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Oral History Interview with Lily Kong (Part 2)

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Singapore Management University Libraries
Oral History

Interviewee: Lily Kong
Interviewer: Pat Meyer
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Pat Meyer: Today is Tuesday, the 12th of March 2019 and this interview is taking place in SMU's recording studio in the Li Ka Shing Library. It's part of the university's oral history project. I'm Pat Meyer and today is the concluding interview for the two-part series with Professor Lily Kong, who is president and acting provost of Singapore Management University and the Lee Kong Chian Chair Professor of Social Science. I want to offer my congratulations on becoming the fifth president of SMU.

Lily Kong: Thank you.

Pat Meyer: And I would like to start our interview today by touching on two topics from your provost portfolio, and then we will move on to your role as president. In the first interview, we talked about organizing SMU's research around societal challenges. And today, I'd like to ask about your ideas for how to enable the growth of that research, how to provide funding, build capacity, increase awareness.

Lily Kong: Any research ecosystem is about people—people at different stages of their research development, and I would start with undergraduates. Part of it is about getting undergraduates interested and engaged with research. To the extent that we can draw in research assistants amongst our students who then might become enthused about doing a masters, a PhD and so forth, I think it behoves us as educators to do that. If we move one step beyond that, then it's students who do the graduate-studies research, whether it's at the master's level or the PhD level. And part of building that ecosystem is to ensure that we have enough resources by way of research scholarships that are attractive to students because otherwise in this economy that we have, that is actually by comparison to many other countries thriving, it is very easy to say, well, why would I take up five years of my life or more to do a PhD when my counterparts are out there developing their careers, settling down, paying the down payment for the HDB (Housing and Development Board) apartment, etc, and I am on a paltry research stipend? So part of it is making it viable through healthy research scholarships, and, of course, that is just one part of it.

Many people enter into research careers because they are deeply interested in the research questions. The financial part of it, they might be willing to make some sacrifices, but we can't be unreasonable about the sacrifices that they have to make. So, ensuring that we have enough research scholarships at a level that is reasonable is another part of making it possible for young people to join the research enterprise as such.

OH Topic: Research – Capacity building

And then, of course, at the faculty level, faculty are constantly trying to juggle between the different demands of being an academic—teaching, research, contributing to service in the

University and beyond the University. And how do we create time and space for them and offer them resources that will support the research? So in the last year, we have put in place a capacity-building fund where we have said to colleagues, if you have a really good idea about a societal challenge that you would like to address, make an application to this fund, not to do the research itself but to build the capacity to do the research. So, for example, the fund would bring in, say, a postdoctoral fellow to work with you, and together you would put your thoughts on paper on how to put together a very compelling research grant that you would go externally for competitive funding. It is about ensuring that there are enough of the kinds of databases that are needed to support the work of faculty, and so forth. So, it is also about putting policy in place where a faculty member who wins a major research grant might have the ability to take time off from a little bit of teaching for a year, maybe two years, to concentrate on the research. But I do want to emphasize that even while we are working through some of these policies, this is a university that does place a lot of attention on the high quality of education, and that means we do want faculty members who are active in research, who are ambitious in their research, but we don't want faculty who only want to do research to the exclusion of teaching. Because if that is the case, this individual belongs in a research institute not in a university. A university is about both education and research. And at different points in our journey as an academic, we might tilt the balance a little bit here or there, but fundamentally those two activities are important. So, it is about putting in place policies and practices to enable that balance, and hopefully, with all of that, we are able to support faculty to achieve the dreams they want to achieve in research and in teaching.

Pat Meyer: The second topic from your provost portfolio that I would like to ask about is the postgraduate professional programs. What is the importance of these programs at SMU and what is your thinking about how they should grow and develop?

