Faculty Satisfaction Survey and what COACHE did was it really allowed me to see things, to recognize things I couldn't recognize on my own. When we got the results of the Faculty Satisfaction Survey, we called a big meeting of deans and chairs. We brought in the COACHE leaders at the time to meet with the deans and chairs and really kick off our discussion of how we were going to use these survey results on campus, to improve things, to listen to the faculty.

But as it turns out, this meeting with the deans and chairs was very contentious, and the vocal deans and chairs said, this is not about my department. this is not about my college. We're just fine.

Pat: Haven't we all heard that? There may be a problem elsewhere, but not in my area.

Susan: Exactly. I recognize, there's a lot of sensitivity when you raise issues of maybe everything's not right. And it was a very powerful moment for me and for the COACHE folks who were there with me. And then we also got a finding in the results we got that our assistant professors felt the promotion and tenure policy was confusing.

So this was like putting a dagger in my heart, because I had spent so much time explaining to people why we had this great policy that they would profit from.

But as it turned out, it was a policy that was very flexible in defining the faculty work that we would reward, and to the assistant professors, that was confusing.

So we got this feedback once I recovered. We changed everything about the way we talked to faculty. So getting that outside input was truly, truly helpful in doing the work.

Pat: I've had the same experience, and as you say, we can dislike the data, get angry that, no, that, I don't like what I'm hearing. But there it is. It's not just stories or anecdotes or collections of two or three people telling me what's going on. And to your point, even with our best efforts, tenure's a classic one. We think we've made it so clear and so evident. Well, yeah, to me, but I'm not the target. I'm not the correct audience for that. Well, as you've then changed sort of levels, did you notice any significant change in both what you were able to do and how you're able to do it?

You moved from now campus level at Iowa State System, level 10 campuses, huge organization. Was that a great thing? You were able to do more with more people? Challenging? More bureaucracy? How was that transition?

Susan: I think I can answer that in two ways. It was a huge change.

The first is that I hadn't understood the way the scope of the University of California would affect my work. So it's a giant system of 10 campuses. There are 20,000 faculty members. Managing policies and processes and compensation and policy for that many faculty was different, because what I was doing out of the Office of the President was enabling the work of the campus and interpreting the work for some of our stakeholders, like the regents or the legislature and the state of California.

But I also realized it is, in fact, by definition, a bureaucracy, the Office of the President. But I realized that one of my roles was to learn how to defend academic priorities to non-academics. How to speak a different language, to people doing risk services, or federal and state governmental relations, or financing the retirement pension, dealing with the media presence. and I needed to find the ways so that they would understand, and everyone wanted to understand the importance of the academic priorities.

But, that was a good new challenge for me as well. And the chance to contribute on a scale like that was really, truly extraordinary.

I can imagine, for many of us inside universities, we use our own language and assume, well, everyone understands what we're talking about, and they clearly

don't. And that's a bit of a shock when we talk to outsiders who say, I don't know what you're talking about. And the other thing, the Office of the President is located in downtown Oakland. It's a very vibrant urban location, but it's not a campus, so you realize how important that, you know, rubbing shoulders with students all day.

Pat: I was going to say, wouldn't you miss that, just seeing students around campus?

Susan: Truly! And so I made it a point whenever I could to be on a campus. I talked to people where they were working, and that made a big difference as well.

Pat: So, in a previous conversation, when we had talked before, you had mentioned that throughout your career, and we've heard a little bit about some of the things you did at Iowa State and then at UC System, but throughout your career you became more deliberate about building a network to be able to accomplish the things you wanted to do.

Can you tell us a little bit more about that? How did you do that and how do you build and maintain those kind of connections from project to project and even as you move maybe from location to location?

Susan: So again, I can't claim that this was all pre-planned, but it's been really easy to look back and to see the processes that I was using, and I used them actually pretty consistently. The biggest one that stands out to me was finding good opportunities for in-person meetings. I mean big, like day long meetings, like a conference, a seminar, a round table, even a training session.

Those always had a particular subject to cover, might've been about faculty recruitment or about faculty salary equity. We did meetings on that, on department climate, or on promotion and tenure policies. But a key byproduct of that was, of course, being with the people. And using that academic propensity to look for multiple ways of thinking about something to actually build ideas and to build partnerships across campuses. This became really important in the many different kinds of diversity work we were doing in the 12 years I was at the UC Office of the President. It turned out that those meetings had two main functions beyond the kind of content of the day. The first was to serve as a support system. Again, really hard, often stressful work. You're battling the status quo often and when you find out there's somebody else doing the same work facing the same things, it's just like, Oh, thank you. I'm not going crazy in the way I'm thinking about this.

