

A Humble Beginning to Higher Education Leadership



Joanne Li

1 The Beginning

It was a starry night when I landed in Florida on December 28, 1988. Determined to get out of Hong Kong, I took a chance to join my friend, Agnes Au, in Orlando to see what life had in store for me. As a first-generation college student with parents who never even finished high school, I knew very little about higher education in the United States. With Agnes's encouragement, I registered for my first semester at Valencia College. Agnes paid for my first semester's tuition because she was proud that I showed up. From the second semester onward, I was a full-ride scholar because of my academic performance. Even with the scholarships, I had to find jobs to pay for living expenses. Often, I worked late in a restaurant until around midnight and then did my homework into the early morning. With the help of a mechanic, I bought a used car at an auction for \$2400. It was a Honda Civic hatchback that always had problems on hot summer days and broke down frequently on the highways. Yet, I loved every bit of my first car. It was a constant reminder of my new-found freedom, a life filled with new people and different cultures. I finished my undergraduate degree at Florida State University and graduated summa cum laude in 3 and a half years. My plan at the time was to complete college and return home. Then my journey took a detour when my professors started to send me to Ph.D. seminars in my last year of college. I had no idea what a Ph.D. was but was recruited to attend the graduate finance program with full scholarships and stipends at my alma mater. After graduating from my Ph.D. program in finance, I had a total of 14

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interviews including three universities in Hong Kong. Life just picked me to start my career in this country.

2 Early Leadership Development

After enjoying a relatively successful career as a finance professor and a researcher at a private university in Maryland, I was recruited by a colleague from a local public university to be the chair of a department of finance. I remember asking the question of why they wanted someone so young and inexperienced to be their chairperson. My now dear friend, Bharat Jain, told me at the time, “we have seen something in you that you have yet to discover.” In my life, I have been exceptionally blessed to meet friends and mentors like Bharat who gave so much and never expected anything in return. His answer was the beginning of my leadership journey. I am forever grateful to him because through the years I have discovered who I am and what I am living for.

When I was a chair, I discovered what leadership could offer that otherwise would not be available if I participated as a professor. I was serving a public university with over 20,000 students. Routinely I would meet with students and parents. Through those experiences, I was trained to be a good listener with empathy. I worked with students who had physical and/or mental challenges, as well as emotional disturbances. In the fall of 2006, I had a student who was diagnosed with cancer. He had to go through chemotherapy, and yet some professors would not excuse him from final exams. Overcome with compassion, I acted as the student’s advocate to convince those professors that he had no intention to make excuses other than health issues. He graduated with a 4.0 GPA and was one of the all-time brilliant students that I ever had the pleasure to teach. The student taught me determination and hopefulness. Learning that he attended graduation and celebrated with his family and doctors was one of the most rewarding moments in my career.

In subsequent years, many students passed through my life to leave unforgettable memories in my teaching career. Among them was an orphan who lived on his own. Another one had a mental breakdown and subsequently received psychiatric help. I always remembered when one student told me she wanted to give up her business career because she decided to be a teacher for inner city schools. And there was another student who, not made to be an accountant, eventually walked away from his business career and became a medical doctor. These students probably would never find out how they had changed me to be a compassionate person through their own stories. These encounters built my capacity to understand complicated relationships and recognize the complexity of issues.

Another insight I learned as a chair was through working across departments within the university discussing ideas of collaboration and the revision of curricula. The opportunity to influence and make changes in other people’s lives in a scalable manner is exhilarating. I still remember one of my favorite students who defended her thesis on mortgage-backed securities using the Black-Scholes option model to

derive her mathematic equations. Her thesis was a brainchild birthed by a collaboration between the finance department in the business school and the risk management department from the school of mathematics. That was my first glimpse of the power of collaboration and shared resources and how they impacted knowledge and people. As a chair of a department, I was put in charge of managing faculty and staff in addition to working in concert with the vision of the dean. It was an invaluable experience because I was trained in how to take care of our stakeholders as well as balance their goals with limited resources.

