

# Japanese Language and Literature

*Journal of the American Association of Teachers of Japanese*

jll.pitt.edu | Vol. 56 | Number 1 | April 2022 | DOI: 10.5195/jll.2022.251

ISSN 1536-7827 (print) 2326-4586 (online)

## A Story of an Associate Dean in Higher Education in Uncertain and Challenging Times

**Kimi Kondo-Brown**

### **Journey to the Current Position**

I was born and grew up in Tokushima, Japan. When I was a high school senior, I wanted to get out of my hometown and go to a university in Tokyo to pursue my dreams. Unfortunately, that year my father passed away tragically, and it changed everything. I had to put my dreams on hold and do what I thought I should do: attending a low-cost national university in my hometown while taking care of my mother, who was a total wreck at that time. In the years that followed, she hoped that I would never leave her, but I knew that sooner or later, I had to live my own life and redefine my personal and professional identities.<sup>1</sup> A decade after my father's passing, I ended up in Hawaii. As of fall 2021, I have completed thirty-three years of service at the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa (UHM), the flagship campus of the University of Hawai'i System. UHM has provided me with great educational and professional opportunities to grow as a teacher, researcher, and administrator.

My career at UHM started in 1988 as a full-time Instructor of Japanese in the Department of East Asian Languages and Literatures (EALL). My responsibilities were primarily teaching and service to the department then. In August 2001, an opportunity to apply for the position of tenure-track Assistant Professor in Japanese pedagogy in EALL opened up, so I applied and got the job. After that, I spent approximately half of my time on research and the other half on teaching and service. I have taught everything from beginning-level Japanese-language classes to advanced graduate seminar courses on pedagogy, language education, and research methods for M. A. and Ph. D. students in the department while actively engaging in research endeavors. I also provided service at the institutional, national, and international levels. In 2006, I was awarded tenure and



New articles in this journal are licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 United States License.



This journal is published by the [University Library System, University of Pittsburgh](#) as part of its [D-Scribe Digital Publishing Program](#) and is cosponsored by the [University of Pittsburgh Press](#).

promotion to Associate Professor, and in 2011, I was promoted to Professor.

Between 2008 and 2020, I also served as Associate Dean of the College of Languages, Linguistics and Literature (CLLL) that housed six academic departments and several funded centers or programs such as the National Foreign Language Resource Center and the Language Flagship programs. I started as an “interim” associate dean, and in 2016, I had the opportunity to apply for a “permanent” associate dean position, and so I applied and got the job. In July 2021, I was appointed as Associate Dean for Academic Affairs in the College of Arts, Languages and Letters (CALL), following the merger of the College of Arts and Humanities, CLLL, and the School of Pacific and Asian Studies. With over 300 faculty members and 2,400 undergraduate and graduate majors in seventeen academic departments, CALL is one of the largest units at UHM, encompassing the study of the arts, humanities, languages, and area studies, with an emphasis on Hawaii, the Pacific, and Asia. An organizational merger of this scale in the middle of the pandemic has proven to be a challenge, to say the least. However, we are not alone, of course. For all of us in higher education, the past couple of years have required us to adjust our teaching, assessments/evaluations, and other educational activities to meet changing COVID conditions (Kondo-Brown 2021).

### **Challenges and Triumphs in a Leadership Role**

Triumphs are rare in administrative work, but there were some incremental successes that have given me a sense of accomplishment as a leader. In this section, I will discuss a few such accomplishments.

#### **Initiating a College-Wide Project as a New Administrator**

When I was an active and engaged faculty member in the department of EALL, it never crossed my mind that I would one day become an associate dean. I had not even served as a department chair. So, in 2008, when the CLLL dean contacted me and asked if I would be interested in serving as an “interim” associate dean, my initial reaction was NO WAY. However, my colleagues advised me that this would be a rare opportunity to learn how the university operates and that my Asian and international backgrounds would add diversity to the UHM administration, which is a good thing.<sup>2</sup> Also, there were other colleagues who said that I would be suited for the job and encouraged me to seriously consider the offer.

So, after giving some thought, I responded to the Dean that I would indeed be interested in the position. Since one of my specializations is

assessment/evaluation, I was particularly interested in working with departments to build evaluation capacity. In fact, a few years earlier, I led CLLL's efforts to assess the Hawaiian/Second language requirements (Kondo-Brown 2004). I told the Dean that if I were to accept the offer, I would want to initiate a new evaluation project. Specifically, I wanted to develop exit surveys to systematically get student feedback at the program-level across CLLL departments. In general, faculty are interested in student feedback on their programs, but in those days, none of the twenty-five B. A., M. A., and Ph. D. programs in CLLL had systematic procedures for getting student feedback at the program-level. Needless to say, a survey cannot evaluate all aspects of a given program, and the project I had in mind was not intended to do so.

