

COACHECast // S2 Ep003 – Dr. Nancy Brickhouse

// Intro //

Todd: Hi, everyone. I'm Dr. Todd Benson, and you're listening to COACHECast.

Today, I'm thrilled to be speaking with Vice President and Provost at Baylor University, Dr. Nancy Brickhouse.

Nancy: As a research university, if you're going to do serious research that's going to make an impact on the world, the world's problems are interdisciplinary in nature.

You got to learn where you are and you got to learn who your people are. And only then can you gain their trust in a way that will help them aspire to do the things that we need faculty to do.

All leaders have to find that balance between providing guidance, but also providing some independence and ownership.

Todd: Stay tuned.

// Main Chat //

Todd: Welcome back to COACHECast brought to you by the Collaborative on Academic Careers in Higher Education, or COACHE for short. We're a research practice partnership based at the Harvard Graduate School of Education. Each episode, we're going to be joined by a guest from across the higher education sector as we explore the faculty experience and leadership in higher education.

Again, I'm your host, Dr. Todd Benson, the executive director and principal investigator at COACHE. I'm delighted to welcome Dr. Nancy Brickhouse, Vice President and Provost at Baylor University. She's been Provost there since May of 2019. Nancy previously served as Provost at St. Louis University. And prior to that, she spent 27 years in various faculty and administrative roles at the University of Delaware.

It's great to have you here today, Nancy. Welcome.

Nancy: Thank you. It's a pleasure to be here.

Todd: So your discipline is in chemistry and in science education, and now, you're here as the Provost at Baylor, a very high profile Texas university. Very briefly, can you tell us about how you got to where you are today and that crossover into administration?

Nancy: Well, first of all, I am a native Texan and I'm an alumnus of Baylor University. I did my chemistry degree here, following the completion of my undergraduate degree, I actually taught school for a couple of years, physics and chemistry and physical science in a little rural district just east of Dallas, and it was a very transformative experience for me. It's where I really learned the kind of difference that can be made through education. You can literally change the trajectory of a kid's life with education and I found that exhilarating and challenging.

I knew I needed to know more. So I went back to graduate school and I chose Purdue as my graduate school, in part, because I still very much identified as a chemist and they had education within the chemistry department. And so it allowed me to kind of marry those two things. And, so I finished my degree there, went to the University of Delaware, where I worked in the School of Education and established a research profile, and actually it was a department chair who tapped me on the shoulder and said, "you know, I think you'd be a good administrator." Prior to that, I don't think I'd ever thought about it, but I did find the work very meaningful. Administration is a place where you can actually see difference as a result of your actions. So that's really how I came into leadership. And then, after 27 years at Delaware, I left and went to St. Louis University for four years and then back to my alma mater.

And I will say there's something special about serving your alma mater. I always felt a little guilty about leaving the place where I grew up. And so now at the end of my career, it feels good to come back and give back.

Todd: That's a fantastic story. And I really love the fact that somebody had to tap you. Somebody had to tell you that you'd be good at this. It's such a flawed piece of the leadership pipeline. I think that, we really do need to be intentional about those sorts of things.

Nancy: Absolutely. I think a lot of the times, some of your best leaders don't even know it.

And one of the things that we as leaders can do is recognize those qualities of leadership in other people.

Todd: And quite frankly, I see it in the team that works with COACHE. I see it in the folks that you've been developing that I've had a chance to watch them for the last three, four years. And it's fun to see because they clearly have a lot of respect for you, but they also feel like they have a lot of trust from you.

Nancy: Yeah, there's a delicate balance there, that all leaders have to find that balance between providing guidance, but also providing some independence and ownership.

Todd: Absolutely. So you've led two different religiously affiliated universities, Baylor and St. Louis University before that. Having previously served in leadership positions at a public institution, the University of Delaware, what are the strengths or challenges of leading a religiously affiliated institution?

Has it changed the way that you lead?

Nancy: Yes and no. I think the real strength of serving at Baylor is that we don't have a hard time articulating our mission and our distinctiveness within the higher education landscape. We also participate in the Great Colleges to Work For Survey and if you look at the results on that survey, we knock the top out of the question of "how does your work contribute to the mission of the university?"

Todd: That's fascinating.

Nancy: And I think that, part of that is that we talk about the mission a lot and we reference it a lot. And I think that's the reason why people come here. I don't think that people just accidentally get here and find out what our mission is.

We're very intentional about it. Now the challenge is that you have a common ground in terms of a well-articulated mission, but there's still a lot of diversity of thought in terms of what that means in practice.

People think that... Baylor has a very diverse faculty body and they don't think all alike. And so you have to navigate that. And provide guidance, yet at the same time, recognizing that diversity of thought is also a strength of being a university in today's times.

