

Leading Universities from a Social Justice Perspective



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Like all institutions, universities¹ are constantly evolving. Historically, US universities have been designed for the elite, preparing a few for leadership roles, and preserving and transmitting knowledge and culture that reflect the privileged class. More recently, higher education has become more egalitarian in preparing youth for careers and civic life by increasing college access and opportunities for underrepresented groups, especially people of color, women, and the poor. This shift away from the exclusive domain of the elite has not been without resistance. University leaders can view their roles as protectors of the status quo or as change agents for equity, diversity, and inclusion.

Within any organization or social group, a leader can have a profound effect on its direction and mission. As leaders seek to leave their mark, there are different ways to be responsive to the societal climate. In some cases, a leader can work to maintain or enhance the status quo in service of the privileged or one can be an advocate to improve the lives and prospects of the marginalized, underrepresented, and less powerful. I refer to the latter model as a social justice leader. A leader with a firm commitment to social justice principles can make a major difference within our universities and the US society.

Fundamental to the effectiveness of a leader is understanding one's core values and applying them to the issues encountered. It also involves collaboration and support from allies to advance shared goals. Strong and effective educational leadership from a social justice perspective can greatly influence the lives of students of

¹Note: I would like to thank Shirley Hune for her suggestions and review of this chapter. I use the term "universities" to include both universities and colleges.

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color and other underrepresented groups. This was evident in the formation of Asian American, ethnic, women's, and gender studies. When applied to major challenges facing Asian American faculty, students, and staff in the twenty-first century, it can be transformative.

A social justice perspective in higher education is a commitment to equity, diversity, and inclusion. It means vigorously defending the rights of and opening up opportunities for low-income, first-generation, women, LGBTQ+, nontraditional, and underrepresented communities within the largely white and male-dominated university environment. It demands that decisions be scrutinized for their impact on the success of students, faculty, and staff, particularly those new to higher education. It is a commitment to open and broaden access to campus resources and to ensure that the university incorporates different teaching, learning, and cultural styles and research approaches in its educational methods and campus climate.

Attending and working in a university is both a privilege and a challenge. For me as a first-generation college-going student, completing university was a family-wide celebration. Going to graduate school, finishing advanced degrees, and landing a faculty job were all satisfying and a relief. Being paid to study and teach a subject matter that I had devoted my career to was most gratifying. The road forward from there, however, was fraught with pitfalls both predictable and unpredictable. Still more daring was to divert from a faculty career to leadership positions within the academy. All these challenges are enhanced for people of color, first-generation, LGBTQ+, and women academics.

Over the past 50 years, I have taken this journey as an Asian American male. I was born in Oakland, California's Chinatown, and initially grew up in a multigenerational household of 13 people in a two-bedroom duplex. In early childhood, my Chinese American father and mother, both born in the San Francisco area, moved us 15 miles north of Oakland to an all-white working-class town where they ran a very small grocery. We lived above the store, and my siblings and I worked in the store from the time we could walk and count money. Working daily in the store convinced my siblings and me that studying and going to college was our only route out. I have never attributed our drive for education as an "Asian" thing but rather the necessity of survival.

I didn't begin my academic journey knowing that I would earn a PhD and become a faculty member and then a higher education administrator. In fact, my high school counselor thought that I would be lucky to graduate from high school and suggested that I go to community college and then work in my father's store. It was a surprise to many that I was admitted to the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) in 1966.

I was fortunate to attend university in a time of struggle for social change. I became a student activist fighting for ethnic studies and increased enrollment of students of color. After completing my BA, MA, and PhD at UCLA, I became a faculty member at UCLA, the founding chair of the Asian American Studies (AAS) Department at California State University, Northridge (CSUN), dean of the Bellarmine College of Liberal Arts at Loyola Marymount University (LMU), dean of the College and academic vice president at Occidental College, interim president

at Occidental College, and chancellor at the University of Washington Bothell (UWB). In this chapter, I briefly describe my leadership journey grounded in struggles for ethnic studies, diversity, and students' rights, with the hope that some of my experiences can guide other faculty and students who hold strong a commitment to social justice and equity and seek to affect change within higher education. Academic leadership is a "road less traveled" by most Asian American faculty, yet I would argue a road that more Asian Americans should pursue if they believe that education is an effective mechanism of social change and justice.²

