

# Courage at the Intersection of Preparation and Opportunity



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Like most people, I did not set out to lead an institution of higher education. I have, however, been blessed with two such opportunities. This resulted from an evolution that occurred over many years and consisted of exposures to many, many life experiences, lessons learned, and intense preparation of the mind and the heart that readied me to become the president of the New Jersey Institute of Technology (NJIT) – one of the top 100 national universities in the USA. Of all my life lessons, the most significant and impactful ones have been the time I spent with my wife raising three great children. At the time of this narrative, all three of my children are young adults between the ages of 27 and 34.

Before I share my story further, let me briefly introduce you to NJIT and then discuss how I got to this point. NJIT is a public polytechnic research university, a Carnegie R1 research university, a top 50 public university with more than 12,000 very diverse students, and exceedingly innovative and entrepreneurial. It is ranked in the top 2% in the USA for return on educational investment and is an engine for social mobility. I am truly fortunate to be able to lead such an institution.

I was born in Malaysia, and my ancestry is Chinese. I came alone to the USA as a teenager in 1983 after high school to pursue my higher education. I grew up with limited means and supported myself through college, and I became the first member of my family to earn a college degree. I was able to pursue my tertiary studies in the USA because of a generous undergraduate scholarship from Michigan Tech. Although my original intent was to obtain a bachelor's degree and move back to Southeast Asia, I went on to earn master's and Ph.D. degrees because of the influence of several Taiwanese friends in college. I worked really hard during those years

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and was able to complete my degrees at three different schools in about 6 years. While pursuing my Ph.D., I married my lovely wife, Gina, who also is from Malaysia. We had our first son during that time, and Gina has been my best friend, a trusted advisor, and a life partner.

I next spent about 7 years in the industry and then made a shift to working in higher education because of my passion to teach and mentor students. It was God's blessing that my adopted country and the institutions I attended had given me so much, and I wanted to repay those blessings by contributing to society through my work in higher education.

My story isn't very different from many Asian immigrants. I don't see myself as special, but I have been presented with extraordinary opportunities. Some of my closest friends have said that I have been lucky in my career, but I believe you are "lucky" when preparation intersects with opportunity. This has happened to me many times.

In 2005, I was presented with the opportunity to lead a large engineering department at the University of Cincinnati when both the department head and dean of the college resigned. I was the youngest faculty member in the department and, within the first few months, some senior faculty members tried to influence me to steer resources to their pet projects. After a few months, I built up the courage to take a stand. I needed to act in the best interests of the entire department and its 1000+ students. Since that time, I have always questioned how any investment of resources or the initiation of a project may impact students. This has become a guiding principle for me.

During my time as the department head of mechanical engineering, I knew I had to work in the trenches with the faculty to earn their support and respect while also supporting the students. Therefore, I decided to personally contribute toward expanding our research portfolio in the department and began pitching the idea that we needed to establish more research and learning centers. My strategy was to pursue industry collaborations, which was born out of several things I knew or had experienced:

- Cincinnati had a vibrant industrial base.
- The university had a 100-year-old mandatory co-op program with companies around the world.
- My former experience as an engineering consultant gave me practical knowledge of the industry.
- Most importantly, I saw a need for engineering education to become more holistic and experiential-based, requiring participation from industry beyond the co-op program.

I also rebranded our industrial advisory board into a more collaborative board. In fact, I even told the board that I wanted their collaboration before I would take their advice.

During that time, I noticed that there were very few collaborations beyond hiring our graduates between the university and Procter & Gamble (P&G) – two major anchor institutions in Cincinnati. Initially, I tried to convince P&G to support the

college through endowed professorships and scholarships, but that was not successful. I realized P&G is a for-profit entity and that my endowment idea was not a priority for P&G because it wasn't germane to their mission. That is when I learned the lesson that for a collaboration to be successful and sustainable, it must be mutually beneficial. With the help of a member of the department collaborative board who was a director within P&G, we were able to convince the chief technology officer to test a concept of establishing a center focusing on digital simulation work of interest to P&G. At that time, P&G was trying to move away from labor-intensive and somewhat trial-and-error experimentation in laboratories to using computer simulation to design and enhance their products. The center started with just a handful of students, gaining successes along the way and ultimately becoming one of the most prominent industry-university collaboratories in Cincinnati, with nearly 100 students, faculty, staff, and P&G engineers engaging in the Simulation Center by the time I departed Cincinnati in 2017.

