

Embracing Forks in the Road: One Woman's Journey into Academic Leadership

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In my nearly twenty-five year career in the academy I have had the privilege of serving as a tenured sociology professor, director of an equity-focused center, associate dean of a graduate school, interim dean of a college, and now dean of a nationally ranked top ten college of education. There was no “grand plan” to take on any of these roles except for the first, to be a tenured professor. Instead, there were numerous “fork in the road” moments that, looking back, put me on the path to my current position. By “fork in the road,” I mean those times in one’s life when a consequential choice is made, one that will deliberately set you on one path or another. Personal examples include such moments as choosing (or not) to marry, have children, move to a new state, and so on. Career examples include choosing (or not) to step into a leadership position, take on a new research project, leave for another institution, etc. Life is full of endless forks in the road. Together, these moments make up the twists and turns of, hopefully, a full and satisfying life.

In this essay I would like to share some insights I have collected over a reasonably long and successful academic career. In particular, I will: 1) elaborate on the fork in the road concept as it has manifested in my own life and career, 2) suggest that academic service may also serve your career interests if you are intentional about your choices, and 3) stress the importance of remaining authentic to yourself no matter what roles you choose to take on during your own career. One point I will return to is this: I do not believe in “good” or “bad” forks. Rather, there are consequences that come with the decisions we make, some intended (and desired) and others unintended. My intention is to plant seeds of possibility as you consider the various forks that will appear ahead in your proverbial road.

The Road Less Traveled.

“Look for chances to take the less-traveled roads. There are no wrong turns.”
—Susan Magsamen (Good Reads)

I am the child of immigrants and technically an immigrant myself – my family moved from Taiwan to the San Francisco Bay Area in the early 1970s when I was three years old, making me a member of the 1.5 generation. Raising a daughter in an unfamiliar and, at times, unwelcoming country, meant that my mother’s main advice to me growing up was to travel well-worn and familiar roads. “Get a good education,” “save money,” and “become an optometrist” are indelibly etched in my memory as common Mom-isms. Why an optometrist, you might ask? My

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entire family has poor vision, which means we made frequent trips to the optometrist for eye exams and glasses fittings. It was not uncommon at that time to see an Asian woman in the doctor role and my mother, ever watchful for well-worn roads, urged me to follow in her path. Never mind that I had zero interest or talent in the field. For my mother, the advice was entirely pragmatic and based on the notion that, “if she could do it, so can my daughter.” Her advice was also based on the belief that staying in familiar territory would keep me safe from nativist hostility and resentment – “a well-paying, professional career but nothing controversial.” Alas, the hints and nudges did nothing to sway me. It would not be the last time that I veered off of the familiar path suggested by my parents.

In college I stumbled into and fell in love with an academic discipline that my parents had little familiarity with – sociology. Here was a discipline that taught me to understand and analyze how contexts and identities (culture, race, class, gender, sexual orientation, etc.) shape the experiences and behavior of people within a society, and to think in terms of systems rather than simply individual experience. Suddenly, my personal experiences as a woman of color and immigrant made sense as part of a larger cohort experience situated against a backdrop of rapid demographic and social change in America. I was hooked and there was no turning back. An academic career, as a sociologist, was what I wanted to pursue even if it meant treading into completely unfamiliar territory and without any obvious guides along the way.

I pursued a PhD in sociology at UCLA and eventually became a tenure-track assistant professor in the mid 1990s, the first Asian American woman in my department and one of a handful or two at my university. I spent my first six years learning how to be an effective researcher and professor as well as balancing career and family life. I spent the next thirteen years refining my sense of purpose as an academic and stepping further into administrative roles.

Service Can Serve You.

“Without community service, we would not have a strong quality of life. It’s important to the person who serves as well as the recipient. It’s the way in which we ourselves grow and develop.”-Dorothy Height (Brainy Quote)

My academic career began conventionally enough. I was hired into a sociology department at an R1, research-intensive university, and understood that I would be evaluated on the basis of my research productivity first and foremost, followed by the quality of my teaching, and lastly by a modest level of departmental and university service. I accepted these “golden rules” and divvied my time according to this prioritized list, at least during the beginning of my career. But over time (and after tenure), my own personal interests, curiosity, and circumstances disrupted the sensibility of the list. It began in the classroom as I wrestled to effectively teach courses on race and ethnicity at a predominantly white campus. Those early experiences invited/forced me to reconsider my practice, again and again, as I looked for ways to meaningfully engage students around a personally and politically charged topic. Gradually I found that the challenges and insights I was gleaning from the classroom were taking up more and more of my intellectual curiosity and that I would rather spend hours designing a learning experience than sitting at the computer working on the next article or book.

That realization propelled me, along with colleagues, to co-found the Center on Diversity and Community, CoDaC, a campus resource committed to building the capacity of individuals and units across campus to advance the university's goals of equity and inclusion. My visibility as director created unexpected opportunities including affording me the opportunity to transfer my tenure-home out of sociology and into a college of education (a story for another day) and endless service opportunities across campus, from modest roles (ad hoc, standing, review committees) to high profile ones (university diversity strategic plan committee, vice-president search committee, provost search committee, president search committee, and so on). The work was time-consuming and, frankly, disheartening at times, but I learned a tremendous amount about how universities work and formed important relationships across campus with individuals I otherwise would have little access to.

