

Shared Governance in American Higher Education and Water-Like Servant Leadership in Daoist Psychology



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In American higher education, it is very common to have conflict, disagreement, or crises between faculty members and administration (Blumenstyk, 2015; Cassutto, 2015; Labaree, 2017). While boards (e.g., boards of directors, trustees, governors, or regents) and administration tend to control and make top-down decisions, faculty/staff members tend to push back, which leads to tensions between these groups, including the resignation of administration members, departure or resignation of faculty members, no-confidence vote from faculty or other constituencies, low morale, and other negative impacts on campus (Lombardi, 2013). A recent example of this includes the case reported at Michigan State University on the conflicts among the board, administration, faculty/staff, and students (Stripling, 2022). While higher education is a learning business, it is also a part of the very complex, public, or common good. It is a place where, in theory, employees and students intentionally enjoy their work and learning (Friedman, 2014) although the reality might be different. American higher education is not truly a business but is a very complicated enterprise academically, politically, and culturally (Newfield, 2016; Trachtenberg et al., 2018). Addressing key issues, like shared governance and collaborative leadership (i.e., water-like leadership), may help in institutional success and harmony in a long run (Lee, 2019, 2021; King & Mitchell, 2022). Thus, this paper aims to examine shared governance and water-like leadership style (i.e., positive, collaborative, and in service of others).

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1 Shared Governance

In Spring 2021, I was elected to serve as the Faculty Senate President, representing 1500 faculty members at my institution. On July 15, 2021, representing the faculty members and the Faculty Senate (as one of the constituencies), I attended the Board of Trustees meeting of Southern Illinois University. Below is part of what I presented to the SIU's BOT about shared governance in American higher education (Lee, 2021):

As a research university, it is very important for SIU Carbondale campus administration to collaborate with faculty and to support shared governance. Our academic excellence and research success greatly depend on our faculty members and shared governance. Why? Here are two examples for you as SIU BOT to consider: Example 1) In 1948, former President Delyte Morris came here with two big strategic goals—to build a school of excellence and to enhance economic and cultural vitality in Southern Illinois (Mitchell, 1988). He accomplished these two strategic goals by collaborating well with faculty members and his Board. Example 2) American higher education (including The Association of Governing Boards of Colleges and Universities) basically agrees that governing with knowledge and confidence can be achieved largely by collaboration with faculty—also see the writings by previous President L. S. Bacow (2018) at Tufts and retired President F. A Hrabrowski (2018) at the University of Maryland Baltimore County in the book, *Leading Colleges and Universities* (Trachtenberg et al., 2018). According to a recent article on the meaning and principles of shared governance (Eisenstein, 2021), governance at universities includes a triad or three main groups: Board, administration, and faculty, and it means shared responsibility, accountability, and promoting collaboration via communication and respect.

More specifically, shared governance in higher education refers to the processes and structures that governing boards, faculty, professional staff, and administration use to develop policies and make decisions that affect the institution (Eisenstein, 2021). It is also common for colleges and universities to invite input from their students. At the BOT meeting on July 15, 2021, I concluded as follows:

In summary, while the Board is our legal authority in the process about all business matters, faculty members and shared governance, via daily interaction with administrative colleagues, play a very important role in checks and balances in academic programs, policies, and other processes that impact universities. We are all equal partners, united for one common purpose (i.e., to serve, to work, and to lead together for our students and other constituencies/stakeholders in Southern Illinois). Thus, collaboration and mutual respect (not unilateral top-down decisions) among the board, administration, and faculty will determine SIUC's success in the future (Lee, 2021).

Therefore, by definition, shared governance means shared responsibility, accountability, and promoting collaboration via communication and respect among all stakeholders.