In 2011, I was asked to lead the college's graduate studies and research when the associate dean who held this appointment stepped down. To this day, I believe one of the reasons for my selection to this post, in addition to my success as a department head in working with faculty and students to advance research and teaching in our unit, was because of my collaborative nature. I worked respectfully with peers and members of the upper administration, especially when we found ourselves having diametrically opposing views.

The third time preparation and opportunity intersected for me happened a year later when my dean left and I was appointed interim dean and later earned the permanent title after a national search. Again, I believe that my collaborative instinct acquired over the years is what landed me the deanship back then. In fact, I have at times stressed the importance of effective collaboration by stating, "In the past, it was publish or perish in higher education. Today, it is collaborate or perish." Later in my narrative, I will come back to a form of collaboration, namely, micro-collaboration, that I find to be a very effective tool for leading an academic institution.

Once during my tenure as dean, my president visited the Ohio State University to participate in an Asian student event. All my children attended and met President Ono, who told them I was a very good dean. My children replied, "No, he is an even better father." I was touched because I was always concerned that I may not have given my children enough attention due to being so busy with my work. Later, when the position of provost at the University of Texas at Arlington (UTA) became vacant, I again seized an opportunity. Almost 3 years into my tenure, I was called upon to lead UTA as the COVID pandemic struck the USA in March 2020.

In my latest instance of being "lucky," I was presented with another extraordinary opportunity during the Fall of 2021 to become president of one of the finest public polytechnic institutions in the country – NJIT. I will return to my presidential experiences later in my narrative.

These opportunities that were presented to me also came with enormous challenges. I faced financial shortfalls, falling morale, student dissatisfaction, and several other obstacles that sometimes seemed insurmountable. Even though there are

many East Asian faculty in this country who have made spectacular contributions, there are very few who have become top administrators at major academic institutions. Some call this the bamboo ceiling, while others say it is the perception of Asians lacking leadership qualities. So, why was I given these many leadership opportunities? I have pondered that question each time I was asked to take on more leadership responsibilities. I know it is not luck because my experience tells me several key factors prepared me for these leadership opportunities.

First, I am a microcollaborator as opposed to a micromanager. I am very interested in understanding and learning about the details of the work people around me are engaged in, and I stand ready to roll up my sleeves to work alongside them, but I do not try to micromanage their responsibilities. I like to surround myself with smart and dedicated people and let them make decisions.

Second, I work hard to listen and learn. That is not easy to do. The act of listening and learning is a very humbling experience, and it also is an admission and reminder of my shortcomings. Oftentimes, as leaders, we do not want to show or reveal our weaknesses, but being open-minded and collaborative does not mean one is weak. Understanding that we all have deficiencies and allowing others to help compensate for our own is a wise thing to do, and that distinguishes great from average leaders.

Third, embrace diversity ubiquitously and involve everyone. No one should be left behind, and valuable contributions can be made as a result of attacking a problem from a unique perspective. Diversity is an effective tool to advance our educational mission and is the hallmark of a successful institution. As an engineer, I know from experience that a homogenous group of people cannot consider all the possible applications and uses for a product. Nor can they optimize a system that will, ultimately, be implemented by people of different backgrounds, skills, and experiences. The value of having people with a broad array of opinions, talents, and experiences is extraordinary. On a small but personal scale, the fact that my wife, Gina, and I are very different people and approach problems very differently is extremely beneficial. I am a quiet introvert, and Gina is a joyful extrovert. She and I are very different and think very differently. The combination is what makes us a great pair especially in caring for the family and raising our children.

Fourth, a leader needs to be transparent. To be transparent, you must have integrity and be flexible. My first name, Teik, reminds me daily of integrity and flexibility because Teik means bamboo in Chinese. Bamboo grows straight up, signifying integrity, but it bends without breaking when a typhoon or hurricane comes and can quickly spring back when the storm passes, signifying flexibility. When people have all the accurate information given to them openly and honestly, they are more effective in their jobs. When I became dean of engineering and applied science in 2012, I inherited a college with financial challenges and declining morale among the faculty. I knew I needed the cooperation of the faculty to solve these challenges, so I decided to open the financial books to them and let them see how resources flowed. Once the faculty understood the challenges, they were on board to help the college revamp its curricula and attract more students and corporate support which resulted in a significant surplus when I left in 2017. In addition, as part of the effort, I had to convince our finance department to let us use the remaining of our savings to create

more scholarships to recruit top students from the area to create momentum that had a snowball effect leading to more students becoming interested in the college. That was challenging because we were losing money, and our finance director felt (rightfully so) that we needed to conserve resources to meet shortfalls. As a last resort, I told my finance director that we need to spend money to make money, which must have resonated with him because we did create scholarships, and the strategy worked. As a result of the steps we took and the successes we had, the college had millions of dollars to invest in research, hiring more faculty, providing more student services, and embarking upon many other academic initiatives. This boosted faculty morale, and faculty productivity grew significantly. This all was possible because of honesty and transparency.