The Dean agreed to support my interest (among other conditions that I discussed), so I accepted the offer. Shortly after being appointed as the interim associate dean, I started a conversation about the exit survey project with the department chairs. To get their buy-in, I explained to them how the project would benefit the departments. I also explained the logistics, i. e., how to gather and analyze evaluation data from their graduating majors (e. g., feedback on the program, student accomplishments, future plans, etc.) without excessively increasing faculty workloads (for details about this initiative, see Kondo-Brown, Davis, and Watanabe 2014).

I should note that this project was initiated when the university created a so-called "prioritization committee" to conduct a university-wide audit to reorganize or possibly terminate programs. Department chairs and program directors seemed extremely frustrated by the process, and their distrust of the administration seemed to be growing. So, to gain faculty buy-in for the CLLL evaluation project, we needed to make it clear to CLLL department leaders that the exit survey project had nothing to do with the university's prioritization process and that it was intended to support, not penalize programs in our College. Today, the exit survey system that started in CLLL remains a regular element of the program evaluation. After the organizational merger, this practice was expanded to other academic programs in the merged College (CALL) for program improvement and promotion.

### **Surviving Budget Crisis and Fostering New Developments**

During my thirteen years as a key member of the Dean's leadership and management team, I have worked closely with five different deans in making programmatic, budgetary, personnel, and many other decisions for

the College. During my time as a college administrator, UHM has undergone various state budget cuts, and those budgetary restrictions hit hard in colleges like ours, in which almost all of the budget is dedicated to salaries for our employees. For example, until the fiscal year 2011, CLLL had been in the black, but during the subsequent fiscal years, we were forced to draw down on the reserves to make up for shortfalls in general funds. At some point, CLLL had exhausted our carry-forward cash and ended up having a substantial negative net balance. Then, at the beginning of the fiscal year 2015, there was a change in the CLLL deanship. The new interim dean, the fiscal officer, and I had to continue working hard to balance the budget by taking some painful cost-saving measures.

None of those challenges was easy, but our efforts helped CLLL make significant budgetary progress. When the College's financial situation improved, we could not only fill some vacant positions but also set aside a modest amount of "Dean's Special Educational and Professional Development Funds" to support students and faculty in CLLL departments. We also created several research awards for faculty and graduate students to celebrate their research accomplishments and support future research endeavors. There was other notable progress as well. For example, our language programs have many faculty employees whose titles are "Instructor (I2)" in the University of Hawai'i faculty classification. They typically teach full-time and also provide various services to the department such as advising and curriculum development. However, even if they had taught full-time for a number of years (some for decades), they did not have promotion opportunities as "Senior Instructors" that come with a pay increase. In 2014, after having researched promotional systems for full-time language teachers at other universities, I discussed a possible in-rank promotion idea with the CLLL dean, who then reached out to other relevant deans as well as Assistant Vice Chancellor for Academic Personnel. They were supportive of our idea, which led to a few years of negotiations between the university and the faculty union. In 2018, I was thrilled by the news that the new contract for Instructors at UHM finally included a 4-step, in-rank promotion system that comes with a salary increase.

### **Advice for Future Leaders**

Today, higher education faces unprecedented challenges because of changing COVID conditions and financial constraints (Finley 2021). So, no matter which higher education institution one works for, the leaders are facing daunting challenges. My experience was no exception. In the past

two years, we have gone through the aforementioned large-scale organizational merger in the middle of the pandemic. The “harmonization” process of the merged college was made even more difficult by the subsequent system-wide budget shortfall, a hiring freeze, and curricular recommendations and suggestions imposed by the UHM’s budget committee.

Clearly, future challenges will continue, and current and future leaders will need to continue providing a supportive climate for our students, faculty, and staff as much as we can in these changing circumstances. To be an effective leader in an educational institution, especially during these uncertain and challenging years, we will need to build and maintain mutual trust and collegiality with our colleagues. Without them, it is impossible to maintain good working relationships with various stakeholders in tackling various academic, personnel, and budgetary issues and difficult conflict situations. Naturally, being a good team player is another essential condition for being an effective leader. I do not know any good leaders who are not good team players. All leaders are part of a wider leadership team that needs to work together to achieve common institutional goals through responsible practices.

Like many other associate and assistant deans in higher education, my job as an associate dean has been intense and extensive throughout the year (see, for example, Stone and Coussons-Read 2011). However, at the same time, it has been highly rewarding. For example, I have gained satisfaction from students and colleagues providing positive feedback on my service. I have also felt great pleasure in promoting and congratulating their successes. Of course, there are times when critical feedback from colleagues may hurt. As leaders, we all want our work to be evaluated positively. Nobody likes to be criticized for what they do. (That’s just human nature.) However, all leaders, including those perceived as the most successful leaders, sometimes have to make difficult decisions that do not make everyone happy. I would be surprised if there were any leaders who have never received criticism about something they did at some point in their careers. So, it is essential to learn to take criticism and manage to use it constructively. Also, it helps to have a support group with whom to share concerns and seek support when needed.