Shortly after I became a professor, I also pursued the Chartered Financial Analyst (CFA) credential because I wanted to encourage my students to do so. With a CFA charter, many firms outside of higher education attempted to recruit me. While a job on Wall Street might provide a lucrative compensation package, something was holding me back. There is not anything noble about me staying in higher education. I am simply grateful for all the professors and mentors who took care of me and the scholarships I received from people whom I never met. I am fortunate to have been educated here in this country. I never dreamed of going to university let alone finishing my Ph.D. The little girl who grew up in Hong Kong has been given so much in life. Higher education is a catalyst to change lives, and my life was changed by higher education. The gratitude I hold in my heart makes up the “why” for me to stay in this country and continue to work at a university.

3 Embracing the Role of Leadership

In 2012, I became a dean of a business school at a public university in Ohio. During the recruitment process, the then-president asked me to give him 5 years of my career. While excited and humbled to accept the offer, I was curious about how my skillset would expand with a higher level of responsibility. Most people would describe me as having a strong work ethic and high energy. In truth, I just want to learn everything and do everything. There is often an insatiable desire in me to identify problems and figure out solutions. I thrive in uncertainty and fancy myself a multitasker. I enjoy my busy life and work every waking moment to tackle challenges.

This attitude was brought to a halt when my president told me to look up in 2015. He advised me that a good leader does not just look down and do busy work. He nominated me to the American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU) *Millennium Leadership Initiative* (MLI). I was selected with a scholarship as 1 of the 24 proteges of the 2016 cohort. In this professional development program, we had over 20 university presidents and system chancellors as our teachers. The MLI was founded in 1998 by a group of minority presidents and chancellors with the hope of bringing diversity to higher education leadership. The program was very real and pragmatic. As part of the preparation before attendance, we wrote essays about ourselves, took a personality test, and provided statements regarding ourselves and our career goals. Faculty of this program include a Harvard-graduate

lawyer, media and marketing professionals, capitol hill politicians, financial strategists, crisis management experts, and many more. The schedule was very intense and required us to work from early morning until late at night.

The defining moment came when we gathered at dinner time to listen to stories of presidents and chancellors in attendance. Often these presidents or chancellors would share how difficult it was to be a president and how impossible the job truly was. These are the presidents that have served through the most racially challenging time in higher education, financial crises of institutions, and public relations disasters. Yet halfway through their discussion, they changed course and said, “now I want to tell you why you *need* to be a president.” Through their talks, I witnessed pain, suffering, courage, and selflessness. Their stories and experiences will be something I remember as long as I live. Maybe with intention, these presidents and chancellors had forever changed my career aspirations. From that point onward, I wake up with a purpose and have become intentional in the pursuit of greater goals for the many who will come after me. As of today, half of the ten founding presidents and chancellors are already deceased, but their legacy lives on. Their decision to diversify leadership in that fateful year has created a ripple effect in higher education. There are over 694 proteges who graduated from MLI, 149 of them went on to become presidents or chancellors, and 189 presidencies and chancellorships are or have been held by MLI proteges.¹

My awakening came soon after graduating from MLI. I took the advice of looking up and becoming more intentional to be a better leader. Since 2016, I have sought out professional development opportunities annually to allow myself to grow. In subsequent years, I have participated in many outstanding leadership and professional development programs provided by institutions, such as Harvard Graduate School of Education, Wharton School of Business, and the American Council on Education. The quest to be a good leader brought me to understand something very fundamental about leadership. In addition to courage and bravery, we all need intentions and deliberations to become good leaders. Good leaders exhibit not only natural abilities but also skills in tackling difficult situations. To build leadership capacity, I look for opportunities to learn from people outside of higher education. I want to learn about their challenges and study their solutions. Often, their corporate culture and people impact the results. I recognized most of the time leadership skills are forced and trained. Acknowledging our limitations opens our minds to improvements so that we can better serve others. I don't categorically label myself as a servant leader because I believe being a good leader implicitly assumes the responsibility of service. But whom we serve and what service we owe should be important questions to reflect upon.