OH Topic: Teaching & Curriculum – Postgraduate professional programs

Lily Kong: These postgraduate professional programs, taught masters programs, that exist in many universities, for me, is about building a more professional cadre of individuals for different industries and businesses. Unlike the research degrees, particularly the PhDs which are much more academic—even though some of them prepare graduates for industry as well—but the PhDs tend to be much more about the research, the deep thinking and so forth. The masters tend to be professionalizing. They lift the level of professionalism in whichever discipline, industry that you are interested in. So, if you're interested in the application of IT and business, you would enrol for a Master's of IT in Business - MITB for short, to help raise your level of professionalism in that particular area of work that you choose to go into. And likewise, if you were interested in a career in the finance industry, doing a Master's in Quantitative Finance could really deepen your professional skill sets. We call it professional postgraduate programs for a reason. It is about professionalizing in business and industry as such. How important it is, I think it fills an important part of the whole ecosystem and the whole spectrum of offerings that we have from undergraduate to PhD, and this sits right there as part of that ecosystem.

It is important for other reasons. In business schools around the world, this is the space that builds the reputation of the business school, perhaps more so than in some of the other schools. So, if you take the School of Social Sciences for example, this is a space that doesn't have the same dominance that it does in many business schools, and that's the same around the world. There are variations across campus in terms of emphases and foci, but I would say that in a portfolio approach, this is an important part of the university.

There is another reason why it is important. What I have just described is a mission of why this space is important. There is another reason, and that is the margins, the profits that these programs make. These are full-fee-paying programs. They are able to bring in revenues. In many universities, this is a space where the revenues come in and cross-subsidize other programs. I firmly believe in this because a university is fundamentally about cross-subsidies. You do believe in certain programs that are important for the education of young people that are not going to bring in the revenues, but they deserve to be there. And what that is, may differ from university to university, and some universities it may be theology, it may be the classics, it may even be philosophy, but you believe that it is an important part of the students' education, and therefore you cross subsidize. For me, the margins that these postgraduate professional programs make is not just about money making—we are a non-profit organization, we are not here to make money for its own sake—but the margins are for mission, and that is what I would keep an eye on.

Pat Meyer: Since becoming president in January this year, you're holding both the president's portfolio and provost's portfolio for a few months.

Lily Kong: Right.

Pat Meyer: And in the first interview you described the role of a university provost.

Lily Kong: Yes.

Pat Meyer: Can you tell us how your new role and responsibilities as president compare with those of provost?

OH Topic: Presidents – Internal and external role

Lily Kong: A provost's role is much more internal. It deals with everything academic. The president's role is both internal and external. Internal in the sense that at the end of the day, the president's responsibility is for the entire university. And it is only that you have the key person of a provost who helps you with many of the internal academic things, but ultimately the responsibility is still yours. Added on to that would be other internal roles for the corporate running of the university. Issues to do with finances, issues to do with the long-term financial sustainability of the university, issues to do with risk management, safety, security, HR for the non-academic side of the house. That entire spectrum is also the president's responsibility.

But over and above that, is an external function, and the external function is a function external to the university within the country but also beyond the country. And the key offices that I would have a great deal to do with, one would obviously be corporate communications and marketing, where it is about how we project ourselves, who are we as a university, how do we manifest a university that is vibrant, relevant and making a difference to society. Part of it is about projecting all the good work that the university does. And it is entirely possible that we do a lot of good work, but if we don't have that machinery and the strategy to project ourselves well, a lot of the good work can go unnoticed. My role as president is to represent and re-present the university.

There is a second office that I would have a lot to do with and that is the international office. And that is about projecting the university internationally. It is about developing the

opportunities internationally for collaborations. It is about making sure that the good things that we do are known much more internationally because that has a virtuous cycle in terms of bringing opportunities to the university.