Todd: Yeah, they don't have to be conflicting values. And that's where, I think it's challenging to navigate it just as you said, but it's really important. Are there aspects of your experience that you think others at different kinds of institutions could learn from about how you lead your faculty?

Nancy: Well, I do think that coming back to this aspect of really understanding the mission of the institution, of what's really special about it.

That is important work to do, I think in today's leadership roles, particularly in the competitive space that we're in. All universities have missions. Think of the land grant universities. I mean, I was at Delaware for 27 years, a great land grant university. I love that land grant mission.

But you need to really lean into that. And develop, I think, what it means to, in the case of a great land grant, it's about economic development. It's about jobs in addition to providing students with opportunity. It's about social mobility is at the core of who they are. Leaning into your mission is important regardless of what kind of institution you are.

Todd: Absolutely. So you've shared that Baylor is made better by the fact that diversity of thought and experiences exist. How do you stay accessible to faculty to ensure that everyone's voice is heard?

Nancy: Well, I do my best to show up at faculty events and I actually really enjoy those events and learning what the faculty are doing. It's one of the best things about the job

And so you don't want to give that up. That's the reason why we all went into academia to start with. So I think that actually has, although my intention to going to these kinds of events is largely about my own curiosity, I guess strategically it does help in terms of being an administrator because they see you there and they see that you care about the work that they're doing and that you're learning the work that they're doing and they appreciate the attentiveness.

Todd: Appreciation was the word I was just thinking of. In that, maybe it's a quirkiest thing, but about faculty is that they study one thing so intently. And it's hard to match that kind of enthusiasm, but by showing up, I think it conveys to them that you're just as excited to learn from them as they are to share what they care about.

Nancy: After this podcast, I'll be headed over to the library where we're hosting a Readers Meet the Author event with one of our history faculty members, regarding a recently released book, where we've got people coming from all over the campus to talk about her new book. And so, those kinds of events, again, they're the fun part of the job, but it's where you also tend to meet up with faculty and you learn what their perspectives are and hear from them in a way that values the work that they're doing.

Todd: Baylor University has just completed the COACHE survey for the second time, once in 2019 and again in 2023. And now you're working through results and action plans. There are three areas identified in the previous survey that you've made great improvements on, including decision making across all levels, mid-career faculty uncertainty, and the experiences of underrepresented minority faculty. Can you talk a little bit more about the strategies that you use to achieve those improvements in at least one of those areas?

Nancy: Well, let's talk about decision making across all levels. The COACHE survey showed us what the faculty were experiencing was that decisions got made, and they weren't quite sure who made them and when they went into effect. All universities have a hard time with communication.

Any kind of hierarchical institution is going to have some challenges. But, there were some low hanging fruit here in the case of Baylor, in that it had grown very quickly and it was still kind of operating like a small college, where everything was based on relationships. One of the things that we did, this is going to sound hopelessly bureaucratic, but we had all of the departments write bylaws.

They didn't have them. And so, how could they know how decisions were getting made, because none of it had ever been committed to writing? And the feedback that I'm getting from that was that they actually enjoyed that process of actually committing to writing, this is how we do things in our department.

We also just finished a new shared governance policy that we're submitting for SACS. That was also useful in that it basically committed to writing; these are how decisions are getting made. We shouldn't leave these things implicit. We should be explicit about them. And I think that's really the main thing that we did there that helped. We also just finished a strategic planning process and the process of this new plan met with, we had 93 listening sessions across campus that included, and we often had 50 or 60 people in each listening session, where we asked for their contributions to the strategic plan. We also solicited white papers from across the institution, had 113 submissions.

Todd: That's amazing.

Nancy: It was, and each of these submissions had anywhere from one to 30 authors. It was really quite an inclusive process. And I think that helped as well for people to feel like they contributed to the plan in a way that was meaningful, that their voices were heard. They heard their voices in the document. And that's what we were really aiming for.

Todd: That's pretty amazing. To get that level of engagement, we just don't see it as much in higher ed. People feel too busy, too stressed, too overworked. But again, maybe it's that connection to the mission that people really do feel like being part of Baylor means doing some of this hard work.

Nancy: I think you're onto something there, because the sessions did not sound radically different from one session to the next.

There was clarity in terms of purpose and there is clarity in terms of opportunities for how we could get better. And it was inspiring in a way to see people come together, around these big ideas and the future of Baylor.

Todd: And the other piece, I guess I would add to that is the act of asking is part of how you define your community. The fact that you created all those spaces for people to contribute, whether it be a, you know, town hall meetings or contributing to a white paper, all say you're willing to listen and that I think does something for faculty.