2 What Is Water-Like Leadership in Daoist Psychology?

Before discussing water-like leadership, I would like to elaborate on why I am interested in Daoist ideas and discuss how I became interested in researching Daoist psychology. What is water-like leadership in Daoist psychology about anyway? In 1986, I was admitted to the Graduate School at the State University of New York at Stony Brook (also known as Stony Brook University) to pursue my doctorate in psychology. On a weekend trip during Fall 1986, I went to a large bookstore in New York City and, serendipitously, I saw and purchased an English version (which included the original Chinese) of *Dao De Jing* by Laozi (Wing, 1986). Since then, over the last 30 years, I have read and reread this text, trying to understand it, though not easily or fully sometimes. Nearly every week, I read it and try my best to practice the ideas contained within. Thus, I really enjoy contemplating Daoist writing and researching Daoist principles, like the water-like leadership style. An overall message from Daoist psychology includes speaking simply, harmony with oneself (internally), harmony among ourselves and other human beings, and harmony with nature (Lee & Holt, 2019).

Since the 1990s, my colleagues, students, and I have been doing research on Daoist psychology, specifically focusing on water-like leadership (Lee, 2003, 2004, 2016, 2019; Lee et al., 2008, 2009, 2013a, 2015). For more than three decades, our group has conducted empirical research on this topic in the United States and throughout the world (Lee & Holt, 2019). To summarize, there are four main ideas from Daoist psychology (Lee, 2019; Lee & Holt, 2019), namely, (1) welfare for others and the world, (2) moderation by avoidance of extremes, (3) practicing *wu-wei* (non-interference), and (4) water-like personality style (i.e., Daoist Big Five leadership style: altruism, modesty, flexibility, honesty, and gentleness with perseverance) (Lee et al., 2013a).

Why is “best like water?” In his writings, Laozi, the founder of Daoist philosophy, used water many times as a metaphor to explain the personality or leadership style of the Sage. More specifically, water is altruistic and always serves others and is modest, flexible, clear, and transparent, demonstrating both power (or perseverance) and softness (Lee, 2003, 2019; Lee et al., 2008).

First, water is altruistic. All species and organisms depend on water. Without water, none of them can survive. What does water get from us? Almost nothing. A good Daoist leader or administrator should be as altruistic as water. For instance, Laozi advocated a “water personality.” We, as human beings, including leaders, should learn from water because it always remains in the lowest position and never competes with other things (Lee, 2019). Instead, water is beneficial to all things. Laozi’s Chapter 8 of the *Dao De Jing* (Wing, 1986

) states: The highest value (or the best) is like water,
The value of water benefits All Things
And yet it does not contend,
It stays in places that others despise,
And therefore is close to Dao.

Second, water is very modest and humble. It always goes to the lowest place. As the above quotation illustrates, although water benefits all things, it does not contend and remains in the lowest places (which others despise). Being humble and modest is necessary for good leaders to appreciate and understand the Dao of things, always be ready to learn, and be cognizant of overconfidence in the self (Lee, 2019). To Laozi (Chapter 66), modesty or humbleness (humility),

willingness to help and benefit others, and the ability to maintain a low profile (just like water) are qualities essential to an individual who wants to influence others: The rivers and seas lead the hundred streams
Because they are skillful at staying low.
Thus, they can lead the hundred streams (Wing, 1986).

Third, water is adaptable, resilient, and flexible. It can stay in a container of any shape. This flexibility (or fluidity) lends a great deal of wisdom to us. Successful leaders and administrators in higher education can adjust themselves to any environment and situation just as water does in a container. Maintaining flexibility and adapting to the dynamics of change, like water following its path, are likely the best traits. There is no such thing as the best leadership style or governing method across time and space in the world; therefore, the best principle is being flexible and fluid, finding the appropriate approach for here and now (Lee, 2019).

Fourth, water is transparent and clear. To gain trust, one should be honest and transparent to his or her followers. The most honorable individuals (not only leaders) are usually transparent (i.e., honest), like water. Though Western Machiavellian or other deceptive approaches might work temporarily, being honest and transparent is one of the most ethical approaches in modern management (Lee, 2019). Water itself, when not muddied, is clear and transparent.