When you take on a leadership role, there is a tendency to be pulled in thousands of different directions. If you are going to accomplish anything meaningful and impactful, you have to focus. I learned this lesson from the numerous academic administrative positions I held previously. As the executive in charge of UTA, I was laser-focused on three goals:

- Successfully navigate UTA through the COVID-19 pandemic with students as our central focus. That meant ensuring students would continue to learn and attain their degrees without delay. Students are our business. Everything we do, research, for example, should be for the sake of educating students.
- Emphasize the collective vision of a campus community that supports student success and research excellence equally and is a welcoming place for students from all demographics who can be successful at UTA.
- Enhance our external engagement to strengthen existing and new partnerships with alumni, corporations, nonprofit organizations, and elected officials. This was important because, as a public institution, we needed to be a value-added entity of the State, the USA, and globally.

In the pursuit of these three goals, I found myself applying the same principles of collaboration, listening and learning, championing diversity, and honesty and transparency that I shared earlier. I knew that our ability to navigate through the pandemic required sound health and safety protocols, so I mobilized an army of faculty, staff, and students (over a hundred of them) and empowered them to develop our campus reopening plan. This required collaboration, listening, diversity, and transparency.

During my time leading UTA and now NJIT, three things have resonated with me in an especially strong way. First, I have seen many heroic acts, many sacrifices, and a great deal of hard work by the faculty and staff. Their efforts resulted in record degrees and certificates conferred at both institutions during the pandemic. Leadership is not about position or title. Leaders can exist throughout an organization at every level, and the leadership of our faculty and staff has shined brightly. Second, I was humbled while leading UTA during the first 2+ years of a global pandemic and through an unprecedented nationwide protest against racial injustice. That experience taught me humility and empathy. I was continuously reminded of how fortunate I am, how little I know, and how important it is to listen and learn. I

believe this experience prepared me well for my transition from UTA to NJIT, despite them being two very dissimilar campuses located in two very different parts of the country. Most importantly, I learned how to strike a balance between listening and learning versus actions and empowerment as I began my presidency at NJIT. To me, achieving the appropriate balance is critical because the community expects a new president to lead but, at the same time, to be inclusive and value the experience and knowledge of those who have served the university for many years. Too much of one or the other can be detrimental. Third, the campus communities at both NJIT and UTA are resilient, innovative, and very entrepreneurial. These two great institutions are bigger than any one person because of the ever-prevalent spirit of community and teamwork. Despite the many challenges presented in recent years, I believe the future of both institutions is bright and both are on a great trajectory.



**Dr. Teik C. Lim** is the 9th president of the New Jersey Institute of Technology (NJIT) and also holds the title of distinguished professor of mechanical engineering. Before joining NJIT on July 1, 2022, Dr. Lim led the University of Texas at Arlington (UTA) as interim president from 2020 to 2022 and was provost and vice president for academic affairs at UTA from 2017 to 2020.

Dr. Lim's career has spanned from the private sector to university administration. He worked as an engineer at Structural Dynamics Research Corporation before joining the Ohio State University Center for Automotive Research as a research scientist. Dr. Lim taught at the University of Alabama beginning in 1998 as an associate professor before joining the University of Cincinnati in 2002, where he advanced from associate professor to professor to department head and to associate dean for graduate studies and research before being named dean of the College of Engineering and Applied Science.

Dr. Lim earned his bachelor of science in mechanical engineering (ME) from Michigan Technological University, his master of science in ME from the University of Missouri-Rolla, and his Ph.D. in ME from the Ohio State University. Dr. Lim is internationally recognized as a leading scholar in the field of structural vibrations and acoustics as well as modeling and simulation technology. He was named a fellow of the National Academy of Inventors in 2018 and is a fellow of the American Society of Mechanical Engineers as well as the Society of Automotive Engineers, from which he received numerous research and teaching awards, such as the Arch T. Colwell Merit Award in 2003 and the Ralph R. Teetor Educational Award in 2002. Dr. Lim also was recognized with the Thomas French Alumni Achievement Award in 2010, the GearLab Distinguished Alumnus Award in 2017, and the Distinguished Alumni Award for Academic Excellence in 2019 from his alma mater, the Ohio State University.