I conclude my story by talking about professional identity. Those who transition from a department faculty position to an administrative position at the college or university level inevitably need to cope with professional identity transformation. For example, White, whose study focused on

faculty transitioning to associate deans, stated that they “must also deal with their own professional identity as administrator versus faculty member” (2014: 3). For many of us who begin with faculty appointments and later join the administration, being an administrator may not be a professional goal, at least initially. After I joined the administration, my identity as professor in EALL and an academic scholar in the field has remained important. My administrative position did not stop me from publishing books and research articles, giving talks at conferences, and providing other professional services that faculty usually do. I would not have continued my administrative work this long if I had to stop my academic career or felt completely alienated from my home department or scholarly field of expertise.

However, I admit that, like many other associate deans, my research or scholarly productivity has declined due to demanding administrative work (see Saylor, Pedersen, Smith, and Cutright 2019). I do not regret my career choice, but at the same time, I do know that I could have contributed more to my field as a teacher and researcher if I did not accept the offer as an associate dean thirteen years ago. That said, for those who are currently considering a managerial or executive administrative position beyond your home department, it is important to know that it will profoundly affect your professional life and identity. I recommend that you pursue it only if you know that it will help achieve your long-term career goals.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> My personal narrative (Kondo-Brown 2007) describes in more detail the transformation of my personal and professional identities in those days.

<sup>2</sup> For example, according to the American Council on Education website, white people represent the vast majority of all administrative positions in American colleges and universities.

#### REFERENCES

American Council of Education. <https://www.equityinhighered.org/indicators/postsecondary-faculty-and-staff/proportion-of-white-college-and-university-administrators/>. Accessed November 20, 2021.

- Finley, Ashley. 2021. *Campus Challenges and Strategic Priorities in a Time of Change: A National Survey of Campus Stakeholder*. Association of American Colleges and Universities. <https://www.aacu.org/research/campus-challenges-and-strategic-priorities-in-a-time-of-change>. Accessed November 24, 2021.
- Kondo-Brown, Kimi. 2004. *Assessing the Language Component of the Manoa General Education Requirements: Report on the LLL Assessment Committee's 2002-2004 Assessment Activities*. Internal Technical Report. <https://drive.google.com/file/d/10Tw2ayikLPzFYakjhzOw2EIDfN1E1Xi1/view>. Accessed November 17, 2021.
- . 2007. *Ohana: Hawaii de mitsuketa jibun rashii ikikata* (Ohana: My way of life found in Hawaii). Tokyo: *San'ichi shobō*.
- . 2021. *Nihongo gakushūsha no tame no kyōka o kangaeru: Nyū nōmaru ni taiō-suru naka de* (Assessment for Japanese language learners under the new normal). Keynote speech paper presented at the 27th Princeton Japanese Pedagogy Forum, May 8, Princeton, N. J. <https://pjpf.princeton.edu/27th-princeton-japanese-pedagogy-forum>. Accessed November 20, 2021.
- Kondo-Brown, Kimi, John McE. Davis, and Yukiko Watanabe. 2015. Evaluation Capacity Building in College Language Programs: Developing and Sustaining a Student Exit Survey Project. *American Association of University Supervisors, Coordinators, and Directors of Language Programs (AAUSC) 2014 Volume—Issues in Language Program Direction: Innovation and Accountability in Foreign Language Program Evaluation*, eds. John Norris and Nicole Mills, 15–40. Boston: Cengage Learning. [https://scholarspace.manoa.hawaii.edu/bitstream/10125/69732/2014\\_01.pdf](https://scholarspace.manoa.hawaii.edu/bitstream/10125/69732/2014_01.pdf). Accessed November 24, 2021.
- Sayler, Micheal F., Jon Pedersen, M. Cecil Smith, and Marc Cutright. 2019. Hidden Leaders: Results of the National Study of Associate Deans. *Studies in Higher Education* 44 (7), 1119–1129.
- Stone, Tammy, and Mary Coussons-Read. 2011. *Leading from the Middle: A Case-Study Approach to Academic Leadership for Associate Deans*. American Council on Education Series. Lanham, Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield.

White, Gary W. 2014. First-Year Experiences of Associate Deans: A Qualitative, Multi-Institutional Study. *Research in Higher Education Journal* 22: 1–29. <https://www.aabri.com/manuscripts/131695.pdf>. Accessed November 24, 2021.