Finally, and most importantly, as per Lee (2019), water is very soft and gentle, but also very persistent and powerful. Over time, water can cut through the hardest rock, forming valleys and canyons. If drops of water keep pounding at a rock for years, even the hardest rock will yield to water. Similarly, leadership style should be gentle and soft, but perseverant and powerful. The *Dao De Jing*

(Chapter 78) provides an example of what we could learn from water: Nothing in the world
Is as yielding and receptive as water.
Yet in attacking the firm and inflexible,
Nothing triumphs so well (Wing, 1986).

To summarize what is discussed as the water-like leadership style (i.e., Daoist Big Five personality), below is a chart to provide visuals and help make these ideas clear (Lee, 2019) (Fig. 1).

More specifically, Daoist philosophy focuses on harmony with external world (i.e., *Dao*) and with oneself and other human beings (i.e., *De*). This harmony helps to generate the water-like leadership style and Daoist Big Five personality traits, including altruism, modesty, flexibility, honesty/transparency, and gentleness with perseverance (Lee, 2019; Lee et al., 2008; Lee et al., 2013a).

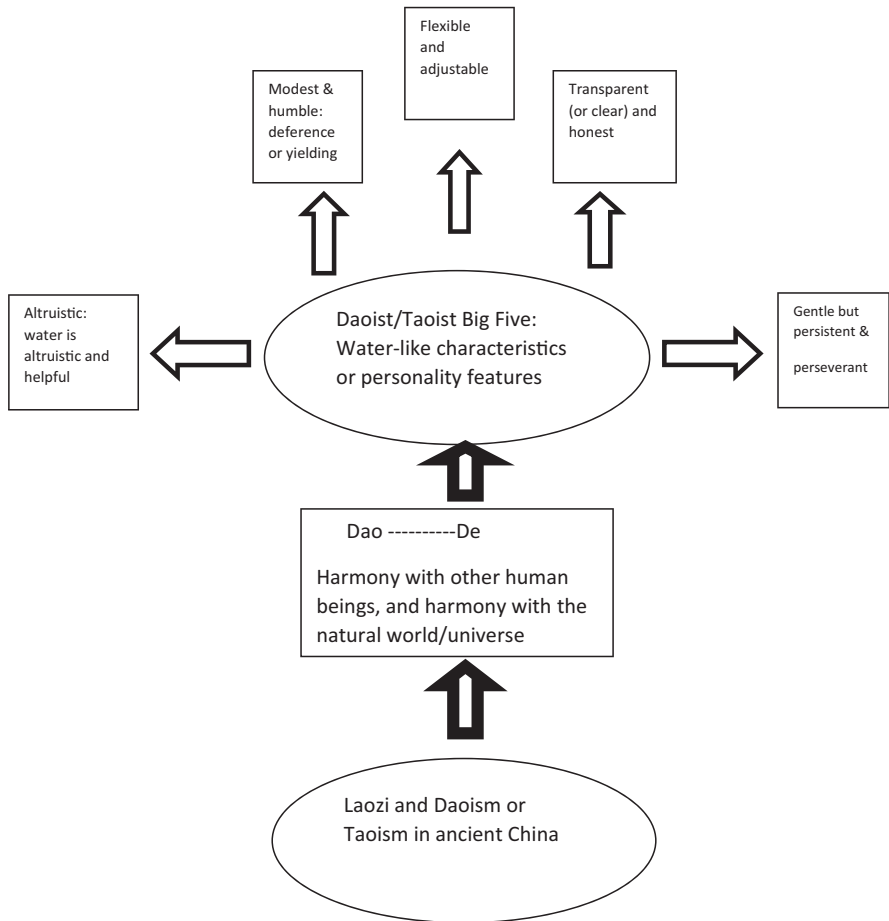


Fig. 1 The Daoist/Taoist theory of water-like personality (i.e., the Daoist Big Five). (The figure below is created by the author himself)

