

To Lead, to Serve, and to Transform: From Law School Dean to University President



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I began my faculty career in 1974 as an assistant professor at the University of Washington (UW) Law School with an adjunct appointment in the Department of Psychology. My proudest moment as a faculty member was when UW Law students selected me as the “Outstanding Professor of the Year” (1990).

In 1990, I was asked to serve on the dean search committee of the UW Law School. One day, the committee requested that I excuse myself, and, when I returned, the committee informed me that it had decided to nominate me for the deanship. Of course, if I agreed to it, I would have to resign from the committee. I had not sought the position, but after reflection, I consented to be a candidate. A couple of top external candidates withdrew from the dean search process, so the UW president appointed me. In 1990, I became the first Chinese American dean of a US law school. When news reporters asked the UW president about my appointment, he stated that he selected me because of my academic leadership potential and not for any historical or ethnic reasons.

During my years as dean, the number of highly qualified Asian American student applicants to the UW Law School soared, even though there were no changes in the admissions criteria or process. The UW Law School rose to the top 10 ranked US public law schools, established clinical legal education and public service programs, achieved a new record in fundraising, and secured state appropriations as well as private funds for a new law school building.

In 1993, the National Asian Pacific Bar Association presented me with the “Trailblazer Award” and the Hispanic Bar Association gave me its “Diversity Award.” To this day, I still consider myself an “accidental dean.” In 1996, I was

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elected President of the Association of American Law Schools, the scholarly and professional society of the academic legal profession. My experiences as a law dean and later as the Director of the Executive Policy Office of Governor Gary Locke of the State of WA were invaluable in preparing me for the presidency of UMCP.

Among the approximately 4000 colleges and universities in the USA, there were as of 2020 about 400 sitting presidents who are lawyers, or 10% of the total. But from 1900 to 1990, i.e., during most of the twentieth century, there were only about 40 sitting presidents who were lawyers, or only 1% of the total number of presidents. Thus, the increase in the number of lawyers as university presidents is a relatively recent and growing trend.

The sitting presidents with law backgrounds are mainly academic lawyers, not practicing lawyers. Academic lawyers have the teaching and scholarly credentials that give them credibility with their peers in other academic disciplines on campus, such as the arts and sciences faculty. They also have administrative experience, if they served as law school deans. In contrast, most successful legal practitioners are unlikely to have this academic background and experience. This is why I believe that a successful law dean is likely to be a successful university president. The question, then, is what constitutes “success” in a law school deanship and a university presidency? In my view, a successful law school dean is:

- (1) A transformative dean, one who does not simply maintain the status quo of the institution.
- (2) A university statesman or stateswoman, one who seeks to improve not only his or her school but also to improve the larger university of which that school is a part.
- (3) A prophetic pioneer, one who seeks to anticipate future trends and acts accordingly. When Wayne Gretzky, one of the greatest professional hockey players ever, was asked what made him such a great player, he said: “I don’t skate to where the puck is, I skate to where the puck is going to be.”

After I served as the UW Law School dean for 5 years (1990–1995), the UW announced the search for a new Provost. I asked the UW president, who appointed me to the law deanship if I would be a viable candidate for this position. He said he would strongly recommend me for the provostship at any university in the country, but he would not hire me at the UW. The reason was that I had spent my entire administrative career at the UW and, therefore, I would not bring a new or fresh perspective to the position of the chief academic officer. I then applied for and accepted the position of Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs and Dean of Faculties (since retitled Provost), and Professor of Law, at the University of Colorado at Boulder, starting in 1995.

At that time, the CU-Boulder campus had about 25,000 students and 2300 faculty and staff in nine colleges and several major interdisciplinary research institutes. My office oversaw 11 deans, 9 associate vice chancellors, and several academic directors across the campus. I mobilized 60 faculty and staff members to help craft a 4-year strategic plan to strengthen undergraduate education and the research

enterprise and also to expand continuing education and outreach to better serve the citizens of the State of Colorado.

My family remained in Seattle because I had elderly parents and a daughter who was still in elementary school. I commuted weekly between Boulder and Seattle. After 2 years (1995–1997), I stepped down from my position at CU-Boulder for family reasons and returned permanently to my home in Seattle.

Governor Gary Locke of the State of Washington – a lawyer and the first Asian American governor in the continental USA – then asked me to join his administration and serve as his policy director. In this capacity, I oversaw some 20 policy advisers and staff in the Governor’s office who worked on a range of policy issues, such as welfare reform and saving the Pacific Northwest salmon. I helped launch and staff Governor Locke’s “2020 Commission on the Future of Higher Education in the State of Washington,” comprised of business, community, and academic leaders from around the state. One result of this commission was the creation of the “Washington Promise Scholarship,” a 2-year grant to expand access to public higher education in the state and funded by state appropriations.

After 3 years in the Governor’s office, I accepted the deanship of the College of Arts and Sciences at Seattle University, drawn by its Jesuit mission of “the service of faith and the promotion of justice.” I served in this role from 2000 to 2008. During this period, the College of Arts and Sciences grew in student enrollment, faculty size, new academic programs, tuition revenues, and philanthropic support.

