

# INTRODUCING PRISCILLA NELSON

## — NJIT'S NEW PROVOST

THE WAY PRISCILLA NELSON SEES IT, HER APPROACH AS THE NEW PROVOST AND SENIOR VICE PRESIDENT FOR ACADEMIC AFFAIRS AT NJIT WILL BE STRAIGHT-FORWARD: “MY STRATEGY IS TO LISTEN, ECHO AND INTEGRATE, TO FIND OUT HOW WE’RE DOING AND TO MAKE SURE THERE IS INTELLECTUAL INTEGRITY TO WHERE WE ARE GOING.”

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Nelson arrived at NJIT in early May, after more than a decade with the National Science Foundation (NSF), a catalyst for and a champion of new ideas, like Nelson herself. She looks forward to being part of NJIT’s diverse and inclusive community, and to the opportunity to provide leadership and vision for the future at a university where learning, research, and engagement are holistically integrated into the experience of everyone on campus.

Not for a second does Nelson see technologically-focused institutions as having a narrow vision for where they are going — and certainly not NJIT. She says, “NJIT offers many opportunities to stretch and encompass areas beyond typical engineering, architecture or science. Opportunities abound for intersection with the humanities, social sciences, and economics as we consider where technology is going to take us as a society and as a world entity.”

Speaking about experiences that she feels prepared her for the multi-faceted position at NJIT, Nelson candidly says that they include dissatisfaction with aspects of her own education that “focused on the blackboard and questions in the back of the book for homework.” As a teacher, she was determined to do her best to create a more stimulating classroom environment. “I think part of becoming a better educator is to listen to students and realize that they are, in a way, your clients. I also think there is a lot more interest in fostering good teaching at the university level than there was 20 years ago, and that’s very exciting.” At NJIT, Nelson will hold an appointment as a professor in the Department of Civil and Environmental Engineering.

Nelson says that her first priority will be to learn about NJIT’s culture: “What’s working, what’s exciting, what people are doing that’s amazing.” As an enthusiastic advocate of open dialogue with individuals and groups throughout the university, she says, “I’m ready to hear the talk and find out what’s going on. I want to understand what the hopes are,



## A SUPER CHALLENGE

When asked about her greatest professional challenge, Nelson reflects on her experience as a consultant on the Superconducting Super Collider (SSC) project for the U.S. Department of Energy and the State of Texas —

*The SSC project was huge. My field of expertise is underground construction and, first of all, I had to work with the physicists to help them understand the underground environment for their purposes. Then I had to work with the State of Texas and figure out the politics, both the politics of the physics and the politics of finding the best site. I did this over an eight-year period, at the same time teaching*

*and bringing graduate students into the study of underground work, overseeing theses and dissertations, and meeting with people all over the country. It was total immersion, a complete learning experience, and I loved it.*

*But I didn't know what it would be like when I started. You begin your journey with some bravery and then keep running into things. 'Well, I don't know anything about that, what am I going to do?' You find out who does, which builds confidence. You don't know the answer now, but you learn what to do to start getting the information you need. That's a good philosophy to operate with, and I don't think I would have found that particular understanding of how to work if I had I not had been involved with the Super Collider. Actually, when Congress decided not to fund the SSC project in 1992, I was a changed person. I taught different kinds of courses when I went back to the University of Texas in Austin after a year's sabbatical, and I taught differently. When the opportunity came to join NSF, it also made sense to go and do that for a while. The SSC project was a life-changing experience. It was challenging, and at the beginning I didn't realize how challenging it would be. Maybe there's a little bit of naiveté necessary in taking big steps.*

what the directions are, by talking to people about the curriculum, about their lives and careers at NJIT.”

Coming to New Jersey, Nelson says, will also allow her to be a more active Mole. Yes, a Mole. She explains that her PhD involved tunnel-boring machines and that she has always liked interacting with contractors who specialize in heavy construction and engineers who build underground. “They’re a very special group, and about ten years ago I was voted a ‘Mole,’ a member of an organization focused on this work.” However, she adds that other obligations always seemed to prevent her from attending the meetings held in the New York Metropolitan Area. Now she’s very much looking forward to active participation in the organization and contributing to the field. Nelson says that studying real underground construction projects and dealing with the people who do the work is a very special experience. “It allows me space to think outside my box, which I really like to do.” ■

## PRISCILLA NELSON — A PROVOST'S PROFILE

### EDUCATION

- PhD, Cornell University, geotechnical engineering
- MS, University of Oklahoma, structural engineering
- MA, Indiana University, geology
- BS, University of Rochester, geological sciences

### EXPERIENCE

- National Science Foundation — Senior Advisor to the Director and the Directorate for Engineering; Director, Civil and Mechanical Systems Division; Senior Engineering Coordinator; Program Director, Geotechnical Engineering; Program Manager, Network for Earthquake Engineering Simulation Project
- Nuclear Waste Technical Review Board, appointed by President Clinton
- Professor of Civil Engineering, The University of Texas at Austin
- Major construction projects, including the Trans-Alaska Pipeline System and Superconducting Super Collider
- More than 120 technical and scientific publications