3 What Is the Relationship Between Water-Like Leadership and Shared Governance?

As discussed above, water-like leadership in Daoist psychology is different from shared governance in American higher education, although both are intimately related to one another. First, about their differences, the former (i.e., water-like leadership) is broader and more generic than the latter (i.e., shared governance). For instance, the former can be applied to almost all aspects of human interactions and relationships, including all human institutions and organizations, whereas the latter is specific to American higher education. Second, although they are different, both are closely interconnected. This is because water-like leadership and shared

governance explicitly and implicitly share a **common theme** that focuses on service, humility, collaboration, flexibility, transparency/honesty, and respect for all. For instance, shared governance involves honesty and transparency to gain trust from others which, in turn, cultivates a strong sense of shared responsibility and accountability. Similarly, those with a Daoist water-like leadership style tend to be helpful and altruistic, flexible and resilient, humble and modest, transparent (honest) and clear, and soft (gentle) and perseverant. Put together, both the water-like leadership style (or Daoist Big Five personality) and shared governance are highly correlated (Lee, 2021).

Although further research is needed and more empirical data should be collected to verify this relationship, recent work from our Applied Culture and Evolution (ACE) laboratory demonstrated shared features among water-like leadership style and workplace outcomes (Zhou et al., 2022). Findings indicated that, compared to agentic or masculine leadership styles, Daoist water-like leadership enhanced the favorability, empowerment, and democracy (FED) of the workplace. Our $2 \times 2 \times 2$ factorial experiment (leader gender, males and females; leadership style, Daoist water-like and agentic styles; perceivers' masculinity values, high and low scores) found that the Daoist water-like leadership was perceived as more favorable, empowering, and democratic (FED) than agentic leadership. Moreover, Daoist water-like male leadership was seen as the most FED, while the agentic male leadership style was seen as the least FED. Finally, perceivers with low masculine values tended to view the Daoist water-like leadership as more FED than agentic leadership (Zhou et al., 2022). Implications of the benefits afforded by Daoist water-like leadership are clear, shedding light on effective leadership practices that may be used by American higher educators. Given the shared commonalities between water-like leadership style and shared governance, it is expected that these concepts are interrelated via FED, though we have not directly examined this relationship and future work is necessary.

4 Addressing the “Common Theme”-Related Questions

Over approximately 20 years, after having served as a Departmental Chair, Director, Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences, Associate Vice President, and Dean of the Graduate School at various institutions, I had never thought of serving as the Faculty Senate President at a research university like SIU to advocate for shared governance, shared collaboration, and shared responsibility/accountability. I feel very honored and humbled to have been elected twice (in 2021 and 2022) to represent 1500 faculty members. I enjoy this servant leadership role to advocate for faculty members and students by working with the administration and other constituencies. As a constituency, based on its operating paper and by-laws/constitution (SIU Faculty Senate, 2022), the SIU faculty senate has the following powers and responsibilities:

The Faculty Senate

- (a) is the body empowered to act as an agent for the university faculty with delegated power to formulate broad policies in regard to the educational functions of the university
- (b) is charged to initiate, promote, and ensure the enforcement of policies involving academic and intellectual freedom and to concern itself in all matters of faculty status and welfare
- (c) is charged with the responsibility for encouraging and facilitating active and effective faculty involvement in policy determination and decision-making, particularly in all academic units at all levels within the university
- (d) shall in no way be restricted with respect to the matters it may choose to discuss and resolutions it may make, nor concerning the communications it may choose to direct both within and outside the university
- (e) is charged to establish and maintain a Judicial Review Board for the redress of grievances
- (f) consonant with the charges and responsibilities noted above shall reserve the right to establish any standing or ad hoc committee necessary for the conduct of its business
- (g) shall formulate its own rules and procedures in a manner not inconsistent with this operating paper and the *Bylaws* and *Statutes* of the Board of Trustees (SIU Faculty Senate, 2022)

As the President of the Faculty Senate, I am the fiscal officer of the Senate and speak for the Senate on all official matters. I also preside over the annual faculty meeting, serving as chair of the Faculty Senate Executive Council. I call special meetings of the Senate or Executive Council, as needed. My additional duties include but are not limited to overseeing the office of the Faculty Senate; charging committees (as needed); meeting with candidates for senior administrative positions; participating in constituency meetings with Chancellor/President; attending SIU Board of Trustees meetings; attending meetings of Executive Planning and Budget Advisory Committee; representing faculty members at the University's Commencement, Honors Day, and other award ceremonies; and joining Chancellor leadership forums. Working very closely with our Chancellor, Provost, and other offices and constituencies has provided me with a 360-degree perspective into the university and its various operations.