I then applied for and was offered the position of Executive Vice President and Provost at the University of Iowa. The new president of the University of Iowa, who appointed me to this position, became an invaluable mentor. I started amid the Great Flood of 2008, the worst in the history of the state of Iowa. It damaged numerous campus buildings, and the cost of recovery and rebuilding was enormous. Then, the Great Recession of 2009 led to historic reductions in state funding to public institutions, including the University of Iowa. I was deeply moved when many faculty members on campus volunteered to accept deeper cuts to their paychecks to protect lower-paid staff members as a result of the state funding reductions.

After I served for 2 years at the University of Iowa (2008–2010), UMCP offered me the position of president starting in 2010. At the time, UMCP had about 40,000 students; some 10,000 faculty and staff, distributed among 13 schools and colleges; and an annual operating budget of about \$2 billion.

From my years of working in state government, I knew that the presidency of a public research university can be the most political, nonpolitical (i.e., non-elected) position in a state. Thus, shortly after I took office, UMCP’s state government relations staff urged me to meet soon and develop a relationship with the longest-serving and powerful president of the Maryland State Senate, Mike Miller, a UMCP alumnus. I met President Miller at the scheduled appointment and I introduced myself, but he just looked at me for a while. Then, he said somewhat dismissively, “So, you’re the new UMCP president? I would have thought that UMCP would have appointed someone like “X” [the provost at a California university who became the US Secretary of State], or someone like “Y” [the president at a Texas university who became the US Secretary of Defense].” I have known many politicians in the State

of Washington during my years in Governor Locke's administration. I realized that I was being tested, so I ignored President Miller's comment. Instead, I thanked him for his years of service as Senate President and for his loyalty to his Alma Mater. I expressed my interest in seeking his support and guidance as we work together to raise UMCP to the next level of academic excellence and service to the people of Maryland. I passed the test.

A few months after I met Senate President Miller, I went to a fundraising event for him, attended by hundreds of his supporters and contributors. He saw me in the crowd, announced my presence, and asked me to join him, his wife, and two daughters on the platform. He then invited reporters to take photos of the platform group. The photos appeared in newspapers the next day. The message that I think President Miller sought to convey to state legislators and the voters of Maryland through the publication of the photos of the platform group was that he considered the new UMCP president to be like a member of his own family. He became my strongest supporter and my most valued adviser in the Maryland legislature during my decade as UMCP president (2010–2020).

Soon after I started as president, the UMCP Director of Athletics informed me that the intercollegiate athletics department had a substantial financial deficit. Therefore, several varsity teams had to be cut to balance the budget. By state law, no state funds can be used to support intercollegiate athletics. Athletics is the "front porch" of a university. It is not the most important part of the academic house, but it is the most visible part. With the Athletics Director, we had heartbreaking talks with the student-athletes. I informed them that their lifelong dream of playing for, and representing, UMCP in various sports could be over due to financial reasons. However, I assured them that UMCP would continue to honor their athletic scholarships, so they could complete their college degrees. After meeting confidentially with, and securing the support of, top elected and higher education officials in Maryland, I approached the Big Ten Commissioner. The purpose was to negotiate secretly and sign a confidential agreement that UMCP would join this conference and, in return, the Big Ten conference would provide substantial new revenues to UMCP's intercollegiate athletics program. This would ensure the program's long-term financial viability.

Members of the public and the media, unaware of the large budget deficits or of the anticipated large revenues to the intercollegiate athletics department, were incensed when UMCP announced that it was ending its decades-long membership in a southern-based athletic conference to join a northern-based conference. (During the Civil War, some Marylanders fought for the North and some for the South.) The campus police provided me with a security detail. My seasoned UMCP staff anticipated public pushback on this change of conferences, but even they were taken aback by the intensity of the opposition. As it turned out, when the amount of new revenue from the Big Ten Conference was leaked and published in a national sports magazine, people were relieved that the intercollegiate athletics program would be saved and its future assured. (UMCP was **not** the source of the leak.) The faculty was pleased that UMCP would join the Big Ten Academic Alliance, a consortium of peer universities with extensive and shared educational and research activities in addition to competing in sports. Thus, joining this conference resulted in substantial academic benefits as well as unprecedented athletic revenues.

In 2011, the American Immigration Council bestowed on me its “Immigrant Achievement Award” and in 2012, and the *Huffington Post* included me among the “Ten Most Popular College Presidents.” In 2015, I was elected a Fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences for “iconoclastic leadership” of UMCP, and the Governor of Maryland awarded me the “Presentation for Excellence.” In 2017, the *WA Business Journal* included me among the “Power 100 Leaders” in the Washington, D.C. area. In 2018, the *Daily Record* listed me as an “Influential Marylander,” and the Steamboat Institute in Colorado presented me with the “Courage in Education Award” for advancing freedom of expression on campuses. In 2020, the Maryland State Senate enacted Resolution 202 for my role in “guiding UMCP to transformational advances in academic, community, and economic development,” and the Maryland House of Delegates enacted Resolution 93 for my “visionary leadership in guiding UMCP to new heights of academic excellence.”