But then the other one we were just talking about, we could talk about sensitive issues and explore a range of ways of dealing with them, which is pretty hard to do on email and memos and more formal ways.

So, the meetings themselves actually, I found is one of the best ways to build networks. In a system, there's also built-in networks that you can use and I tried to leverage that. There were meetings of all the vice provosts from the campuses and we did a lot of work together.

At Iowa State, one of the best networks, and it's unusual, I believe, that I worked with were the department chairs. There was a council of department chairs across all the colleges and they were so valuable for us in the provost office to get to talk to them, not just to the deans. Now the deans weren't always happy about that, but it gave us a way of understanding what was going on at the department level as well as at the college level.

Pat: We had the same at Lehigh and I think that I appreciated hearing from the chairs as provost. I think they really appreciated, not that they didn't think the deans were working on their behalf, but I think they also appreciated the chance to sort of tell me whether it was to yell at me or to appreciate something, what they were thinking.

The other thing I just want to pick up that you mentioned, which I'm hearing about. Creating networks is, you're taking the opportunity, whatever the topic of the day was, build a network that then was going to, not necessarily in a planned way, was going to turn out to be useful on the next topic, on the next issue, or on something else.

Now you had a good personal connection, you had shared some ideas, and so when a new topic came up, I need these people's help, you already had a network in place, and whether that was intentional and just sort of a natural thing. That sounds like that turned out to be really valuable for you, as you increase the level and scope of the things you wanted to do.

Susan: Yeah, it did. And I haven't mentioned explicitly the Academic Senate, which at UC has both a campus presence and then also a system wide presence. Again, there's a built-in network, but working with and in that network was really important and quite valuable.

Pat: So, networking, whether you're intentional or not. Not necessarily a cocktail party but working with other people is critical.

I'm going to change topics slightly again. You had mentioned earlier in our conversation, the notion of policy and how important policy, particularly you mentioned with respect to DEI, but I'm sure with respect to other things as well, how important it is for policy to be helpful in making sure that change persists and is sustainable over time.

Could you talk a little bit about how you might go from an initiative to that actually then would become formalized in policy that hopefully persists well beyond any of us?

Susan: Yeah, that, and you, you took my punchline, which is... Administrators come and go, but policy stays.

Pat: I was hoping we'll go, we'll go pretty soon!

Susan: Yes. I ended up being pretty deliberate about that and partly by chance, I ended up as a brand-new full professor being on a task force that was rewriting the promotion and tenure policy. So I was hooked from the beginning. But the thing I like about it, my two institutions, the policy development process is a partnership between faculty and administrators. It's not imposed by administration, which in my experience doesn't work very well. And it's a tough battle on many issues to find a place where faculty will accept it and administrators are doing their job of maintaining certain important goals of the institution. But knowing that it's going to be a give and take.

We had policies at UC that took us three years to change, because there was so much back and forth, and we had a very formal process where anybody could respond, and every response was read and considered and we figured out what was the exact language that was going to move us forward. It's worth the time and the payoff is really huge.

Pat: I totally agree. I think for many new administrators it sounds like it's an endless amount of work for very little payoff. But I think you're right. It takes a long time. But it takes what it takes. And if we can persist and help guide a process towards something that feels right, as you say, on the faculty senate side, administrative side, that is a real success, even though it may take way longer than we thought.

Susan: Indeed.

Pat: We've talked about a lot of the challenges and pressures associated with senior administrative positions. So, an obvious question, perhaps for anyone who may be thinking about this is, how do you do this? How do you maintain

balance in the rest of your life, so this doesn't become completely consuming? Keep up your energy for doing this work. We mentioned some things take a long time.

Can you talk a little bit about that?

Susan: I'm not sure I was the best at this, but I was always aware of this, and maybe my life was more integration than balance and integrating with my husband and two children who were being raised, two sons who were being raised during this time.

Crucial to me was what my family called talking time. Talking time was the end of the workday, back in the days when everybody went away to work, back home or went away to school. And my husband and I would have a glass of wine and it was like a debrief on the day. The successes, the irritations, the oh my god moments. And it was a transitional space, I think, away from what was often stressful or hugely rewarding events of the day to the family.

It was wonderful for my husband and me and often went on a long time. Our sons were always invited and usually found other things they wanted to do. And then I have to admit that I have a wonderful husband who supported my being able to do this work. And I can't credit him enough for helping me succeed in what I was doing.

And then the other thing we would do as a family is time away, vacation is real time away, not just, you know, a few hours at night. But, our favorite place to relocate was to a beach in a small town in Mexico. And it was very different and you didn't have to talk about the same things, and it was wonderful that way.

