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ASIAN AMERICAN SCHOLARS IN MID-CAREER

## Joining the Administrative Ranks? Potential Impacts and Discerning Factors

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### ABSTRACT

With “diversity, equity, and inclusion” becoming a greater emphasis in many educational institutions, many faculty of Asian descent will need to consider if they want to move from fulltime teaching to some kind of administrative role. This article discusses various factors—societal, institutional, and personal—that impact upon this decision-making process.

### KEYWORDS

institution; administration; Asian American, racialization; career

As the term “Asian Americans” represents many different people, so the phrase “academic administrative positions” represents many different roles.<sup>1</sup> There are some pretty significant differences between being, say, a department chair, an academic dean, or a chief executive officer of an entire institution (such as a seminary president). Reduction of classroom teaching (barring exceptional arrangements) is a common result of one’s entry into the administrative ranks, even if one is talking about a part-time administrative position (such as heading up a center or a particular program), but the particular impacts on teaching and learning will vary depending on what kind of an administrative role one assumes.

For example, department chairs and academic deans have the potential to influence faculty hiring, curricular design, and assessment. Those of Asian American descent in these positions have a great opportunity, therefore, to bring not only diversity concerns to these processes, but also actual diversities in terms of who gets to teach, what is taught, and how teaching and learning are being done and evaluated. This is especially important since Asian Americans and Asian American concerns can still be invisible and unrecognized in many educational circles. Having (at least in theory) control over the academic budget of either a department or an entire institution, they can also set particular priorities for funding faculty research and new course design to help encourage teaching and research on topics that are related to race or to Asian America. While CEOs of educational institutions are arguably

<sup>1</sup> Having been an academic dean for only two short years in 2011-2013, I am not really qualified to write on this topic by myself. As a result, I solicited input and received many helpful insights from Susan Abraham, Carolyn Chen, Jane Iwamura, Uriah Kim, Kah-Jin Jeffrey Kuan, Boyung Lee, Roger Nam, Sharon Suh, Sharon Tan, Frank Yamada, and David K. Yoo. While these wonderful colleagues’ reflections inform and infuse my writing of this article, I alone am responsible for its final written form, including any shortcomings or inadequacies that may be present therein.

more removed from these academic decisions, their duty and responsibility to shape and implement an institution's mission and vision means that they cannot, and should not, be completely disengaged from these conversations, especially if the institution in question is relatively small. In fact, the need to think about some larger questions beyond one's own courses may cause one to think about and see teaching and learning in new ways. For instance, the experience of being an administrator may lead one to pay greater attention to issues of formation or questions about what constitutes "student success."

Even if a school's CEO of Asian descent has decided—whether because of the size of the school, time constraint, and/or other reasons—to completely disengage themselves from academic matters, what they do as an administrator can still have huge effects on teaching and learning. While a school's cultural and financial health, for which its CEO is ultimately responsible, will undoubtedly influence teaching and learning (for example, theological/ideological rigidity or flexibility, class size, or faculty morale), this is not what I have in mind here. Instead, I am imagining what might happen if an Asian American president decided, as part of his or her vision and mission for a school, to radically diversify the student population so students of color actually become the majority. This change alone has the potential to exert pressure on those who do make academic decisions to seek a more diverse faculty composition or, at the very least, to demand a diversification in course materials, even if those materials are taught by white faculty persons. Having a critical mass of persons of color on campus, whether they are students or faculty, alters the teaching and learning environment, which may in turn lead to pedagogical shifts, curricular changes, and different faculty compositions.

While an Asian American dean or president may not be involved in much, if any, classroom teaching of students, she or he can still be teaching a different population in a different setting. In an effort to work with the faculty, cultivate individual donors, build communal relations, or guide the board of trustees, an Asian American dean or president has opportunities to share what she or he cares about, including the importance of diversity in the study of religion and theology in general and the importance of paying attention to Asian American communities and concerns in particular. One should never underestimate the possible effects of such teaching and learning, as it may bring awareness, interest, or even personal or communal investment that can indirectly or directly impact classroom teaching. The rhetoric of "moving from faculty to administration," while commonsensical in some ways, can also present a false dichotomy. This is not a question of whether administrators retain faculty titles within an institution or whether they still spend time teaching courses in classrooms; it is a deep realization that teaching and learning are foundational and indispensable to an administrator's work in building institutions.

It takes intentionality on the part of an Asian American administrator, of course, for these indirect but larger scale impacts to have a chance to materialize. Similarly, Asian American administrators can still shape the classroom directly, if they intentionally choose to use whatever classroom opportunity they have to teach materials with an explicitly Asian American focus. This is especially important given the still low number of religion and theology faculty members with scholarly focus and expertise in Asian America.

The inevitable question that many Asian American faculty members in religion and theology face is whether one should consider becoming an administrator, especially since diversity is now a rhetorical goal in many institutions and an increasing number of Asian American faculty members are being tapped or invited to become administrators. This is not an easy question, and must be considered on several levels. First, there is the big picture, which has to do with not only teaching and learning in religion and theology, but also the social reality of race and racialization in the United States. As already mentioned, Asian American administrators have the potential to influence and change the broader culture of teaching, learning, and scholarship because they can participate in institutional governance and decision-making processes about policies and practices, including for what and how resources are being accessed and deployed. There are also structural problems in education, especially those that are related to the larger social dynamics around race and racialization (for example, white supremacist and normative values), that one cannot address, let alone transform, through one's own scholarship or classroom teaching.