¹American Association of State Colleges and Universities, August 18, 2022, <https://www.aascu.org/MLI/About/>

4 Scaling Up and Facing Adversity

I became a dean of a very substantial business school in Florida in the year of 2017. The school is substantial not only by the size of the student body but also by the potential to excel. The university serves over 58,000 students that have a rich diversity in both ethnic backgrounds and economic resources. In recent years, it has become a Carnegie classification R1 university and is perceived as a rising star among its peers. The acceptance of this job put me on a journey to understand how to manage a much larger-scale institution both in operation and finance. I was particularly excited to serve in a city with a population of over six million. Traveling around the world and visiting many cities, I believe urbanization will continue to define higher education. To give a better context, the state of Florida has nurtured a rather competitive higher education environment with all the universities in its system subject to annual performance evaluation. While performing universities are rewarded with additional incentives, underperforming universities are subject to a significant amount of resource reduction. I was excited to operate in a highly competitive environment and ready to take on difficult tasks. However, the real challenge arose when I found myself truly a minority among the constituents.

There are about 6.5 million people in Miami-Dade County. Crowned as the financial center of Latin America and with one of the busiest international airports in the country, Miami is heavily influenced by Latino culture and driven by its entrepreneurial spirit. Naturally, the university has many substantial Latino and Latina leaders and employs many of Hispanic heritage. Asians represent a little over 2% of the population in the metropolis. Naturally, having an Asian woman come in to run the largest business school in Florida at the time might seem unimaginable to many. Growing up in Hong Kong with a homogeneous population, I was rather naive about the potential racial conflicts. Certainly, I have had my share of prejudice in the country before moving to Miami, and thought I would be able to tackle any racial challenges. Yet I was confronted with something completely foreign. Eager to advance the business school in status and recognition, I began to launch significant changes in operations and personnel. Nine months after assuming my position, anonymous letters started to arrive in the mailboxes of the whole business school, faculty and staff, and external stakeholders such as alumni and employers, attacking my race, gender, and faith.

Whether because of technology, or the lack of, or the lack of real interest from the administration to identify the culprit, I was never able to find out who sent these hateful emails. In a short 6-month period, three letters were sent with defamatory allegations and slanderous accusations with the obvious intention to discredit my leadership because of my race and gender. As each additional letter arrived, more people who worked closely with me were also dragged into the center of these allegations. My close confidants started to see their characters being assassinated. In the initial few days of these letters, I had a difficult time comprehending the situation and began to doubt my ability to manage the crisis. Then my husband asked for my patience because he believed the true signal would be revealed. He argued under

most circumstances it would be difficult to decipher how others perceive the work we do due to our positions. However, extraordinary events such as these defamatory letters would provoke people to express their opinions openly about my performance and the overall state of the affairs. Soon enough, supporting and encouraging letters began to pour in. Faculty, staff, and alumni would apologize in person for the unfair treatment I received. With each word of encouragement, I resumed my task of leading the changes that started since the first day I joined the university. No doubt my character was put to a test during those 6 months. And yet I never walked away from what I committed to doing. I continued to change the operation of the business school, initiate new programs, reform our financial strategy, create innovative partnerships across the globe, and build up its reputation.

Sometimes I looked back and realized those letters stopped coming not because I fought back. I never defended myself in public. I never even brought up those letters in our faculty and staff meetings. These accusations were silenced because the faculty and staff were happier than they had ever been before, and the business school's reputation continued to rise as we achieved unparalleled success in a short 4 years, garnishing national and international attention both in rankings and results.

In some quiet moments of my life, I often reflect on what I would have done differently if I had to relive those 6 months. Undeniably, that crisis challenged me to the core. It had shaken my confidence as a person and almost defeated my belief as a leader. Despite the stress I had to live through, I did not walk away with regrets. I became more determined to always do the right things. This experience reminds me of some random Pinterest quote, "no matter how badly someone treats you, never drop down to their level. Remain calm, stay strong, and walk away." In fact, I farewelled my students, colleagues, and communities with gratitude and even bigger aspirations. The business school was a wonderful chapter of my career. It was a perfect partner to advance my purpose to serve a bigger mass of students and the community. It taught me resilience and perseverance. It made me emotionally strong. It provided me with the best laboratory to execute some of the most brilliant strategies in the world of business schools. Along with our students, faculty, and staff, we celebrated successes that many would call inconceivable. Among all, the crisis allowed me to find out who I am and what I am made of. The lesson I learned is that being truthful to who you are and focusing on the purpose you serve can shelter you through some of the tumultuous storms in life.

