

# Breaking the Bamboo

By Renu Khator

When my appointment as president of the University of Houston was announced in 2007, many Texans turned to Google to find out more about this strangely named person who would be leading their state's third largest public university. In India, televisions interrupted their programming to announce the news. Thousands of congratulatory e-mails flooded in, many from Asians and Asian Americans proclaiming it a great day because I had cracked the "bamboo ceiling."



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# Ceiling

As an immigrant woman, I always have known that I had to work harder to climb the ladder, but had I indeed gone beyond some sort of bamboo ceiling? To tell the truth, I wasn't familiar with that term.

A few months ago, however, I had the opportunity to learn more about this perplexing phenomenon as a participant in the American Council on Education's roundtable, "Breaking the Bamboo Ceiling." It was an enlightening experience, one that laid out the special challenges (and possible remedies) facing Asian Americans aspiring to leadership positions at American universities.

The statistics, which indicate that Asian Americans are nearly absent from the ranks of university presidents, are indeed vexing. Although nearly 7 percent of tenured faculty members in American universities are Asian American, less than 1 percent of presidents and chancellors come from this group. Compared with Hispanics (3 percent of faculty and 4.6 percent of presidents) and African Americans (4.5 percent of faculty and 5.8 percent of presidents), it's clear that even within the minority arena, there is a notable discrepancy.

## A Conflict of Values

Obviously, the pipeline to the top for Asian Americans is broken. But why?

The short answer seems to be that Asian Americans, though considered hard workers and academically inclined, hold values that are often in conflict with those perceived to be vital for a university president. This discord between the Asian-based values and those perceived to be necessary for American leadership roles are reflected not only in the academic arena but also in society in general, including the worlds of business and politics.

What are these conflicts?

In a University of California, Santa Barbara study, psychologists Bryan S. K. Kim, Donald R. Atkinson, and Peggy H. Yang identified more than a dozen such common Asian values, including deference to authority figures, respect for elders, self-effacement, restraint, avoidance of family shame, and placing others' needs ahead of one's own.

The study also revealed that these values did not differ substantially across generations since immigration. In other words, Asian-American descendants may assimilate and adopt Western ways of living, but certain ingrained Asian values are very slow to change. Although those values are commendable under many circumstances, they also can be perceived (or misperceived) as being contrary to the generally accepted traits required for leadership in American universities.

A classic example, for instance, is the Asian cultural belief that too much eye contact is disrespectful and even confrontational. However, not making eye contact can be misconstrued within the American system as an indication of insincerity or discomfort. Similarly, deference to authority may be likened to timidity or a lack of opinions. Self-effacement suggests indifference or a lack of ambition; avoidance of shame prevents one from publicly acknowledging his or her aspirations for fear of failing; self-control and modesty inhibit one from social interaction and public speaking; and so on.

Without a doubt, these are obstacles on the pathway to the presidency. It's important to note that these aren't "prejudices" in the usual sense of the word. In her insightful book, *Breaking the Bamboo Ceiling: Career Strategies for Asians*, human resources executive Jane Hyun explains it this way: "While biases in the workplace do exist, this ceiling is not always imposed by others. As with many challenges, Asian Americans should acknowledge that barriers could also stem from self-limiting cultural influences on their behavior, attitude, and performance in various social and professional settings."

I started my career facing many of those same challenges as a stereotypical Asian American—bashful about speaking in public, academically inclined, reluctant to talk about myself, enmeshed with my extended family, deferential and in awe of figures of authority, and publicly dismissing any desire to be in administration and assume a leadership role. "The dark side is not for me," I boasted freely and frequently.

But, in my case, things changed.

My dean suggested that I apply for the university's new administrative internship program. The program required me to write about my ultimate career goal and its importance to me. It took several drafts for

me even to admit that I was serious about administration. In the end, I wrote that my “ultimate objective” was to be dean. It was as far as I could dream. Writing it down and then publicly discussing it with others made the first crack in the barrier that stood

That initial impetus from my dean helped me take the first big steps of acknowledging my aspirations and seeking a mentor. After the internship, I applied for, and was appointed to, the position of faculty assistant to the president. For the first time,

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between my dreaming a dream and working hard to achieve it.

The program required me to have a mentor, and I selected our vice president of research simply because he was able to maintain his research while holding an important central position.