Then, of course, there is the external world where I would have a primary responsibility, although I would not be the only one responsible for this, and that is advancement. That is about bringing resources to the university to do all the wonderful things that we want to do as a university. Imagination is free. Ambition can be free, but making it happen is not free. So we really do need to work at building a resource base that is robust, not just for the here and now, but for the long term. If I am to see myself as a steward, then my responsibility is not to steward the institution just now but for the longer term. And to the extent that I am able to work with all colleagues on campus because all colleagues have a responsibility or a role—maybe not a direct responsibility, but a role in helping with bringing in gifts to the university because people believe in us and what we want to do. It is my responsibility to shepherd everyone to do this as well as we can.

Pat Meyer: Last month at your inaugural address to the SMU community, you used the metaphor of a garden to lay out your vision for SMU. You spoke about the importance of working together to create this garden, and you described some of the challenges we might face. What's been the reaction of your colleagues and the SMU community to your inaugural address?

OH Topic: Presidents – Garden metaphor

Lily Kong: I have been hugely encouraged by the reaction. I have had colleagues who said that the "what" in the garden which I had described in terms of the four "I"s: the internationalization, the integration, the industry, innovation, was something that they felt they could easily internalize instead of a laundry list of 20 things that we wanted to do. It had been distilled in a way that they felt they could walk around and actually repeat what it is we wanted to do. That was one of the things I was trying to achieve, that people would know and it would become instinctive, rather than scratch their head and say, what was it the president said of the 20 things she wanted to do? I can remember two or something. So that was a part of it, and the reaction has been positive. Everybody could recite that back to me and probably can do it in their sleep now.

The other part was much more in a sense, touchy-feely and much more relational, and it was about the garden metaphor that I had used. People felt like—at least the reaction I got from like maybe 50 different people who have spoken to me or written to me—all of them except one said that was a metaphor that really worked. Many people said they could relate to it. It makes sense when you say that we want to cultivate this beautiful garden for everyone. It was a happy feeling. There were those who said they can totally understand the need for some weeding periodically. They can totally understand the need for pruning periodically, and there were those who said we recognize the hard work behind gardening. So, the reactions were varied, but the metaphor worked I think for many people. As I mentioned there was just one person who said that it was kind of out there, but one out of 50 is not bad.

Pat Meyer: How are you guided by this metaphor of the garden as you identify and tackle your initial priorities as president?

Lily Kong: When I think about Gardens by the Bay and how large a garden it is with different parts of the garden, you have the domes which require different temperature, different treatment, you have the different ethnic gardens, etc. I use that as a metaphor because I don't mean that the garden is just one monolithic whole. There are different patches in the garden. We all have our role to tend our patch of the garden, but the whole is a beautiful garden, and it is greater than the sum of the parts. My role, I think, is to identify —working with colleagues— what are those parts of the garden that we want? Do we want the domes? Do we want the ethnic patches? Do we want some outdoor garden? Do we want the gardens sheltered? Do we want a pavilion in the garden? And that is the next order of detail that we are getting down to that needs to be worked through with everyone.

So, if I say we are going to have more integration as part of the garden, how is that to be played out? Is it integration in interdisciplinary terms, for education, for research? Is it integration across the alumni-student cycle? Those are different parts of the integration garden, and we need to agree what integration looks like, and we need to find the right gardeners for the different practices of integration as such. We need to be able to identify the strengths and passions of the different gardeners, some of whom prefer to be working in a greenhouse and others who are very happy to be out in the sun, some who like to be tending to the pond in the garden and so forth. And so it is about good judgment as to what the strengths of individuals are, and we all have strengths and weaknesses. We all have blind spots. We can't do certain things, and why do we then pursue a path, a track for an individual where that is where his or her weaknesses are? Should we try and match where the strengths are so that the individual comes to work, on a daily basis, feeling fulfilled, that my strengths are recognized and what I am doing is making a difference to the larger garden. It is easier said than done. It is definitely easier said than done. But I think the metaphor worked because people recognized that that is what we need to do, we need to recognize the strengths of different people, match the job and the strengths, and sometimes, to then move on from what is your strength to another area where you don't have strength, but because you are interested and you want to learn, you are actually developing a different skill set as well. And as I said, all of this works very well in theory. The proof of the pudding is in the eating, to mix my metaphors.