I have argued elsewhere that colleges and universities are as important sites for social change as any community location.³ Over the past 50 years, Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders have fought for a greater access to universities with a more inclusive curriculum, welcoming spaces, more diverse faculty and staff, and access to the levers of power and decision-making within institutions. Effective change in higher education requires faculty participation, a willingness to lead, and student and community allies. It requires individuals willing to not just talk the talk, but walk the walk as social justice change agents.

1 Faculty Participation Matters

While all universities have presidents/chancellors, chief academic officers/provosts, and other major administrative leadership, the strength of American higher education is faculty authority over curriculum and academic matters. Historically, collaborative governance between the administration and faculty on almost all campus matters has supported academic freedom, curriculum development, research, and scholarship that is the envy of the world but is under continuous threat. To maintain the values of collaborative governance, faculty must take their role in leadership and decision-making seriously.

On many campuses, getting faculty to participate in governance is very difficult. Most faculty are heavily involved in their teaching and scholarship/creative work. Serving on governance committees or in leadership roles is often seen as a punishment or, at least, a distraction from "real" work. When promotion and tenure decisions are made, credit for university service is small or nonexistent. Rarely are faculty with strong research and teaching records denied tenure or promotion because of poor service. Why, then, should faculty participate?

For me, it is all about grassroots activism and asserting political power that I learned as a young student and is even more important today. Faculty can influence

²In 2017, only 2.3% of all university presidents were Asian American. Henry Gee & Audrey Yamagata-Noji MIA: *Missing in Administration: Asian Pacific Islander Americans and the Bamboo Ceiling*. Los Angeles: Asian Pacific Americans in Higher Education and Leadership Education for Asian Pacifics (2018).

³For example, Kenyon S. Chan, "Rethinking the Asian American Studies Project: Bridging the Divide Between Campus and Community." *Journal of Asian American Studies*, 3:1 (2000), 17–37.

the institution in several ways. First, and quite commonly, faculty can just complain. They can complain about the curriculum committee that seems to protect the status quo and doesn't accept or appreciate the new scholarships and perspectives offered by fields like Asian American Studies. They can complain about promotion/tenure committees that seem biased against minority and women faculty and that discount the value of nontraditional scholarship and the extra hidden duties of nurturing minority and women students. They can complain about the bias demonstrated in hiring committees for never appreciating the difficult and less traditional paths taken by minority and women candidates, and so on.

Complaining sometimes works. Maybe, the generally white male and female administrators will be sympathetic to the complaints of minority voices and act to make curriculum, admissions, promotion, and other matters more transparent. However, even when there are administrative allies, they do not control faculty committees. Rather, there are conservative faculty and administrators nationwide who control faculty committees and appoint those who will uphold the "standards" of the university and Western civilization. Think about faculty who seem to have lifetime appointments on these key committees or senior faculty who block any progressive agenda including new faculty hires, and you will begin to understand the power of faculty participation.

Faculty with a social justice perspective who would like to see more equality and inclusion on university campuses should participate willingly and purposefully in faculty governance. They can volunteer to serve on the department or university curriculum committee. They can ask to serve on hiring and promotion committees. They can ask the provost and dean how they can become more involved in university affairs. They can take their turn being department chairs.

I recognized early on that taking faculty leadership roles and greater responsibilities within the university meant that I would be sacrificing my own research and teaching. I watched with envy as my friends working hard and long in Asian American communities started or worked in social service agencies, civil rights organizations, K-12 education, legal aid centers, and local government sites. Then, I realized that my commitment to activism and social justice could be fulfilled on campus and decided to try to do what I could in the university with as much purpose as I would in any community site.⁴

Serving on and, better yet, chairing faculty committees provide opportunities for one to influence the decisions being made on behalf of the university. As an example, in the mid-1990s, CSUN decided to completely overhaul its general education (GE) requirements, namely to reduce the units and options required of students to facilitate their degree completion in a timely manner. At the time, I was chair of Asian American Studies (AAS) Department⁵, whose entire curriculum and enrollment were based on courses approved for GE credits. It was rumored that changes

⁴Chan, "Rethinking."