4.1 What Were My Motivations for Assuming a Leadership Role?

It is very important to gain the trust and respect of faculty members. Serving in leadership positions, such as Faculty Senate President, offers an effective way to gain trust and respect by advocating for and serving students, staff, and faculty.

Importantly, this service does not directly help me gain anything (e.g., financial incentive). There is no course release; I teach and oversee a research lab (the ACE lab), just like other faculty members. The duties and responsibilities of my Faculty Senate President position are above and beyond my expected services as a professor. So why do I assume this leadership role? The faculty senate as a constituency is very important for the university. Therefore, I am motivated to serve because, via shared governance and collaboration, these constituencies may have positive impacts on campus climate both for faculty/staff and students.

5 How Did I Take on This Faculty Senate Leadership Role? What Was the Campus Context?

For approximately two decades, I served as an administrator in various roles at different universities. However, before 2020, I had not served as a campuswide faculty leader. After returning to a faculty member position, several fellow colleagues (i.e., faculty members) nominated me to run for the Faculty Senate. In 2020, I was elected to the Faculty Senate and became part of the Faculty Senate Executive Council.

Leading up to this time, the context of institutional policies and programs on campus was uncertain. Over 3 years (2015–2018), when I was working as the Graduate School Dean, SIU did not have a state budget. Furthermore, senior leadership had little stability (e.g., chancellorship changed every 2 years). Due to these leadership instabilities and financial uncertainties, the administration began to merge all academic units unilaterally. Thus, our enrollment declined from 18,000 students to 12,000 students, resulting in a budget loss of approximately \$60 million. Similarly, we lost over 400 faculty members to “Tier 1” research universities (which may be partially explained by a lack of salary raises in the 10 years before 2020). During this period, campus morale was extremely low. Thus, to advocate for faculty members, I decided to return to teaching and research (as a faculty member) to serve my fellow colleagues in a different capacity.

6 What, and/or Who, Influenced You Over Your Administrative Journey?

Two factors influenced my decision to serve faculty members and students. First, I fundamentally believe in Daoist psychology and shared governance as a means to practice water-like leadership. These psychological or philosophical perspectives motivated me to run for the Faculty Senate President position. Next, during my past 30 years in the United States, I have gotten to know the Honorable Shien Biau Woo (aka S. B. Woo), the former lieutenant governor of Delaware, the former member of the Board of Trustees, a professor emeritus of physics at the University of Delaware, and currently the President of 80-20 organization and 80-20 Education Foundation.

His tireless services to education and unwavering commitment to Asian American communities inspired me. I have enjoyed working with him, and he teaches me a lot about shared governance, collaboration, and servant leadership every week when I work with him directly.

Several other leaders in American higher education who were my mentors explicitly and implicitly influenced me as an academic and administrator, such as the late Vice Provost, David Glass, at Stony Brook University; former Provost Susan Coultra-McQuin, at State University New York Oswego; former President Roy H Saigo at St. Cloud State University and Southern Oregon University; former senior Vice President William Logie, at the University of Toledo; and our current Chancellor, Austin Lane, at SIU Carbondale. In brief, all those colleagues mentioned above are role models for me and I respect them greatly as leaders in higher education. I benefit from their styles, actions, and behaviors. They taught me how to serve and work with faculty, staff, students, other individuals, constituencies, and communities. I greatly appreciate their support and guidance for me in and outside American higher education.