Pat Meyer: Also, at your inaugural address, you introduced two new members of the SMU community: Professor Timothy Clark who will join as provost next month and Professor Chandran Kukathas who will join as dean of the School of Social Sciences in July.

Lily Kong: Yes.

Pat Meyer: As you said in your address, now is a very different time from when the planning for SMU began over 20 years ago. As the world and as the model for education changes, what is your thinking on how to guide SMU as it enters its third decade, and what are your ideas on the type of leadership required in this environment?

OH Topic: Presidents – Leadership styles, group dynamics

Lily Kong: I always believe in a leadership team, as opposed to a single leader who is dominant and maybe charismatic, but overly dominant. I do think there are times when you need that—if you are in battle in a war, you might need that command and control person, but in educational institutions, for the most part, I think you need a leadership team. And there is a good Chinese saying for it, "Qu Chang Bu Duan" (取长补短) which is, basically the different strengths of individuals that you would bring together to make up for the

weaknesses of other members in the team. And in an educational institution, that I think is very important. I think that in an educational institution, if you had an individual who was overly concerned about credit and glory to himself or herself all the time, you would lose the team.

What I do see as part of the team would be the following: I have articulated, after consultation with stakeholder groups, the key directions, and those key directions require different skill sets. If we are looking for someone to help develop the industry piece, having someone with that industry background would be really sensible, but who also understands the educational institution. That mix of it doesn't reside in everybody, because many of us came through from an undergraduate to a PhD, to an academic career and have never spent one day in in industry. Others have. Maybe we should draw those strengths into the team. If we are interested in a university that is developing, cultivating innovation and entrepreneurship talent, you need someone who knows that space, ideally through having been in that space himself or herself, or if not at least having done research in that space and understands what innovation and entrepreneurship means.

If we are looking for someone for the integration piece, then surely you need a particular kind of personality and leadership style, that the person is able to forge consensus, bring people together, have the patience to sit down and listen to different points of view. And if you're thinking of an internationalization piece, then you need someone with the international experience and background, you need someone who has that kind of presence when you are meeting with other counterparts and so forth. So, there will be different strengths that are needed depending on what you want to do. I have articulated what we want to try and achieve, and I am looking for individuals whose backgrounds, personalities and temperament would help make this up.

But more important than anything else, this group needs to be able to work together. This group needs to be able to recognize that this is where I have strengths and that is where I'm going to be really rowing hard and let me leave that to my partner, my colleague in the team and not try and do that as well. And I think we need for a team that supports one another, that's willing to say, let me chime in when you are having a difficult moment, let me not try and be the one who is dominant, has a voice in everything and so forth. We have got to know when to lead and went to take a step back. Ideally we will be able to find individuals of that ilk who will be able to work well together. That for me is my responsibility, to compose the team and to build the group dynamic.

Pat Meyer: I wanted to ask a little bit more about SMU going forward, and that is what are the challenges and advantages of being a relatively young university in this environment?

OH Topic: Challenges & Future – A relatively young university

Lily Kong: Yes. If I might just add to that—a relatively small university; it is not small but it is not fifty thousand, forty thousand students, and there is great advantage in that. Youth and size, I think, can be a double-edged sword, and we have to be clever about dulling the side of the sword that is not so good for us. So, on the plus side, relative youth, the fact that when we started we were agile, we were innovative, we were entrepreneurial. All of those things are characteristics of the university that I hope will stay with us for a very, very long time. I have said to my colleagues that it does not matter if we are 20 years old, 50 years old, that pioneering spirit will hopefully continue to stay with us. That sense of youthfulness if it stays with us

means that we are constantly looking at the next frontier, thinking of how we can do things differently, pushing the boundaries, pushing the envelope. At this point in time, I think we have still got elements of that. We must not lose it. If anything, we should try and grow that still further. It is an opportunity—with new leadership, with new ideas brought in from elsewhere mixing with the experience of those who've been here.

