

PITCH PERFECT

Entering the United States with an early wave of immigrants from Korea, Dr. Kwang-Wu Kim's parents placed education as a focal point for his family. Growing up in Chicago's Hyde Park neighborhood, he often heard that the one thing that can't be taken away from you is what you learn.

In higher education, Kim has found that how you learn has a much greater impact than simply absorbing information.

"For me, one of the most important things about the role of education is that it's preparation for adaptability," says Kim. "It's learning what it means to learn and understanding how to recognize opportunities, then figuring out how to reposition one's

knowledge and skills to be successful in a different direction."

Since July 2013, Kim has served as president and CEO of Columbia College in Chicago. Like many, his current position was preceded by a number of trials and life lessons along the way.

When Kim enrolled at Yale University, he planned to study pre-medicine. After his first semester, he found the field to be less interesting than he'd thought. He explored several fields and decided to major in philosophy.

"I just loved the exploration of thought and ideas," he says.

Kim graduated from Yale magna cum laude in 1979. As an undergrad, he also spent a great deal of time studying music and developed his skills as a pianist. He furthered his education at the Peabody Institute of Johns Hopkins University and earned his doctorate in musical arts and an artist diploma.

Kim began his professional career in the nonprofit sector, where he directed a small community-based performing arts society in El Paso, Texas. From this experience, he gained the practical skills needed to run an organization and learned the dynamics of effectively connecting with communities.

After about six years in the nonprofit sector, he yearned to make a more profound impact. "I started asking myself what kind of work would make me feel a little more like I was helping to make the future better and I realized that had to be about being directly involved in what young people learn and how they learn," he says.

In 2001, Kim crossed over into higher education as president of the Longy School of Music in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

In 2006, he became dean of the Herberger College of the Arts at Arizona State University (ASU). Three years later,

he was named dean and director of ASU's Herberger Institute for Design and the Arts.

In each position, Kim was responsible for overseeing change. At Longy, he transformed the university's model from a community music school to a degree-granting institution, with a focus on requiring students to interact with the local community as a part of earning their degrees.

While at ASU, he was tasked with responding to a financial crisis during the Great Recession. The recovery process included merging the College of the Arts and the College of Design, creating a new culture on campus.

Kim is also highly concerned with setting a stage for national conversations surrounding the importance of the arts. "The artistic and creative disciplines propose a different paradigm of knowledge creation and a different way of understanding the world," he says.

As president at Columbia, Kim is fueled by student interaction. "I have individual office hours for students," he says. "That ongoing engagement is a daily reminder of why I'm doing this work and it's like being recharged every day."

Aware that many leading roles in higher education are not held by individuals of Asian descent, Kim is especially focused on minority students.

"Although different races and ethnicities experience challenges in the world differently, the fact that none of us are a part of the historical majority population gives us some commonality and gives me an opportunity to really talk to young people about what it means to navigate that," he says.

In leading the university, Kim's greatest concern is defining and implementing an education that is of clear value to students, especially during a time of increasing skepticism around the relevancy of higher education.

"Many institutions have not taken up the call to really declare what their value is," he says.

"For me, that's the work that we're doing through this planning process — making sure that what our students learn is relevant and sets them up for both a career after graduation, but also — in a liberal arts model — for success throughout a lifetime."

— Christina Sturdivant



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