Honoring all my mentors, I accepted the position to be the 16th chancellor of the University of Nebraska at Omaha on July 1, 2021. I am the first Asian American to ever serve in the executive role of the University of Nebraska System and the only woman in the President Council. Fate has an interesting way of finding me. As I began to research and write this chapter, I found out that one of the ten founding members of the AACSB MLI was Dr. Gladys Styles Johnson. She was the chancellor of the University of Nebraska Kearney, a sister institution in the University of Nebraska System. In the *MLI 20th Anniversary Monograph – Influence and Impact: The Meaning and Legacy of the Millennium Leadership Initiative*, Dr. Johnson was remembered fondly as a dedicated leader, "...[i]n addition to serving many years on the AACSB Board of Directors, Gladys also served as a member of AACSB's Committee for Women Presidents..." During the period between 1999 and 2018,

only two Asian American women completed the MLI program, and I am one of those two proteges. In many ways, Dr. Johnson found me without ever knowing who I am. She passed away in 2018, 2 years after I completed the MLI program. From one woman chancellor to another, I am humbled to live in the legacy she created 24 years ago.

5 My Vision of Higher Education

Except for my first appointment, I have deliberately sought out public universities to serve. It is particularly meaningful for me because I graduated from a public university. University of Nebraska at Omaha (UNO) is the only 4-year public research university in the city of Omaha. It serves a diverse student body, of which many are first-generation college students and learners of color. Among our students, I am home. Omaha is the largest city in Nebraska and the economic powerhouse of the state. Yet, UNO has many challenges despite its prime location. As an urban university, UNO faces a long-rooted perception of subpar quality. It has a mission to serve underprivileged communities and students of color. Whether it is prejudice or reality, learners with less economic means are often regarded as academically ill-prepared students. Many of our students have economic challenges and come from difficult financial circumstances. In addition, UNO does not receive the kind of financial support of a land-grant university or a medical center due to research capacity and/or mission. This brings me to the question of the existence of institutions such as UNO.

For years, the Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education has classified universities and colleges by their research productivity. Universities are labeled as R1, R2, and others. Consequently, universities and schools became focused on earning higher recognition. Strategies were identified to alter operations and finances to make progress. These labels, while helping to delineate research portfolios and productivity, created many unintended consequences. Unfortunately, universities with severe financial constraints and a mission to serve underprivileged populations seemingly became less important or irrelevant.

Arguably, universities have two constituencies – students and faculty. Faculty are in place to educate students through teaching and/or engaging in research. Regardless, the existence of higher education is to educate. Once the institution has achieved a recognizable quality, shouldn't we focus on our efforts in expanding our reach so more students/learners can be educated? As such, shouldn't our fiduciary duty be to pursue those students who don't believe they belong to the system? After 25 years of working in higher education, I have decided whom I want to serve and to whom I owe my service. My mission is to bring social mobility to many of our candidates and to ensure economic prosperity for the community. I argue if we reach the threshold of quality, our goal as educators is to ask the question "who is that student we missed and how can we reach them?" I believe research and discovery have the power to influence public policies and change business practices. But they also carry the most important intention – to improve human conditions. Higher

education is an essential tool to change the world by educating the mass. I grew up poor, but higher education opened doors of opportunities for me. I want to see those learners who never thought they belonged will find a home at our university. I dream of the day when students enter our space, they find comfort and encouragement. I need them to know they are never outsiders.

6 Advice for Future Leaders

To those interested in taking on a leadership role in higher education, I would recommend finding your purpose first. Purpose serves as a roadmap for your career and provides you with a reason to wake up every morning. Ask why you want to be a leader. At one point in my career, someone asked this insightful question. “Do you enjoy the work of a leader or the title of a leader?” I hope your answer is the former and not the latter. If you want to belong to something bigger than yourself, then your answer becomes obvious. Be a leader in higher education for there is no better job than serving learners from all walks of life. Yes, you will take on an insurmountable volume of work and confront difficult tasks. Yes, you will be challenged to your core and often find yourself in a sea of uncertainty. But you will also find your journey rewarding because you will be able to help students like me. By being a leader, you become a multiplier of influence. By leading, you are in a position to change lives.