⁵In 1990, I was appointed the founding department chair and only faculty member of the new Asian American Studies Department at California State University, Northridge. Now, this department has over 20 faculty and offers a BA degree and minor in Asian American Studies.

in GE requirements would eliminate AAS and other ethnic studies courses from the approved list of GE courses. This would devastate our enrollment. At a time when many of us sought a more inclusive curriculum, eliminating Asian American and other ethnic studies courses from general education would make it more difficult for students to learn about the history, struggles, and contributions of Asians in America and other communities. So, I worked with my dean and provost to get appointed the chair of the GE review committee. It wasn't hard to convince them since few people wanted this difficult position.

This was one of the most challenging administrative tasks that I have encountered. I had to pull together every part of the university to bring vision and clarity to the GE program. Turf wars were reopened. Redefining a requirement could enhance the enrollment of some departments and shrink the enrollment of others. At the same time, I knew that as the chair of the review committee, I could protect my department and other critical areas of diversity and inclusion. I used persuasion and a strong collaborative process to accomplish a very successful result for the campus. Most importantly, I was able to ensure that my department would be safe and thrive and that ethnic studies was respected. Of course, participation in shared governance is also frustrating because conservative forces still have lots of levers in their control, particularly if progressive faculty fail to participate.

2 Leadership Matters

Being willing to take on top leadership roles in higher education matters. I am often asked why I decided to become a department chair, dean, vice president, and eventually chancellor/president well beyond active faculty participation. For me, it was a matter of how I could affect the greatest change for underrepresented and first-generation students, faculty, and staff, including Asian Americans. Teaching and mentoring students offer lifetime rewards and fulfillment. Exploring new ideas or research to solve a social issue is exciting and valuable. Administrative work, however, allowed me opportunities to change the institution from within.

As department chair, I decided who served on curriculum and promotion committees. I sat with other chairs to discuss the allocation of faculty and fiscal resources. I was also positioned to advocate for the value of new fields such as Asian American, ethnic, and women's studies and other new disciplines as significant parts of a modern university curriculum. As dean, I had significant control of financial budgets and faculty allocations. I influenced faculty and staff hiring, admissions policies, and special funds for student and faculty projects. In support of equity and inclusion, I also made the final decision on faculty hiring and tenure that were forwarded to the president. For example, I was given two finalists for a position in one of the social science departments. One candidate was a white male rated by the department as a perfect fit. The other was an African American woman who was also rated as highly gifted and well qualified. The department recommended that I hire the white male and find the funds to hire the African American woman too. So, both were

acceptable to the department. Much to the department's initial distress, I only hired the African American woman, and she became a leader in the department. The deanship is a powerful location for social justice.

As the vice president and chancellor/president, I could shape the university at all levels. I appointed social justice allies to major positions and committees; diverted funds to projects that opened the university to underrepresented students, new curriculum, and new scholarship; ensured that student affairs, student life, clubs, and cocurricular activities were inclusive and welcoming for all the students; provided resources for targeted student recruitment and scholarships; and supported and encouraged staff of color to be hired and seek promotions.

Most importantly, chancellors/presidents have ultimate authority over faculty hiring, tenure, and promotion. When I served as interim president and chancellor, I changed faculty hiring and tenure/promotion practices to ensure that hiring committees diversified the criteria for their searches and their finalist pools. I required that both hiring and tenure/promotion review committees take into account the positive value of new scholarship areas, community participation research, and nontraditional career pathways. With these changes in place and guided by social justice values, it was ultimately my decision of whom to hire, tenure, and promote.