I think it does it for students and staff as well. As you try to build a sense of community, so kudos to you. Really great work. Think a little bit for me about the idea of taking the COACHE data and turning it into strategy. What's the process like at Baylor and how do you roll it out? How do you think about it?

Nancy: First of all, that is not a straightforward process. I mean, as good as the COACHE data are, they don't tell you directly what to do.

Todd: That's right.

Nancy: One of the things that we did was we created committees to kind of do a deep dive into the areas that we wanted to improve on and make recommendations for action steps that we could take.

I will tell you the one that was most concerning to me, was the experiences of our underrepresented minority faculty. So what the COACHE survey told us was that our underrepresented minority faculty were experiencing Baylor very differently than the faculty at large. I almost wondered, are they at the same place?

Todd: Yeah.

Nancy: I mean, it was really stark, and it was not clear to me exactly what to do about that. There are things that you can do that are symbolic, but I will say, I thought a little bit about my own experience of being outnumbered. When I was

an undergraduate student in chemistry at Baylor, they were not very many women in chemistry at all. And the feeling of being conspicuous it's just harder to feel that sense of community when the numbers are lopsided.

There wasn't anything in the COACHE survey that told me that, but I couldn't help but think if maybe the sense of belonging would get better if they weren't alone, if they just weren't quite so alone. And so we worked really hard over the last several years to do a couple of things.

One was simply get the numbers up and we have hired much more diverse faculty cohorts these last four years than we've ever hired before, particularly in those units where they're hiring a lot of faculty, like nursing. The faculty look totally different today than they did five years ago when I arrived.

We really worked hard on that. One of the nice things about this was the faculty pretty much agreed on this, that this was a problem.

Once it was pointed out...

Todd: And the data was a component of that?

Nancy: Yeah, this is what the data said. This isn't my opinion, this is what the data are saying, is that our faculty, our minority faculty don't feel included in the way that others do. So what are we going to do about that?

We also created more, employee resource groups within human resources to also provide ways of creating community.

We started a Latin America initiative. Those faculty have coalesced in really wonderful ways. And I will tell you that one of the things, this may sound a little odd, but we've made a lot of progress, if you just look at the numbers, and the data are much better. But if you also look at the very last COACHE survey question, which was something along the lines of, what is your least favorite thing about working at Baylor University? Something like that. And the most commonly made comment was lack of diversity.

And so I think that's really wonderful, because once this rolls out to the faculty in the spring, I can say, look, the faculty are still not happy with where we are. Our work isn't done yet and the faculty are the ones who are on the hiring committees.

Todd: How are you going to fix this, Provost Brickhouse? Uh, well...

Nancy: No, so I'm kind of like, you know, we're all on the same team here.

Todd: Absolutely. So I want to just circle back to the, strategic planning for a second and just ask, can you tell us more about how the COACHE data intersected some of the strategic planning, either the process itself or particular outcomes that were important to the strategic plan?

One of the areas that was identified in the 2019 survey as an area of weakness was interdisciplinarity.

I mean, we weren't actually weaker than other universities on this particular item, but it was still lower than most everything else. And it's important. And we did not make any progress. In fact, well, I don't know if we actually didn't make any progress or if faculty standards for what we should be doing went up. If you get my drift?

Todd: Two potential framings of the problem.

Nancy: Yeah, I like to think it may be the latter, because we've reached R1 status now. And so as a research university, if you're going to do serious research that's going to make an impact on the world, the world's problems are interdisciplinary in nature, and you've got to be able to figure this out.

And one of the things that we've been talking about a lot at Baylor is the importance of taking on big problems. It's easy to be satisfied with working with little problems and solving them and maybe, two people in the world care about them. There's a place for that kind of research, by the way. I don't want to pooh pooh it, but I don't want people to be satisfied with that being the only thing that Baylor does.

So I think that people are now thinking bigger. And they're wanting to take on bigger problems, and so their dissatisfaction with the fact that we still don't know how to do interdisciplinarity very well is more of a problem for them.

In the first, survey in 2019, there were still faculty who when I said, well, we're not very good at interdisciplinarity, their response might've been, okay, so what? Now I think the response is, yeah, that's a problem.

We need to get better at that. So that's the one issue I'll tell you on, on the 2023 working groups, they already know that this is going to be one that we take on, because our ne, strategic plan, Baylor in Deeds, there's only four commitments and one of those commitments is dedicated to interdisciplinary work.

So, it's not a small item in the new strategic plan.

Todd: Well, and it's not an easy problem to tackle. As you said, when we look at the mean scores for all of our benchmarks, interdisciplinarity is always the lowest one. It just across the board, you can be a rock star on tenure and promotion. You can be killing it with mentoring, but interdisciplinarity, most universities really struggle with what that means and how do we support and engage faculty in that kind of work.

Nancy: Well, stay tuned!

Todd: Season three!