No great leader ever achieved success alone. There will be plenty of people in your life who will lift you up as you climb. Most likely they are the reason why you got here. In reflection on my leadership journey, I recognize I have been blessed with many mentors who generously shared their wisdom. Be intentional to build a network of mentors and a circle of advisors. Look for someone who will take a genuine interest in your career and give different perspectives. While it is great to have someone always agree with you, it is extremely valuable to gather opinions that challenge your thinking. You should be honest and feel safe with these people and know that they don’t have other motives but want you to be successful. Don’t be shy to ask for advice because you will be delighted that many are eager to help. As you advance in your career, you should start mentoring others. The future of humankind requires all of us to invest in others.

Getting to know yourself is also important. Leaders come in different styles, temperaments, and personalities. Knowing who you are is crucial to find your complementary team players. There are many personality tests available and take those tests.² For instance, if you are an introvert, you want to add a team player to your inner circle who is an extrovert. If you are known to always have big ideas, you might need someone who can provide structure. The reasoning is simple. You will need to create a team that can have different strengths to complement each other.

²Personality tests such as Emergenetics, Gallup Strengths, and Myers-Briggs tests are some examples.

Don't be tempted to hire someone who thinks as you do. It is flattering to always have people agree with you, but you will also stifle creativity and innovations if your team thinks exactly alike.

Don't forget to look up. By looking up, you will start to see the bigger picture. All the different parts and units of your operations will begin to make sense. Study your people and study with them intently. Listen and hear their concerns and ideas. They are your opportunities for innovation and creativity. Ask a lot of questions because all good leaders do. Their answers open many doors for you to envision the future. Build your capacity for empathy for people and circumstances. Work on your ability to persuade and your openness to being persuaded, for democracy relies on our commitment to debate. A big vision requires many to come with you, so take good care of your people. Remember every successful organization is made of caring stakeholders. These days I look up often to discover the stars in the big picture. I study these stars with the hope that I can connect with them one day. May you join the leadership role and become part of this constellation. I shall leave you with a quote from J.R.R. Tolkien, "all we have to decide is what to do with the time that is given us."



Dr. Joanne Li was named the 16th Chancellor of the University of Nebraska at Omaha (UNO). Li is the first Asian American to be appointed to an executive role in the Nebraska University System.

UNO is the only urban university within the Nebraska University System and has an operating budget of around \$2B. UNO is proud to serve its diverse student body of over 15,000+ students. In 2014, UNO was awarded the Presidential Award by President Obama, the highest national honor for creating economic opportunity through community engagement efforts.

UNO is also home to the National Counterterrorism, Innovation, Technology, and Education (NCITE) Center of Excellence, a strategic partnership that connects 26 partnering institutions and the Department of Homeland Security. NCITE has gained international recognition as an important component in national counterterrorism efforts.

Before joining UNO, Li was the Dean of Florida International University's College of Business (FIU Business), the largest business school in the state of Florida and home to the #2 US News ranked International Business program and #1 Real Estate Research program in the world.

A native of Hong Kong, Li graduated summa cum laude from Florida State University with a major in finance and a minor in economics. She then earned her Ph.D. in Finance, with a support area in Econometrics, from Florida State University. Li is a Chartered Financial Analyst (CFA) Charterholder, as well as a protege of the American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU) Millennium Leadership Initiative's 2016 cohort. She has also completed executive programs from Wharton Business School and Harvard Institute for Management & Leadership in Education. Li is a 2022 graduate of the Harvard Seminar for New Presidents through the Graduate School of

Education. She is actively engaged with the community, currently serving on multiple boards and international schools, such as the European Foundation for Management Development (EFMD), Federal Reserve Bank of Kansas City and CNBC Financial Wellness Council.

Li is proud to have also joined the Board of Trustees of the Higher Learning Commission, as well as the Executive Committee of the Coalition of Urban and Metropolitan Universities (CUMU).