Relative youth means that we're not so set in our ways. You know, 100-year old institutions have layers and layers and layers of bureaucracy and so forth. We could become like that if we don't watch it. And every now and again we do need to prune. The relative size of this university— we have 10,000 students, it's not small but it's smaller than many institutions with 30, 40 thousand maybe even a 100 thousand in some universities—and that size is also a double-edged sword. On the positive side, it means that we are actually a more close-knit place than many other places. We actually know faculty across the schools better. We actually know our students much better. We have that close contact with students that we're actually not just that distant figure in a lecture theatre but in many ways a role model for the students as well. And that's great.

But the flipside of it is that our relative size means that we have limited faculty numbers. It means that if we are trying to develop, say, a critical mass in particular areas of research while delivering the spectrum of courses, it can be a challenge. We can't have a group of 50 working on a particular area. You need to spread it out, expertise across different areas so that they can teach different areas. So we need to be smart about how we do it. The way that we are coming at it is precisely through the societal challenges—that if we identify a particular societal challenge, such as aging, that we are drawing different disciplinary perspectives to bear on that particular societal challenge. You bring in the psychologists, you bring in the information systems colleagues who are working on technology to enable the homes of elderly people, you are working with economists. So, we really do need to be strategic. We don't want to try and say we have the best marketing group per se. We want to say that we have particular strengths in an area that cuts across the schools. I have spoken previously about aging as an example drawing from economics, from psychology, from marketing, from information systems to bring to bear perspectives on a particular societal challenge.

Pat Meyer: There's been debate about the usefulness and relevance of university rankings and sometimes university degrees. Could you share your thoughts on this?

Lily Kong: Whether we like it or not, the rankings appear to be here to stay. When school rankings were done in the context of Singapore, and met with so much unhappiness, the Ministry of Education that had done the rankings had the ability to do away with the rankings and to turn that into banding. But in the case of rankings for universities, they are done by external bodies, and we don't have the same ability to just kind of say we are going to abolish that.

Neither is it necessary to completely throw the baby out with the bathwater. There are some things about rankings that can be helpful. For example, they focus our minds on certain areas, certain criteria, that the ranking agencies use. They focus our minds on how well are we doing in those areas. If we don't think that a particular criteria is really that important, then we don't pay as much attention to it. But there are other criteria that actually are quite helpful as a mirror to ourselves, and the fact that we are in these rankings, therefore then put the spotlight on some of those areas that we want to improve on. I think the critical thing is that we don't become too obsessed with the rankings, but neither do we want to throw the baby out with the bathwater.

The truth of the matter is that these rankings are a useful way for young people looking to go to universities, if only because of the fact that it is a simple metric. But I always tell young people: read it with caution, read the ranking results with caution, read it with a critical mind and don't take it as gospel truth. Look at the criteria. What are the criteria that are important to you? If the criteria don't matter one jot to you in your decision to choose a university, then don't look at those rankings. The thing to do is not just to look at the rankings and say oh these rankings, say this university is top 10, that university is top 500, therefore choose top 10. But if the criteria for top 10 don't demonstrate that they make any impact on your education, why should you worry about that ranking?

Pat Meyer: Can you share your views on the Singapore government's efforts to shape the educational scene here, and, in particular, what has been the impact of SMU on tertiary education?

OH Topic: Concept & Values – Making a difference in higher education

Lily Kong: 19 years ago, actually 21 years ago when SMU was first imagined and then conceived very quickly, and then developed, established and developed very quickly, I think it made a difference to the higher education landscape in Singapore in quite radical ways. At that point in time, the other universities were statutory boards, and run like statutory boards. The compensation scale was that of civil servants. The instruction manual of the public sector applied to the universities, so we were like—well, not we SMU—but the other universities were like government agencies in many ways.

