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Learning to Lead

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I am a professor of Japanese in the Department of Modern Languages and Literatures (MLL) at Lehigh University in Pennsylvania. I was the director of the Asian Studies Program from 2012 to 2021, and I was the MLL department chair from 2015 to 2021. I came to Lehigh to take a non-tenure track position in the mid-1990s when I was still ABD, and I took a meandering path to get to where I am now. It is my hope that through my positionality as a foreign-born female of color in American higher education, my essay will give some perspective to young female Asian academicians who are or will be in leadership positions.

Where I Began

After I finished college in Japan, I came to the United States to study at a graduate school. At the time, I was not planning to have an academic career. I just wanted to get out of Japan, see the world, and become fluent in English. My desire to go beyond Japan had a lot to do with my background. I was born in Osaka to a Japanese mother and a *Zainichi* Korean father.

My mother was very supportive when it came to my education. In fact, she really encouraged me to find a career that would be transferable internationally. In a way, her reasons were very ironic: she thought I was not marriage material because of my half *Zainichi* Korean background and my bookishness. I don't think she imagined I would find a partner outside of Japan, either. My father spoke English pretty well. He once told me that his English teacher told his students they should know their enemy through learning English. It was during the Pacific War, and English classes were banned in most schools in Japan. So, this was very unusual. After the war, my father did not take over his family business as he was expected to do as the first-born son. Instead, he became a jazz musician. He had a jazz band and performed on the US bases in Japan during the US occupation. I had a chance to talk with his musician friends when I was in college. They



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told me they got more gigs than other bands because my father spoke English. He thought knowing English was crucial in the postwar world. He sent me to a private elementary school where they taught English from the second grade. My parents had no objections to my coming to the United States to study after I graduated from college with a degree in English linguistics.

The first master's degree I received was a professional degree in cross-cultural communication. Somewhere in my mind, I wanted to be involved in supporting young people who were caught in a multicultural situation, specifically *kikokushijo* "returnees." Actually, about twenty years ago, I returned to my passion for supporting bi/multilingual young people, and Japanese heritage language education became another field of my research. After my first master's degree, I taught the Japanese language for several years at the college level. During that time, I met academics who encouraged me to go on to a doctoral program in linguistics.

I cannot talk about my life in the United States without mentioning the people who had faith in me at crucial moments. To name just a few: my partner in life; my mentors at Harvard graduate school, Professors Susumu Kuno and the late Tazuko Monane; and at Lehigh, the chair who hired me, the Japanese-American provost when I received tenure, and the first openly gay dean, who saw something in me and appointed me to leadership positions. Without their support, I could not have accomplished what I did. I feel extremely fortunate. At the same time, there were numerous episodes where I felt that I was excluded and stereotyped. Some of them were simply based on gender, but some were more specifically because of my status as foreign-born, female, and Asian faculty.

What I Encountered in My Workplace

At Lehigh, all the languages are taught in the Department of Modern Languages and Literatures, and the Japanese language was the last addition to a very Eurocentric department. When I joined, I was the first Asian non-tenure-track full-time faculty member. I am not certain, but when my position became tenure-track later on, I may even have been the first female Asian to hold a tenure-track position in the humanities there. As is probably characteristic of language departments, my department has been predominantly occupied by female faculty. However, culturally and racially insensitive comments come from people regardless of their gender. While it is human nature to be threatened by the "unknown," it is not excusable to be insensitive or rude to them/us.

Once when I was cleaning up loose tea in my tea pot, for example, a white female professor told me to make sure I cleaned up the sink because “it looks disgusting.” In addition, I was often profiled because of my Japanese accent. One time I called HR for some benefit clarification. When a staff member answered the phone, I hesitated a bit. Immediately after they recognized that I spoke English with an accent, they said, “You are an adjunct, and a non-US citizen.” When I told them, “No. I am an assistant professor and a US citizen,” they just said, “Oh.”

Sometimes people don’t realize they have unconscious biases. One of the associate deans said to my Japanese colleague and me, “I want to know your culture.” I am certain they meant well, but the comment made it clear to me that language and culture courses were not taken seriously as academic subjects. We are not teaching “our culture” or “our language.” In fact, there are several faculty members in the department who are not “native” speakers of the target languages.

I also encountered many instances of male dominance. Here is a classic example. I met with a curriculum committee as chair to present our department’s proposal for reinstating language requirements for undergraduate students. My associate chair, who was older than me, non-Asian, and male, accompanied me. Throughout the meeting, senior male members of the committee dominated the conversation, and whenever they had questions, they directed them to the associate chair, not to me.

How I Responded to Challenges in My Leadership Roles

I became the director of the Asian Studies Program in Fall 2012, and that was my first leadership position at Lehigh. I held that position for nine years. I should also mention that I was the first Asian person to be the director. The Asian Studies Program was a very comfortable and safe place for me. It is an interdisciplinary program that transcends departmental boundaries, with faculty members from the Departments of International Relations, Religion Studies, Sociology, Music, and Modern Languages and Literatures. We are all united in promoting Asian Studies. As director, I attempted to foster a safe space for those who are interested in and have connections to Asia on campus. We already had a major and minor in Asian studies, but its requirements consisted of mostly language (Chinese or Japanese) courses. The Chinese major was established around 2010, and the Japanese major in 2016. Before that, students who would have majored in Chinese or Japanese otherwise only had the option of majoring in Asian Studies. So, I initiated changes in the requirements for

the Asian Studies major so that it would be more of an “area studies” major, distinct from the language majors.