3 Students and Campus Allies Matter

The idea that students matter is obvious. In the case of Asian American Studies, students are central to its survival and renewal. Asian American Studies was born out of student activism in the 1960s–1970s and continues because of student concerns. Many small Asian American Studies programs across the country would disappear if it weren't for student vigilance on those campuses. Students continue to fight for curriculum inclusion, equality in admissions, support for Asian American and Pacific Islanders and other underrepresented groups, and support for diversifying faculty and staff. New discussions about undocumented students, individual pronouns, and reframing titles like Chicano to Chicana are all pushed by students.

Campus allies matter as well. The establishment of Asian American Studies at CSUN was helped enormously by the support, advice, and influence of the Chicana/Chicano, Africana, and women's studies departments. Influential senior faculty and leaders in those departments supported Asian American students and faculty and demanded the establishment of Asian American Studies. They also assisted in the campus political maneuvering necessary to get approval for the department and curriculum. Faculty and students of color and white faculty and students in other academic departments and nonacademic departments such as student affairs, admissions, and staff associations are also important sources of support. Indeed, Asian American Studies would not exist today without the political power of the African American and Chicano movements. Ethnic studies in general is critical for advancing diversity and inclusion.

If Asian American Studies and a social justice agenda are to thrive on university campuses, communities still matter. Asian American community organizations and leaders were instrumental in supporting the early development of Asian American Studies on university campuses. For instance, community involvement was critical during the 1968 Third World Strike that led to the formation of ethnic studies at San Francisco State University.⁶ The 1989 landmark tenure battle at UCLA of an Asian American professor successfully brought state and local elected officials and many community leaders nationwide to press the chancellor to reverse the initial decision not to tenure the faculty member.⁷ In 1989, the San Fernando chapter of the Japanese American Citizens League strongly supported the establishment of Asian American Studies at CSUN. Even today, universities continue to engage local and national Asian American organizations and leaders in support of issues on campuses and to raise funds from alumni and other community supporters for student scholarships, community internships, community-based research, and endowed professorships. Ignoring or alienating alumni and the community is done with great peril. All universities must have support from their local community and pay attention to “town and gown” relationships. Asian American Studies programs disconnected from their local and national communities are without souls.

4 Applying Social Justice Leadership in the Real World

Serving as chancellor at the University of Washington Bothell (UWB) from 2007 to 2013 allowed me to test my theory of social justice leadership in a real-world setting. At the time of my appointment, UWB was barely 20 years old, served only 1600 students, and lacked any academic identity or clear mission that would attract students. It resides a mere 12 miles from the UW Seattle campus, established in 1861 with an enrollment of over 40,000. In addition, the campus is in a suburb of metropolitan Seattle within a primarily white middle-class community, while it was designed to serve a more diverse population by drawing from areas outside Bothell. At the same moment, public funding of universities was severely impacted by the great recession of 2008, and UWB lost more than 60% of its state funding. This required specific and targeted strategies to lead the campus.

With broad responsibilities, often described as “soup to nuts,” I was determined to approach my chancellorship with a firm commitment to social justice and equity within the university. Among the many challenges I faced, four stand out as examples of how a social justice approach to leadership is effective. The first was the necessity to gain the trust of the entire UWB community so that it would accept a

⁶ Karen Umemoto, “On Strike!: San Francisco State College Strike, 1968–1969: The Role of Asian American Students.” In M. Zhou & A. C. Ocampo (eds.), *Contemporary Asian America: A Multidisciplinary Reader* (3rd ed). New York: New York University Press (2016), 25–59.

⁷For a discussion of Don Nakanishi’s case, see Dale Minami, “Guerrilla War at UCLA: Political and Legal Dimensions of the Tenure Battle.” *Amerasia Journal*, 35:3 (2009), 143–166.

social justice mission for the university. The second was to focus the campus on student recruitment, retention, graduation, and post-graduation success to grow its size, impact, and reputation. The third was to ensure a strong and vital faculty. The fourth was fighting for support for public higher education.