The fact that SMU was established not as a statutory board, made a difference. It signalled a departure. It signalled a certain level of autonomy. It signalled a level of innovation that was expected of the university. And I think SMU lived up to that, definitely in the early years, and I would hope it continues to do so. I'd like to believe so.

From things like introducing a much more American system, with the professorial ladder with the provost and president, as opposed to a vice chancellor and deputy vice-chancellor, and the different salary structures and so forth. It brought a lot that was different to the higher education landscape in Singapore which had been dominated by a British model. I thought it was a really good thing because as a response to what SMU was doing, I think the other universities then felt compelled to innovate, and that competition I thought was a good thing, because it just prompted and motivated all the universities to innovate within their own space, and I dare say that the higher education landscape today in Singapore, is at a very high level, stands tall internationally, partly because of this impetus that SMU brought.

Pat Meyer: And how would you like to position SMU in the future vis a vis these other universities in Singapore or in the region?

OH Topic: Challenges & Future – Healthy competition, cooperation and collaboration

Lily Kong: Harking back to what I said a moment ago, we are not going to win in a scale game. I think we must continue to be innovative as a university in the way in which we do things, not necessarily just in the innovation and entrepreneurship space, or start-ups and so forth, even though that is something we want to do. It is about how we think about education, how we approach interdisciplinarity, how we engage industry and so forth. There are opportunities for

new ways of thinking about these various dimensions of a university that we can continue to try to develop, to innovate. Other universities may think, well that is an interesting model, we might want to adopt and adapt that, or we don't think that is the way to do it, but that has given us an idea for doing something else. I really believe that a rising tide raises all boats. It is not about one university developing at the expense of another. If another university innovates and it pushes us to do so, that is great for the higher education landscape. I would dearly love to see the universities in this spirit of healthy competition, but also cooperation and collaboration.

Pat Meyer: I'd like to turn to more a personal, reflective question, and that is you're the first Singaporean President of SMU, also the first social scientist to lead SMU and you're also a woman in the senior management position in Singapore, and we'd like to know if you've faced any special challenges along the way, and if you have any advice for others?

OH Topic: Personal Reflection – As a woman in senior management

Lily Kong: I have just said this to a group of 800 teenagers over the weekend. My alma mater, my secondary school and my primary school had organized its 165th anniversary events, and there are now eleven schools in that system, and there were 800 students coming together, and they asked me a similar sort of question. It was wonderful to hear it from a ten-year-old primary four student.

For me, some of the challenges have related to age and gender, at different points in time. I was a very young dean, and I might have said this in my previous interview, please stop me if I have, but when I was appointed dean of a faculty with about 400 faculty members at that point in time and about 7,000 students, a senior colleague said to me, I am used to working with people with 35 years of experience, not 35 years of age. And that was a wake-up call for me, because I had never thought about age as a factor, and I realized at that point in time that it did matter to some people, and that I had to demonstrate a certain depth and gravitas, in order to win their respect.

At other points in time, it has really been about how, as a woman, you have care responsibilities. I said this to the 10-year-old student over the weekend, that childbirth is the sole responsibility, in a sense, of women because the man cannot take that responsibility. Childcare need not be the sole responsibility, but often it is the primary responsibility of women. And eldercare need not be, but it is also often primarily the responsibility of women. So, everything that people say about juggling the responsibilities at home and in the workplace are completely true.

How do we deal with that? Supportive colleagues are a big part of that. That at times when there is a dire situation at home, that your colleagues are willing to step in, and more than pull their weight. At other times when things are good on the home front, you must be willing to step in for other people, and that has to be manifested on a daily basis for the group dynamic to work.

It is true that with heavy responsibilities, whether as a provost or president, there are sceptics. There are sceptics who will say—you can't do this, how can you do this? —not because you don't have the ability, but because you have other responsibilities. It was a question that I deliberated very carefully. If I didn't think that I had a chance of making this work well, then I shouldn't take the responsibility. But the moment I take the responsibility, I have to then learn to manage the time, to give and take, to know when to rely and when to support.