Another big-picture consideration is the need to challenge the bias that Asian Americans are not well suited for leadership. The presence of Asian American administrators may change the minds of not only those of the dominant culture but also those of Asian Americans. Just as having Asian Americans on a faculty may help Asian American students imagine being

faculty members themselves, having Asian Americans in administration can have the same effect on current and future generations of Asian American faculty members in religion and theology. A lot of times, it does take “seeing” for an Asian American teacher/scholar to take the necessary steps to pursue an administrative position. Having more Asian Americans in various administrative roles can also help combat social temptations and tendencies to essentialize “Asian American” identities and categories. If one wants to be a changemaker, there are certainly many good reasons to go into administration.

Regardless of the specific administrative role in question, an Asian American administrator may be particularly effective in playing a mediating role among different racial/ethnic groups, given the group’s placement as a “middle minority” within the racialized social structure of the United States. Being in the middle, of course, can mean either both-and or neither-nor. Depending on the specific situation and dynamics, Asian American administrators may also find themselves hanging in the balance precisely because of this somewhat liminal position, or at times even unrecognized, identity, and their administrative work rejected by other racial/ethnic groups as illegitimate or ill-advised meddling. There will inevitably be some within an institution who think that an Asian American’s entry into the administrative ranks is solely based on race and political correctness. This big—and general—level of consideration, therefore, must be balanced by careful reflection on the particulars of the specific situation or institution. Intentionality must be present for Asian American administrators to bring about real changes, but intentionality undoubtedly works better with cooperation than against resistance. One must, in other words, evaluate if an institution is ready and eager to support a minoritized leader and does so with proper resources. What will it take, including what you have to do and not do (such as teaching and scholarship), for you to not only step in but also do the job well, and how much of what you need is already in place? Does the institution truly value you and your vision for this administrative role, or is the institution only interested in you as a diversity token because of recent demographic changes; as a model minority because you, in their imagination, will be a diligent and compliant caretaker who follows all the established procedures and processes all the necessary paperwork; or, especially in scenarios where an administrator is chosen internally, as an “ideal candidate” because your research and scholarship are deemed to be less significant than those of your (white) colleagues? Will you be the only Asian American or person of color on the administrative team?

Similarly, one will do well to consider the financial and emotional health of the institution in question. Is the institution undergoing significant transition of some kind? Will you be so mired in budget cuts or personnel conflicts that you are already set up for failure? These concerns, like the concern about support, all come down to one question: What will happen to your agency and your intention for your vision given the situation of and the personnel dynamics within the institution? Will your agency increase, decrease, or simply be neutralized? The transparency and fairness of the selection process is also related to this; a questionable process can undercut one’s effectiveness from the outset because many within the institution will question your legitimacy.

In addition, there is the personal factor. Do you enjoy thinking about institutions and lean toward institutional forms of thinking? Do you value administration, or do you see doing administration as easier than developing your teaching and scholarship? If it is the latter, is it because you have less passion for teaching and researching, or is it because, as a person of color, your courses and scholarship are less valued? Do you feel a call to a particular administrative post, or is it a “model minority” sense of duty or even, in some cases, a bit of messiah complex? Also ask yourself honestly: are you mainly attracted by the pay raise that comes with an administrative position?

What about your temperaments and skill set? Are you able to work with different personality types or working styles? Do you move well among diverse cultures and interact comfortably with persons of different races and backgrounds? Can you not only stomach but also work through conflicts (including the expectation by some Asian Americans and other minoritized persons that you will always take their side, or the assumption that you, as an Asian American, should be meek and mild)? How do you react or respond to subtle and perhaps even sophisticated forms of racism against you, whether manifested through underperformance of your staff or microaggressions of those higher up (including those on the board of trustees)? Are you comfortable with being a “first” or an “only,” since there may not be another Asian

American administrator before you or with you? Can you keep confidentiality? How do you handle uncertainty or crisis? Do you feel comfortable or frustrated with prioritizing and multitasking? While no one can be completely ready or perfectly equipped to take a new position in administration, asking these questions and answering them honestly can be very helpful in the discernment process.

One should also remember the different seasons in an academic career. Is this a right time in your career to become an administrator? Have you established yourself as a teacher and scholar so you can return to full-time teaching if you so desire? Joining the administrative ranks does not necessarily mean that you have to stay there for the rest of your career (provided you know and have what it takes to get back into the classroom). In fact, it may be wise to set some criteria and a timeframe to reevaluate continuing in administration. This is especially important if one enters the administrative ranks with ambivalence. The point of exploring and trying something is to gain clarity, so there is nothing wrong with moving out of administration after a test drive. Similarly, saying no to the administrative ranks at one moment does not mean that one cannot say yes later.

Finally, I must say that I do not see faculty members entering the administrative ranks in terms of “moving up” or “moving down.” I see it as a personal decision that is not necessarily irreversible, although it should be made with careful consideration and honest self-assessment. With vision and intention, Asian Americans in administrative ranks can have a huge impact on diversifying the teaching and learning of religion and theology.

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