7 What Are Your Most Proud Accomplishments?

As the Faculty Senate President during the initial COVID-19 pandemic, I am most proud of the collaborative efforts between the faculty and the different offices and constituencies on campus. We worked together to support face-to-face teaching with flexibility and to support the student letter grade policy (instead of implementing pass or no-pass grades). Beyond regular business matters, the Faculty Senate worked together, via shared governance and concerted efforts (collaboration and innovation), to also initiate and implement several important initiatives, including an Ad Hoc Committee on Institutional Ranking/Education Quality, advocacy for the SIU faculty members through the reduction of racial profiling related to China initiative by the Faculty Status and Welfare Committee; implementation of parliamentary procedures by the Governance Committee; amendment of the FS operating paper/by-laws; advocacy for undergraduate academic success and mental wellness at the faculty-student town hall meetings by working with the Undergraduate Student Government and Faculty Senate; and consistent advocacy for SIU's shared governance. I am also very proud of the monthly publication by our team, *Faculty Senate Updates/FYI*.

8 What Are the Lessons You Have Learned? Regrettable Moments? Ongoing Reflections?

With regard to lessons, on the positive side, before being elected to serve in this position, it had never occurred to me that I was well respected by so many people (faculty and staff members). This was a surprise to me. On the negative side, being

Faculty Senate President has taken more time than what was required when I worked as the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences. Every week, I work almost 80 h in FS business, teaching/advising, and research. While serving as the Faculty Senate President requires more of my time than serving as Dean did, the nature of this work is more rewarding to me.

Reflecting, I do not have any regrettable moments while serving the faculty and students at SIU. However, if I could rewind the clock, I would like to serve as an academic leader or faculty president first, as this would allow me to practice and role-model shared governance and water-like leadership for my colleagues. Many administrators in higher education started by serving in academic positions, like the Faculty Senate President or the University Senate President, before beginning their careers as professional administrators. My path has been somewhat different and unique. When beginning 20 years ago, I wish I had had the opportunity to serve as a faculty leader before becoming a Department Chair, CAS (College of Arts and Sciences) Dean, Associate Vice President, and Dean of the Graduate School. The ability to practice these approaches (shared governance and water-like leadership) would have only aided my effectiveness as an administrator. Nonetheless, it is never too late to serve the faculty, staff, and students. I feel fortunate that my current role allows me to do just that.

9 What Advice Would You Like to Offer to Future Leaders?

Two pieces of advice are in order. First, shared governance (i.e., collaboration, communication, transparency and trust, and shared responsibility/accountability) is closely related to the water-like leadership style. Thus, the best academic leaders should strive to embody the characteristics exemplified by these approaches. Related, it is very important for leaders to be humble and modest, flexible and resilient, honest and transparent, and gentle, yet persistent. That is to say, employing a water-like leadership style (i.e., practices corresponding with the Daoist Big Five personality traits) is beneficial for organizations because it allows for more effective and successful functioning. Second, although we might believe that we can control others or manipulate situations, it is just the opposite. Our ability to control and manipulate is directly constrained by personal, familial, social, cultural, political, environmental, or other factors. Thus, it is very important to respect reality and appreciate both what we have and those around us.

To follow these recommendations is to be Daoistic or, more simply, be like water (i.e., water follows its course, naturally). There is no doubt that financial incentives and/or administrative ranking benefits (e.g., in higher education or in private businesses) can motivate and influence the actions of others, whereas being in service (for communities, nonprofit organizations, and institutional constituencies) may not be similarly incentivized (e.g., no monetary compensation) and require more time and resources. However, these positions of service may produce a positive impact

on others, which is in line with the principles of shared governance and Daoist psychology (i.e., water-like leadership style). As stated by Laozi:

The more you serve others altruistically,
the more respect and trust you gain from them;
the more you give to others,
the more you get back! (Chapter 81, Wing, 1986).

10 Conclusion

Competition in higher education gets more intense every year. State budgets are unpredictable (Crow & Dabars, 2015; Newfield, 2016). To survive and thrive, institutions (public or private) must compete with other institutions in terms of enrollment, academic quality, accessibility, affordability, and service (Levine & Van Pelt, 2021). The institutional boards, administrators, faculty, staff, and other members play a very important role in student outcomes, institutional accessibility and affordability, and broader community engagement. To best aid these endeavors, we need to share governance and collaborate with different constituencies via water-like servant leadership. Competitive institutions are community-connected, student-centered, market-sensitive, and mission focused, engaging in innovative, forward-thinking entrepreneurship across shared governance and vision.