The most important role of chancellors/presidents is to set the broad direction and agenda for the campus and gain the trust of the campus to accomplish that agenda. Luckily at UWB, I inherited a campus that was not bogged down by a long history of traditions; indeed, the founding faculty viewed the campus as an opportunity to reinvent the definition of a university to better serve students inadequately served by more established institutions. My role was to crystallize the goals and values of the faculty, students, and staff into a campus-wide agenda for change and to build a team of senior administrators and faculty, students, and staff from across the campus to implement our shared vision. I wanted to ensure that the campus was strongly committed to recruiting, retaining, and graduating an undergraduate population consistent with social justice values that included students who were underrepresented, first in their families to attend college, from low-income families, returning, and nontraditional age, women, and veterans. Over the years, this diverse student body has become UWB's strength.⁸

A social justice approach to campus leadership opened the campus to a discussion of the good, the bad, and the ugly to ensure that the entire campus and local community were invested in UWB's future. No detail was too small to discuss, and no issue was too confidential to be hidden. To be transparent and inclusive, I regularly held open town hall meetings with faculty, students, and staff to discuss the direction of the campus and to brief the university community on budget matters, campus physical planning, new curriculum proposals, student affairs, and housing concerns and, of course, the perennial issues of food and parking. Widely attended, these town halls were important occasions for me to outline the differences between making a decision based on social justice values versus decisions made to maintain the status quo. The town halls were also important opportunities to listen to the questions and concerns of the campus community. I also held regular meetings with the governing boards, community advisory boards, mayors, state legislators, business leaders, social service leaders, and other opinion leaders who needed to clearly understand and support the goals and values of the campus, particularly when the goals run against the preservation of the privileged or elite.

The second challenge was to translate the goals and values of the campus into actions that ensured student success. We targeted student recruitment to augment enrollment that would enhance our social justice mission. Recruiting a diverse student body was essential, but graduating them was the goal. UWB is now cited as a model for the recruitment and success of underrepresented and nontraditional

⁸As of this writing, UWB serves over 6000 students; more than 50% are first in their family to attend college, 46% are domestic students of color, and 10% are international students, along with 300 veterans; 59% graduate debt free. *Fast Facts 2018–2019*, University of Washington Bothell.

students.⁹ We knew that many students came with great talent and motivation but went to high schools that left gaps in their preparation for university work, and they often faced economic challenges that could prevent them from graduating. Many older/returning students had deep life and work experiences but lacked confidence in their academic skills. We also knew that students of color and women faced negative stereotypes about their potential to succeed in many fields and professions.

The campus took pride in every student who graduated and felt a personal failure for every student who did not succeed or graduate. Campus ownership of student progress is no small matter in the overall success of students. We decided that if we admitted a student, it was our collective responsibility to graduate that student. This was our social justice challenge. Faculty and staff agreed to an early alert system to identify students who were struggling in the first weeks of classes. All student support programs, including student affairs, became better coordinated and developed a triage method to work as a team to support individual students. We carefully studied students who left to determine what we could have done better and to try to draw them back to campus if that was what they desired. We also started a new School of Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics, with a particular focus on opening these fields to women and students of color and breaking down traditional barriers to their success.

The third challenge was recruiting and retaining exceptional faculty. Faculty responsibilities have grown over the last decades. Part of these pressures on faculty come from the severe budget reductions imposed on public universities. This has resulted in the reduction of full-time tenure-track faculty in favor of full-time and part-time adjunct/contingent faculty. At UWB, we faced several dilemmas. We were growing student enrollment rapidly and developing new academic programs and degrees. We could not hire full-time tenure-track faculty quickly enough to meet the student demand. Further, we needed sufficient student enrollment to fund new faculty positions, but we also required new faculty to open new classes and degree programs to build enrollment. How could we accomplish this in a time of recession and state budget cuts! Yet, we still had students who needed classes and wanted to graduate. Adjunct faculty are wonderfully skilled and dedicated scholars/teachers. From a university budget perspective, however, they are often seen as simply cheap labor. Universities can hire three or four part-time faculty to “cover” the basic courses taught by a department, pay each a very low fee per course, and provide no benefits/retirements. However, a short-term solution of hiring more part-time and full-time adjunct/contingent faculty and underpaying them was not consistent with our social justice values.