Faculty, especially pre-tenure faculty, are typically advised to avoid service. As a junior faculty member, I can recall many colleagues describing service as “thankless,” “time-consuming,” and “to be avoided when possible.” It is certainly true that much university service is tedious, but I also learned valuable lessons from the countless hours I spent engaged in the work. Mostly, I learned how service could also serve me. Looking back, I can clearly see how campus-wide service work enhanced my competitiveness when I applied to serve as an associate dean in the graduate school. I had broad experience working with units across campus and name recognition among search committee members from having worked with diverse constituents over the years. This experience, in turn, made me competitive to serve as interim dean when the need for one arose in my college. Each experience, choices I made during forks in my road, built the foundation for the next experience, and changed my life in the process. Today I serve as dean of the University of Washington College of Education, ranked nationally in the top 10. There is no question in my mind that all of my “service” work contributed to being competitive and effective for the role I currently hold.

Be Authentic.

"I know when I was growing up, I didn't see any women like me in positions of leadership... and so when you're only seeing white dudes just like, running the world, you think you need to act like a white dude to run the world. The problem is that mold wasn't made for you, and so even if you try the hardest at being that, you will not be as good as someone who is just that already."

-Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (Berger 2019)

I am a sociologist trained in the arts and science tradition who ran a center serving constituents throughout my university in advancing diversity, equity, and belonging. As an associate professor, I transferred my tenure home from a college of arts and science to a college of education and taught future educators about race, identity, and equity in K-12 school settings. After promotion to full professor, I became an administrator for two complex units, one (graduate school, associate dean) that served 80+ diverse graduate degree programs and the other (college of education, interim dean) specializing in education and human services. And today I am the dean of an equity-focused college of education.

Looking back at my academic career, it is clear that I have taken unfamiliar and adventurous roads rather than staying on well-worn paths. I have embraced going beyond traditional

boundaries of discipline and it has, for the most part, worked out well. I will readily admit though, that the journey continually demands facing fears of the unknown, sometimes feeling inadequate, and questioning whether I belong. I can recall many meetings where I was: a) the only woman, b) the only person of color, c) the youngest person in the room, and d) all of the above. In those settings it can be difficult to remember who I am and, to quote Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, not “think I need to act like a white dude” or feel inadequate because I am not one. The most challenging lesson I continue to wrestle with is the importance of remaining authentically myself and to have the courage to show people that there are other models for being a leader in the academy. My style emphasizes building relationships (“make a friend first”) long before there is a need to reach out for a favor or address a conflict. I value vulnerability and connection with others and work hard to disarm whoever I am engaging with. This means I often share candid stories about my life and what I am learning along the way, be it to students, faculty, colleagues, donors, or community partners. I do not shy away from acknowledging my organization’s growing pains or my own, because being human is an important part of my leadership. I prefer being Mia rather than Dean Tuan or Dr. Tuan. I have little interest in being put on a pedestal or intimidating other people with a title – I would rather win their regard and trust over time based on pursuing common goals together.

My best self-embodies these values with grace and ease. But the usual stress of the job combined with being a rarity among higher education leaders do take their toll. According to the American Council on Education (2013), only 3% of deans, 2% of provosts, and 1.5% of presidents are from Asian or Pacific Islander backgrounds. Factor in gender and the chances of working with other leaders who look like me or share my sensibilities become even slimmer. While I face little risk of acting like a “white dude,” I do have to contend with moments of imposter syndrome and questioning the worth of my contributions. This, too, is part of being human in one’s leadership, or at least mine. After twenty-five years in the academy, often as a “first” and “only,” I am deeply familiar with my own emotional roller coaster. What I have learned is to breathe through the dips and dives and remember the long game. I do not need to be perfect, inspirational, commanding, on point, etc. all of the time. Instead, it is the cumulative total of who I am, as a leader, that ultimately matters. This realization helps me to return to a calm state, an authentic center.

Parting Thoughts.

“If you come to a fork in the road, take it.”

–Yogi Berra (Berra 2002)

The fork metaphor has worked well for me in navigating my twenty-five year in the academy and I hope it can hold meaning for you as well. In general, I think of fork moments as those times when a big decision needs to be made, to stay the course or go in a new direction. One of the biggest moments for me was moving my tenure home from one college to another. But upon deeper reflection, I see that fork moments can also be quite subtle, barely perceptible at the time and yet the ripples of the decision can be felt for years afterward. As a relatively new junior professor I sent an email to my president expressing dismay after he was called out for being racially insensitive (using the term oriental to describe Asian students) while addressing a crowd. The message took ten minutes to write and I fired it off without much thought. He ended up using a part of my message in his apology to campus, saying I had helped shape his

understanding of why people were upset. He and I were friendly for the next seventeen years, up until the time of his death – he occasionally took me out for coffee, checked in on me from time to time, and congratulated me each time I stepped further into administration. I am also fairly confident that he nominated me for a campus award as well as to serve on several high-profile searches. All because I chose to write an email rather than shake my head in disbelief before deleting the message about his gaffe.

I will end this essay by drawing on the wit and insight of Yogi Berra. In life you will face many fork in the road moments. When you come to one, follow Yogi’s advice, pick a direction, and lean into it knowing that there are no “good” or “bad” forks. Each decision you make will create a cascade of consequences and opportunities for learning (some with ease and others the hard way) that will lead to further decisions and learning down the line. Better to look forward to the next fork than lament the one you took last year, five years, or twenty years ago. My wish for you is to have a fulfilling and long career in the academy. May each experience, choices you make during forks in your journey, build the foundation for the next experience, and change your life in the process. Happy trails!

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