Nancy: That's right.

Todd: So, we've talked before on COACHECast about how there would be no university without the faculty, but we're all here in service to the students. You and Baylor's chief business officer created Baylor's first strategic enrollment management plan, which has brought faculty and staff together to commit to a shared set of goals to support student success.

Can you talk a little bit more about that? Had you done something like that before at a previous institution, or was this a first time for that kind of an initiative?

Nancy: At my other institutions, we always, they both had strategic enrollment management divisions and they were all fully housed within academic affairs. And the situation at Baylor was different, because the undergraduate admissions reported up through the business office. And so, what we were really trying to do with this strategic enrollment management plan was to bring people together across divisions of the university to work on the enrollment management writ large, so that admissions and student success and financial aid and all of the colleges and schools were on the same page and learning how to talk to one another.

That was the main impetus for that. We're in the process of now implementing that plan, and we have made considerable improvements in terms of our overall retention rates as well as our four-year graduation rates.

Todd: That's fantastic. And again, another data-centric project where you can really see the improvement over time.

Nancy: That's right.

Todd: So let's talk a little bit about the idea of storytelling and data. How have you been able to convey the story of your institution and champion the needs of your faculty to stakeholders like your board of regents, especially because in some cases, members of the board lack an academic background or firsthand understanding about the academic workplace.

So how do you think about telling that story to them?

Nancy: One of the most positive responses I get from the board is when I bring faculty together to present their work to the board, to talk about the nature of their research, talk about their teaching. I think that the board tends to really enjoy learning from the faculty. This may sound a little odd, but the same thing that I enjoy, they enjoy.

They want to learn about their work and we were again, moving over the last several years, we've been ramping up our research activities. And so for them to continue to buy into the kind of hiring that we were doing, first-rate scholars, they needed to hear the nature of the research that they were doing. And that is nearly always positively received by the regents.

I guess we try to make it about, the work of the faculty and help them understand the work of the faculty from the faculty themselves, so that I'm not always just doing the translation.

Todd: Yeah. Yeah. And that makes an awful lot of sense.

So looking back, if you could give us, one piece of advice to someone in their first week as Provost, what would you tell them?

Nancy: I think I would say focus on listening.

There'll be times for you to talk, but being a good listener is more important than being a good talker. Try to get an understanding of, I'm going to use a Catholic term here, but I love it. It's called *charism*...the nature, the soul of the place. You got to learn where you are and you've got to learn who your people are. And only then can you gain their trust in a way that will help them aspire to do the things that we need faculty to do for the sake of the institution.

Todd: Absolutely. Is there anything else you want to plug or highlight? How can our listeners find you, whether it's on social media or how can we keep up with the good work that you're doing?

Nancy: Well, I tend to not, I don't get involved with social media. So...

Todd: No TikToks for you?

Nancy: No! We use more conventional sources of media. I'll just say it's a great time to be at Baylor.

Todd: Yeah.

Nancy: We have a clear identity. We have the ability to generate the resources we need. And people want the best for the institution. It feels like we're all rowing in the same direction, so to speak. And we're making a difference in the lives of our students. Research expenditures have tripled in the last five years. The graduation retention rates are steadily improving every year. We're creating new programs. When I first arrived, there were very few graduate students. Now, one in four students at Baylor is a graduate student.

Todd: Wow.

Nancy: We've really managed a lot of growth during this time, and the COACHE survey has been really helpful, because it is one of the ways that we can listen to the faculty.

So here's the, one of the other big challenges with being a provost is that it's tempting to listen to those who are talking to you, without recognizing that you may not be hearing from everyone.

There will be certain faculty that will have certain complaints and they'll make those complaints known, but then if you ask, I wonder if this is a problem for anyone else? Well, that's when things like getting database information like you can get from COACHE is really useful. It means that you're not just attending to the loud voices, you're listening to all the voices, and that gives you a much better way of acting in a way that is actually addressing the needs of the faculty and helping them in terms of being productive at work. So I guess that's a plug, not just for Baylor, but also for COACHE.

And actually I would have to say one of the first things I did at Baylor was to say, I was hearing all these things, the faculty think this, the faculty think that, and I'm like, why don't we ask them? Let's see if that's really what they think. And so, it's been really useful in that regard.

Todd: That's excellent. I'm so glad to hear that.

// Outro //

Todd: That's our show. Thanks so much for joining us and be sure to check out our show notes for transcripts and links to any resources that were mentioned today. Nancy, thank you once again for joining me today on COACHECast and for sharing your insights with us.

Nancy: It's been a pleasure to join you today.

Todd: Well make sure you tune in for our next episode.

Listen wherever you get your podcasts and be sure to follow us.

I'm Dr. Todd Benson. See you next time.

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