Applying a social justice perspective required the campus to find a way to compensate our adjuncts adequately and provide them with a supportive working environment. Although we were committed to hiring full-time tenure-track faculty who would carry the responsibilities of research, teaching, and service, the appointment

⁹Shaun R. Harper & Isaiah Simmons, *Black Students at Public Colleges and Universities: A 50 State Report Card*. Los Angeles, University of Southern California, Race and Equity Center, 2019.

of full-time long-term lecturers focused on teaching also fits our campus well. Being a more teaching-/student-oriented small research university, we could combine many part-time positions into full-time lectureships with long-term contract commitments, reasonable teaching loads, full benefits/retirement, promotion possibilities, sabbatical rights, and voting rights within their departments. Within the constraints of the University of Washington's overall faculty policies, these lecturers can devote their careers to teaching and mentoring while maintaining their scholarship but at less intensity than tenure-track faculty. It isn't perfect. While greatly reducing the number of part-time faculty, it provided for more full-time, long-term positions with greater benefits.¹⁰

A fourth challenge that was superimposed over all other challenges was the decline in public support and state funding of public universities and community colleges across the nation. This was accelerated by the historic economic recession that began in 2008. The de-funding of public higher education continues as of this writing. In 2007, Washington funded 77 cents of every academic dollar; by 2015, that was reduced to 23 cents shifting the cost of attendance to the students and families. The state of Washington, like many states, spends more on prisons than higher education.¹¹

Higher education was once considered a public good and hence publicly funded. However, public opinion, as reflected in state legislatures, now believes that funding public universities and community colleges should be the responsibility of students and their families, not the public through tax dollars. For many low-income, first-generation, nontraditional age, and underrepresented students, publicly supported higher education is often their only option. Reducing the public commitment to funding public higher education locks out the very students who need it most to advance themselves and their families. A social justice leader must provide a voice to ensure that higher education is not just for the elite or a mechanism for students to secure a lifetime of debt. As described before, I spent considerable time meeting with state and local legislators, business groups, and opinion leaders to argue for the necessary investment by the public in higher education.

Most importantly, to meet these four challenges and other issues during my term as chancellor, I did not operate alone. Effective leaders, including those who hold strong social justice values, must gather together a strong team of senior administrators, faculty, students, and staff to be successful. Progress at UWB was largely accomplished by keeping a laser focus on social justice and equity issues with an extraordinary group of vice chancellors, deans, staff, faculty, students, and community leaders.

This strong commitment to social justice leadership continues to be a central focus of the campus today. In 2022, UWB served over 6000 students and ranks

¹⁰Some part-time faculty will always be essential to teach specialty or professional/practice courses.

¹¹Sullich, S. Morgan, I, and Schak, O. *State and Local Expenditures on Corrections and Education. Policy and Program Studies Services*, U.S. Department of Education, Office of Planning, Evaluation, and Policy Development, 2016.

number 1 in the nation for public colleges that provide the greatest return on investment.¹² It ranks second among public universities in Washington state in highest wages earned by UWB alumni and continues its mission of being one of the most economically and ethnically diverse universities in the northwest.¹³

5 Conclusion

Not all universities are receptive to enhancing equity, diversity, and inclusion, but leaders can make a difference in even the most conservative institutions. To lead a university from a social justice perspective does not take any special talent or skill. It does not require more time or energy. It does require clear goals, values, collaboration, and allies at many levels. It compels a commitment to equity, diversity, and inclusion. It involves leadership in the service of others. And it demands a commitment to do battle against established institutional biases and privileged positionality.



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¹² CNBC *Make It* (2020); Educational Resource & Data Center (2021).

¹³ UWB Fast Facts 2021–2022; *Best Value Colleges 2018 College ROI Report* (2018) [Payscale.com](https://payscale.com), www.payscale.com/college-roi