Pat: I think both of those are really valuable, I think, for a lot of people that finding a way day to day to adapt to the challenges and not have them both particularly disappointments, but even the victories consume you and as you point out a little bit of a time maybe as a reminder the place is not going to collapse if I'm not there.

Susan: Exactly, yeah, exactly. And then I would always think when I was away, how come all these things happen when I'm gone?

Pat: Well, there's that.

Susan: But then I realized, well, of course, they also happen when you're there, but you just expect them to happen, so they don't go away, but....

Pat: That's part of your normal day when you're there, that's right.

Susan: Exactly.

Pat: So, we've just touched a little bit on the array of experiences you've had over many years as administrator. For those of our listeners who might perhaps either be new or even thinking about moves into senior administration, if you could give one piece of advice to someone who's thinking about, or perhaps new as a senior administrator, what one piece of advice might you give them?

Susan: So I know there's always a advice books are full of, you know, your first 90 days and make a splash, and there's a lot to be said for that, and you do have to be yourself in a pretty visible way, but I would also counsel to get out of your office. Physically get out of your office. Be sure as you're making your mark, you're part of the community. You're now part of it, not outside of it. And understand what's going to be hard to do or easy to do. And at an institution, an academic institution, there are always people who will not agree with you. And listening to them as well. It's really important to listen to them.

Oh, one other thing I'd say is being a faculty administrator means, of course, that you've come up through the faculty ranks. And I think faculty have a view of their workplace that's pretty unique in seeing pretty much everybody as a peer or a potential peer. So students are our potential future faculty. When you see or have a graduate student who's way smarter than you, your job is to help that person along and it happens all the time.

Pat: My objective is to get grad students who are smarter than me!

Susan: Exactly. And to bring that into the administrative role with a lot of responsibility, I think is important too. And people really appreciate when they know you're not thinking only in terms of some kind of a hierarchy, you're up somewhere at the top.

Pat: I think to me that really echoes what you mentioned before about getting out is, to a certain extent letting people see you, your personality. They'll read your emails or hear the official stuff that comes out. But I find it useful also to let people at least get a glimpse of what you're about. What are you really interested in. What really drives you. Because I feel like in many cases, as you say, that, that helps people begin to understand, okay, I'm just beginning to see where some of these things are coming from or why we're focusing on this instead of that. So I really agree. It maybe sounds uncharacteristic, perhaps, but I think that's really good advice.

Well, I think we're coming to a close here, so I want to thank you very much for the conversation and for talking with us today. I do have one last question, which we're asking each of our guests, so I'd like to wrap up with that.

You had mentioned before, and I know you've worked closely with COACHE in the past, as a collaborative, working to improve the faculty experience and support leaders in this effort, what should COACHE study next?

Susan: Well, this is related to all the change issues we've been talking about, but I think at the top of my list, and I hope it's on the list for COACHE would be digging into the criteria by which we judge faculty accomplishment and the scope of what we reward. And I'm thinking about what we call service, which in most cases is not appropriately valued and disproportionately allocated.

And a lot of what COVID taught us, which is the major disruptions like COVID have disparate impact, particularly it happened for women and for underrepresented minorities. And I'm really taken right now by a concept called achievement relative to opportunity, which is being talked about at my institution and at others as a way of making sure review processes are equitable.

So, getting into that realm, I think, is very important.

Pat: All right. There you go, COACHE. You heard that? See what you can do!

Well, thank you very much, Susan. It's great to have had you with us and get a chance to talk. Before we completely close, let me invite you to tell us what are you working on now?

Susan: For me, a very good time to answer that question. I've just finished a manuscript and it's focused on the diversity work I did while I was at the UC Office of the President. so its title will tell you, where it goes. It's called the Art of Diversity, a Chronicle of Advancing the University of California Faculty through Efforts in Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion 2010 to 2022.

So I'm in the process of working with the California Digital Library, which does online open access publishing to publish this, because I really hope it will be valuable to others to read about how we did this work for a certain period of time. And to see that there was real change, but what kind of work went into that.

Pat: Wonderful. I look forward to reading that because I think a lot of us could learn a lot from the work you've been able to do it in UC and UC system. So thank you for that.

Susan: Thank you.

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.

And Susan, thank you once again for joining us on COACHECast.

And that pretty much leaves me to wrap up by saying, thanks for joining our very first series of COACHECast. It's been my pleasure to be your host these last few episodes and thank you to all our guests. These are challenging and exciting times in higher education. I really appreciate these kinds of candid discussions about change and how to lead change into the future.

For our next series, COACHE's very own Dr. Todd Benson will be your host. I'm looking forward to tuning in, and I hope you are too.

For now, though, I'm Dr. Pat Farrell. Thanks for listening.

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