

## Chapter 25

# Unexpected Journey Into Academia: Into the Great Plains

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### **ABSTRACT**

*There is much to be gained from narratives and stories. This author's perspective on transitioning from K-12 classrooms to higher education classrooms is one of many stories out there. The author acknowledges the experiences of others making the transition. The author wants to inform, educate, quicken, and inspire others in the unexpected journey into academia. There is much hope that the author's story will provide a collective body of knowledge, reflections, and experiences to aid others in similar trajectories. This story is of a Christian woman of Chinese descent in academia. It offers a human side of academia, extrapolating the struggles and joy of making that transition.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

Stories are more than just stories. The authors tell, inform, expound, quicken, challenge, nurture, commiserate, and rejoice with others. They often contain truth, personal truth at the very least, that others may never hear if they go untold. Etherington (2009) defines such stories of life and the corresponding research as the knowledge constructed by the individuals concerned with meaning made and attached to lived experiences. These stories can resonate with others and may even cause profound outcomes. Researchers usually look at individuals transitioning into traditionally secular higher educational institutions (Schuster & Finkelseten, 2006), often from the perspective of the various stages of faculty in their academic careers. They also tend to study faculty groups based on their specific identities, such as Faculty of Color or women faculty.

The intersection of the need to escape, change, and pure serendipity is intentional. In my case, I am telling my story of transitioning into academia with a faith perspective. I believe many people start their journey toward academia purposefully. Others, like me, begin vaguely, wander about, loop haphazardly

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across life, swerve off, and find their way back into academia. That's my story, and I am proud of it. I am wary of the responses to my account as there are risks in telling this story. I am telling my story to create a way for others to read and learn about how my account affects me, the community around me, and the pastures beyond. My narrative may serve as an opportunity for reflection on an alternative perspective to someone thinking about making a similar transition. However, I believe narratives can be compelling research pieces. My story provides the background of where I came from, the events that led me into higher education, the challenges and joys of my journey into higher education, and where I see myself in my current position.

### **Importance of the Story**

My story is important since it also provides a voice to the group of professionals in academia who are mothers. There are conversations about married mothers in academia; however, those conversations rarely lead to anything. In my experience, the lack of sustainability of conversation is often because of the lackadaisical attitude of individuals. If the conversation does not directly apply to the individuals' lives, there is not much-vested interest in getting the conversations moving towards any reform. An acknowledgment that mothers in academia face challenges is significant but insufficient. For example, there is still very little effort to ensure that institutes of higher education provide flexible schedules or extended winter and summer breaks (Casteneda et al., 2013). In my particular and personal experience, conversations do not often happen for fear of backlash. I believe that it creates a sense of discomfort in making oneself vulnerable. The invisibility can be real. The burden of microaggressions is felt. The lack of representation, especially in areas of mentorship, is undeniable.

However, I am a firm believer--or perhaps an eternal optimist-- that I do not have to be voiceless. In my experience, there is just as much joy and contentment as struggles in one's transition from K-12 to higher education. As much as constructive discussions can begin with the courage to tell one's story, I am always hopeful that discussion will continue as people listen when a story is told. My story is described as a commitment to honor my history, my gender, my color, my faith, and my community.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

There are bodies of research that look into the transitional journeys of K-12 teachers as they move into institutes of higher learning or academia. Individuals make the transition for many, often conflicting, reasons such as wanting a career change, meeting a professional need, following a passion, or having a life event change (Mainiero & Sullivan, 2006; Wilson et al., 2014). Those transitions are also mired in challenges associated with forms of stereotyping or discrimination. To better contextualize my transition into academia, I am mindful of including literature that can better understand my narrative and my journey.

### **Theoretical Lens**

The theoretical lens for this narrative is based on sociocultural identities studies which view human development as a continual process of becoming. This lens is based on the quest to self-search and analyzes the multiple sources and processes that contribute to the development of a new academic in higher education. Transitioning from a K-12 environment to academia requires dealing with the contextual re-

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