While I was serving as director of the Asian Studies Program, I concurrently served as chair for my department from 2015 to 2021. This was a lot harder than being the director of the Asian Studies Program. The MLL department offers Spanish, French, German, Russian, Chinese, and Japanese. These languages each have majors and minors. In addition, we offer Arabic and Hebrew language courses. Every year we have about 1,200 students studying languages in our department, and half of them are usually taking Spanish. That means the Spanish program constitutes about half of the department, and the five other language programs constitute the rest. As you may all know, enrollment in language courses has been declining in the past decade, especially in French, German, and Russian, and that trend has led to insecurity in some language programs.

Before I became the chair, several conflicts arose between the European and non-European language lines. For example, the first time I had a chance to request a second tenure-track Japanese position, there also happened to be a sudden retirement in one of the European language programs. The chair at the time was from the same language program, and the dean gave us one position and asked the chair to decide which language program it should go to. At that time, the Japanese program had much better enrollment numbers and I was the only full-time faculty member, while the other program had three full-time faculty members and declining enrollment numbers. However, the chair decided to fill the position in her own language, and most of the faculty in European languages went along with the decision, despite strong protest from the faculty in non-European languages asking for more transparency. After that incident, the department was very dysfunctional for several years.

There was another chair, a professor of Spanish, who served for one term (three years) before I took the position. Under his calm management style, our department had time to heal. I was able to work with him and successfully argued for a tenure-track position in Japanese. In fact, he was the one who strongly recommended me to the dean to be the next chair.

When I started my chairship in 2015, I felt the department was ready to be active again. I wanted to create a departmental culture in which everything we did in our department was everyone’s business. I created a five-year strategic plan so that everyone was on the same page, especially about hiring. I filled all the positions that had been left vacant by retirement or resignation. I successfully added two new full-time

positions: one tenure-track position in German and one non-tenure track position in Japanese. Whenever we asked for any position, I thoroughly prepared by assembling data to justify the request and to maintain transparency. The two new faculty members hired in Spanish and German during my chairship told me several times that, unlike modern languages departments they knew at other institutions, in our department, “the faculty members are talking to one another!”—and they gave me the credit for that.

I also tried to foster equality among the faculty members regardless of their rank. I hosted a social gathering at the beginning of each academic year to welcome not only new full-time faculty members, but also adjunct faculty. In a language department, it is often the case that adjunct faculty members do much of the heavy lifting, and we should never dismiss their contributions.

Of course, there are some colleagues with whom one would rather not have any contact if it were possible to avoid. But if you are the chair, that is not an option. That was probably the most difficult thing I had to overcome. There was a male colleague who easily got emotional and tended to lash out. Every time I had to communicate with him as chair, I took a deep breath and reminded myself not to be reactive. I also imagined and prepared for all the possible reactions I might get from him before meeting with him. When he got loud and started shouting, I would say to him, “I cannot talk to you if you raise your voice.” This sometimes worked, but other times, he just stormed out of my office. When such things happen, don’t take it personally! And when it gets out of hand, don’t hesitate to get help. I eventually ended up involving the dean to deal with this colleague’s unprofessional behavior.

Interestingly, the first tenure case I oversaw as chair was for the faculty member who had been hired for the European language instead of for Japanese several years before (as I mentioned earlier). Although the file left our department with full endorsement, it was negatively reviewed at the dean’s level. The biggest problem the promotion committee had was that most of the candidate’s publications were written in a language other than English. Although the candidate had published in highly reputable venues in their field, the committee did not see the value of academia outside of the Anglophone world. In our department, we all write in the languages of our research fields as well as in English, and the negative review felt like an insult to the integrity of all of the faculty in the department. Everyone in our department felt the same. I mobilized all the

senior faculty members in our department and wrote a strong response letter. I requested meetings with the dean and the provost, and all of my senior colleagues were present at the meetings. I had to admit that at the beginning of the review process, I really had to convince myself to set aside my mixed feelings towards this position, and to focus on advocating for the candidate. After all went well, the previous chair who had hired this person thanked me for my professionalism.

Another episode that required a lot of patience was when I worked with the Global Studies Program to establish a joint major in Global Studies and MLL. Their own major only required an intermediate level of language proficiency, but the proposed joint major would require more advanced language proficiency. Because Lehigh does not have language requirements, we have to grab any opportunity to advance language studies. It took me three semesters of negotiation among our department faculty to reach consensus because of strong opposition from the Spanish faculty members. Although they were half of the department in many respects, they were worried that the new joint major would steal minors from Spanish. The faculty in the Global Studies Program became a bit impatient, but I wanted to have a proposal that everyone in our department was happy with. In the end, it was voted on in a general faculty meeting, and now students can choose the MLL-Global Studies major.

What I Have Learned

During the six years of my chairship, I learned a lot about myself and being a leader. It was very stressful and kept me on my toes all the time. However, I feel that I have grown as a human because of these experiences. Here are the mottos I have developed for myself, which may be useful to others in any leadership position. And of course, there are many things you will learn on the spot.

- Be rational, not reactionary: when you receive comments or encounter behaviors that elicit strong feelings, take a deep breath and focus on what you want to accomplish. If it can wait, sleep on it.
- Be transparent: you have to be able to account for all of your actions.
- Be fair: don't treat anybody differently based on the position they hold.
- Be consistent: don't make any exception that you cannot defend.
- Be patient: forcing somebody to do something never leads to a good outcome. Work with them to find a way.
- Get help: when you exhaust your options for solutions, don't hesitate to get help.

During my longer than a quarter century career at Lehigh, I have seen positive changes in academia. Younger faculty members have more sophisticated and nuanced ways of looking at the world. They grew up with people who are racially, ethnically, and culturally different from themselves. They engage in more interdisciplinary research. I see more diversity on campus now, both visible and invisible. There is even a 2021 television show, “The Chair,” with Sandra Oh playing the role of the first female Asian chair in an English department! We just have to be on the watch and support the leaders who embrace diversity and foster dialogue among us. I have high hopes for young female Asian academics.