In 2022, the College Park City Council unveiled a plaque in City Hall in appreciation for my role in helping make the city “a better place to live and work with collaborative programs in education, development, transportation, and public safety 2010-2020.” My strategy of “place-making” in College Park was to create an ecosystem that blends education, research, innovation, and entrepreneurship and is built around the state’s flagship university as the anchor institution.

My volunteer community service activities, while in office as UMCP president and/or thereafter, include the “Scholars’ Advisory Committee” to the Museum of Chinese Americans in NYC (2021–2022); the Washington D.C.-based Bipartisan Policy Center’s “Academic Leaders’ Task Force on Free Expression on Campuses” (2020–2021), which produced a report with recommendations that have been adopted by many college and universities; the advisory board of the US Comptroller General, Government Accountability Office (since 2013); the board of directors of the American Council on Education and mentor to ACE Fellows (2014–2018); and the Greater Washington Board of Trade (2017–2020).

I held a top FBI security clearance and served as chair of the academic advisory council to the US Secretary of Homeland Security (2011–2013). I served as board chair and founding member of a public charter school, College Park Academy (2014–2020). As UW Law School dean and UMCP president, I initiated and completed major fundraising campaigns supporting financial aid, education, research, new facilities, and community development.

As for my background, I am a “Latasian” or Latino-Asian. I was born in China, and at the age of 2, I moved with my parents to Peru. My native languages are Spanish and Chinese. They opened a small mom-and-pop grocery store that was open 365 days a year. I worked at the store when not attending school. We lived in four rooms behind the grocery store. After graduating from high school, my parents gave me their life savings (\$400) and a one-way airline ticket to the USA. At the age of 16, I came to a field of dreams called Iowa. I had a partial tuition scholarship and worked my way through college with part-time campus jobs, first at Iowa Wesleyan College and then at Grinnell College. Each of them subsequently awarded me an honorary doctoral degree in 2010 and 1994, respectively.

I was sustained – as generations of immigrants before and after me have been sustained – by an unwavering faith in this land of freedom and opportunity, and that with

hard work, scrappy determination, perseverance, and education, I could realize my dreams. I am grateful to the trailblazers of earlier generations whose struggles paved the way for me and many others. My personal story is of no consequence other than as a story of the importance of education and the promise of America. After I became a naturalized US citizen, I helped sponsor my parents' immigration, and we were reunited.

Serving as a university administrator and helping educate the next generation of citizens and residents is a way of giving back to a country that has given me so many opportunities.



Dr. Wallace Loh was born in China; moved with his parents to Peru at age 2. He came alone to the USA at age 16. He attended Grinnell College (BA), Cornell University (MA), University of Louvain (Belgium), University of Michigan (Ph.D., in psychology), and Yale (JD).

He served as President of the University of Maryland, College Park in 2010–2020; Provost of the University of Iowa (2008–2010); Dean of Arts & Sciences at Seattle University (2000–2008); Policy Director of Governor Gary Locke (WA, 1997–2000); Academic Vice-Chancellor of University of Colorado (1995–1997); Dean of the University of Washington Law School (1990–1995); the first Chinese American dean in US legal education); a visiting professor at the University of Texas, the University of Houston, Emory, Vanderbilt, and Cornell. Dr. Loh served on the boards of the US Comptroller General; the Greater WA Board of Trade; the American Council on Education; the Academic Advisory Council to the US Secretary of Homeland Security; Big Ten Conference representative to the NCAA D-1 presidential forum; and President of the Association of American Law Schools (1996). He received many honors including the State of MD Senate's "First Citizen Award" (2018); MD House of Delegates' Resolution 93 for "Visionary Leadership of UMCP" (2020); Steamboat Institute (CO) "Courage in Education Award 2018"; *Daily Record* "Influential Marylander" (2018); *WA Business Journal* "Power 100 Leaders" (2017); Fellow of American Academy of Arts & Sciences (2015); *Huffington Post*'s "Ten Most Popular College Presidents" (2012); American Immigration Council's "Achievement Award 2011"; National Asian-Pacific American Bar Association "Trailblazer Award" (1993); Hispanic Bar Association "Diversity Award" (1993); and the University of Washington Law School "Professor of the Year" (1990).

Dr. Loh was a visiting professor of law at Peking University (1989), Cornell University (1987), University of Texas-Austin (1984), University of Houston (1981), Emory University (1980), and Vanderbilt University (1977). He taught courses in Criminal Procedure, Criminal Law, Contract Law, Law and Social Science, freshman seminars, and continuing legal education seminars. His scholarship and academic publications are centered around legal policy issues informed by research and statistical analyses, evaluation of criminal justice reforms, and law and social change. His 1985 book, *Social Research in the Judicial Process* was published by Russell Sage Foundation Press.