To address unique challenges and leverage opportunities, dialectically (or Daoistically), institutions need collaborative and innovative leaders (Chen & Lee, 2008; Lee & Holt, 2019; King & Mitchell, 2022). Important indicators to pay close attention to include enrollment, academic quality, accessibility and affordability, and diversity, equity, and inclusivity (DEI) initiatives, as these are associated with regional vitality, increased scholarly reputation, higher program quality and marketability, and greater faculty-staff commitment (Davidson, 2017). Faculty and staff members (e.g., administration) play a critical role in student success via their shared governance, water-like leadership, and collaboration with other constituencies and communities. While the future may be uncertain (Levine & Van Pelt, 2021), shared governance and collaboration (via water-like leadership) surely make the future brighter in American higher education.

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Dr. E Yueh-Ting “Y-T” Lee (E aka Elk) is a Professor of Psychology at Southern Illinois University (SIU) at Carbondale, where he served as the Dean of the Graduate School (2015–2019). Since 2020, he has served as an academic leader (i.e., Faculty Senate President), elected twice (2021 and 2022), by faculty members (to represent approximately 1500 individuals) at SIU Carbondale. Before he came to SIU Carbondale, Dr. Lee had served as Ethnic Studies Departmental Chair at Minnesota State University Mankato, Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences and Associate Vice President at the University of Toledo, Ohio, and Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences at Minot State University in North Dakota (during which he was honorably adopted into the Mandan-Hidatsa-Arikara Nation of Fort Berthold Reservation and was given his “Elk” Indian name). More specifically, since 1999, Dr. Lee has been working with and engaged with a variety of Native American communities—i.e., American Indian tribes and reservations in Minnesota, South Dakota, North Dakota, Michigan, Montana, Alaska, New Mexico, and Arizona—for the purpose of learning, service, mentorship, and research. He completed field research on unique similarities of beliefs between Native Americans and East Asians or Chinese. He was greatly honored and very proud of being adopted into the American Indian Hidatsa Tribe, part of the Mandan-Hidatsa-Arikara Nation on Fort Berthold Reservation in North Dakota in summer 2006. His given American Indian name is Ehr-shi-hra-ri in Hidatsa language or Elk in English.

Dr. Lee received his BA in English and American Literature from Central South University in China and his Ph.D. in psychology from Stony Brook University and completed his postdoctoral training in the early 1990s at the University of Pennsylvania. He has produced 12 scholarly books and has authored (or co-authored) approximately 120 refereed journal articles and peer-reviewed book chapters. Dr. Lee has supervised and advised over two dozen doctoral graduate students (Ph.D. students) on their dissertations and three dozen masters-level graduate students on their master’s theses. Dr. Lee has secured and implemented approximately \$6.6 M in grants to support research, education, training, and other projects. He fundraised approximately \$10 M (in various gifts and donations) for educational institutions and cultural communities (e.g., scholarships, fellowships, endowments, and capital campaigns).

Professor Lee has been actively involved in the scientific/scholarly review process (journal article reviews, grant reviews, and book proposal reviews) for approximately 50 different journals, publishers, and grant agencies. He also served as a special issue editor for two APA journals: *Psychology of Religion and*

Spirituality and Evolutionary Behavioral Sciences. He has served as a peer evaluator/site visitor for doctoral program accreditation for American Psychological Association and institutional accreditation for North Central Association-Higher Learning Commission for the past 20 years.

Primarily on a pro bono basis, Professor Lee has actively been involved in consultations and training sessions/workshops for business and corporate leaders, health/medical staff members, law enforcement officers, lawyers, judges, and NGO or other professionals, with a focus on leadership, organizational behavior, group dynamics, diversity and different appreciation, equity and social justice, conflict resolution, and harmony/peace education.