I sensed the value of administration and learned my early, important lessons about the crucial need for networking and partnering. I also realized that I genuinely enjoyed it. I rose from department chair to dean to provost to president.

Unfortunately, too few of my Asian-American colleagues have had similar experiences.

Statistically, Asian Americans have been reluctant to prepare themselves as candidates for the presidency. A recent ACE survey found that only 15 percent of Asian-American chief academic officers have participated in leadership programs, compared with 57 percent of African Americans and 30 percent of Hispanics.

In contrast to survey results indicating that Asian Americans do not seek out mentors, I was most comfortable in seeking out such assistance and have benefited greatly from having a mentor. My favorite readings have always been biographies and autobiographies of political and social leaders. I am intrigued by how people build great things from nothing and how they conquer the most difficult summits in their lives. Seeking out real-life mentors was simply an extension of what I had been doing all along.

Now, unlike so many of my Asian-American colleagues, I am neither a scientist nor an engineer. The discipline of political science and public policy afforded me the luxury of continuing my research while experimenting with administration. But I truly appreciate the additional difficulty that my Asian-American colleagues face in maintaining their lab-based research on a part-time basis while pursuing administrative experiences. To be honest, I simply got lucky in that respect.

I must address another question often asked by Asians and Asian Americans: “Do you have to sacrifice your family life?” I was fortunate in two respects. First, I had children at a very young age and they were already in college by the time I took my first steps on the road to administration. Second, my husband has been the dreamer and architect

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of my career. He does whatever necessary to help me succeed, from fixing a last-minute dinner to graciously dressing up in a tux to accompany me to an event for the fourth time in one week. If I have cracked the bamboo ceiling, he has been my biggest hammer.

### Start Building

To my Asian-American colleagues, I have a plea: Administration has its own thrill and gratification, and I urge you to consider playing a prominent role in it. The opportunity to make a difference in higher education as an administrator is huge. There are many Asian students on American campuses today, so you might consider doing it for them, if not for yourself. They need to see role models, and they need to be inspired. If not, the bamboo ceiling will remain in place.

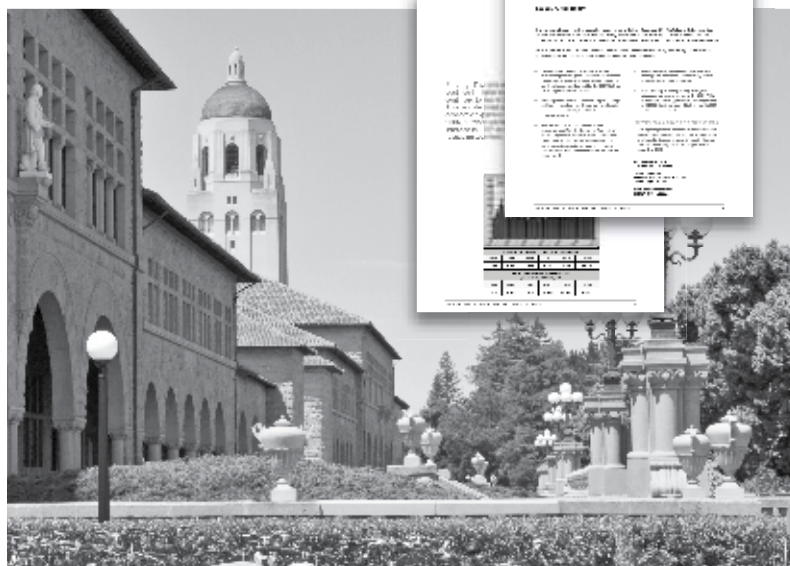
So think seriously about traveling the road to the presidency. If you decide to take that journey, admit it to yourself. Say it in front of a mirror several times, then say it to others. Until you believe it, you won't admit it, and until you admit it, you won't take the first real step. Then, start building your network, seek out mentors, attend workshops, and become methodical about your approach. You needn't turn your back on your cultural heritage, but you must recognize the limits and misperceptions that may come with it and transcend them. Self-awareness is the key.

In the end, if everything fails, just remember this: If a teenage immigrant girl in an arranged marriage with no knowledge of English can become a university president, why can't you? Higher education in America deserves nothing less than the very best leaders available, and ceilings—bamboo and otherwise—should never get in the way of that. ■

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