Pat Meyer: Any advice for young women?

OH Topic: Advice for Students – Dare to dream

Lily Kong: Dare to dream. Dare to dream. Very often, we think because we have to do all these things—that maybe many men have less responsibility for—we won't be able to juggle it, so let's not try. Very often we think there are all these more senior people—by age if not by experience—let me not put my hand up for something. And even if called upon, maybe I shouldn't say yes. Very often I think we actually can do more than we think we can. I am not suggesting that we bite off more than we can chew, but actually when it comes down to it, we can chew and we can swallow too. And sometimes we are a little bit more reticent than we need to be.

If it is possible to have a mentor, somebody that you can speak with, to learn from and with, it really does help. I don't think we have enough women role models in senior positions, and if we did have senior women, sometimes these are not people who spend time with younger people. I think that part of the responsibility of being a woman in a senior position is to try and give time to younger women.

Pat Meyer: We just want to ask, what's one of the best things about your job, and maybe what is one of the misunderstandings or misconceptions about your job?

OH Topic: Presidents – Learning and delegating

Lily Kong: I like the fact that a university is such a multi-faceted place. If I just focus on the faculty, the myriad research questions that they ask, the sorts of things that they are sharing with their students in the classroom, I feel like a student very often and I am learning, and I am growing. If I look at the non-faculty side of the house, the expertise that people have that I couldn't possibly have, I haven't had the opportunity to learn and develop. So making a video, I don't know how to do that. The deep finances that people work with, I find it fascinating to be learning all these things, even while I am supposed to be leading. And I feel very intellectually stimulated and alive as a consequence.

The misconceptions about the job. I think there are different kinds of misconceptions depending on the level of understanding of what a president does. There are people who have said to me, all presidents do is just kind of go for lunches and dinners all the time, because your job is to represent the university. It is a figurehead. And I recognize that different presidents will bring different styles and different approaches to their role, but I am not a figurehead. I don't know how to be a figurehead. I feel deeply responsible. One of my colleagues in one of the schools said to me today, maybe you are overly responsible, and I said, I can't help it, I was brought up in a convent. I went to the Convent of the Holy Infant Jesus. So one misconception is a president is a figurehead. My, very, very mischievous 74-year-old brother, still mischievous at this age, said to me, "Do you have to go to work anymore now that you are president?" He got a glare in turn. So there is a misconception about that.

Other people think that the job of the president must be terrible. You must have so much and everything is on your shoulders. And, yes, it is, ultimately the buck stops with me in that sense. But people sometimes don't understand that there can be senior members of the team who really do a lot of heavy lifting. So, a provost does a lot of heavy lifting that helps the president a great deal. So, the truth is somewhere in between. I am neither a figurehead nor do I have to

do heavy lifting in every single area. Not everybody understands that. A former vice chancellor gave me this advice, "Find a good team, develop a good team, and delegate." And I will hold that in mind.

Pat Meyer: We talk about SMU being a transformational learning experience for all who pass through its doors. How has being at SMU changed you?

OH Topic: Personal Reflection – Getting a different perspective

Lily Kong: That is a really good question. When one is in one institution twenty-five years or thereabouts, you begin to take many things for granted. What it has done for me is to help me listen all over again, and to do something that I have always held fast to, but maybe over time in one institution, you need to do less and less of it because you already know the institution very well, and that is to "climb into other people's shoes and walk around in them". It is a line that I take from Atticus Finch in "To Kill a Mockingbird". I have known that line since I was fifteen, and I believe in it very firmly. Coming here has made me recall and remember how important that is. That certain perspectives that you take for granted, that you have thought but of course that's the way to do it, and that's the way we have to approach it, well, hold on a sec. Climb into somebody else's shoes from a different context, a different university, development path and think about why it has been done in a different way. So, I am delighted that I'm reminded of a favourite line from a favourite book from many, many years ago.

Pat Meyer: Just coming up to my final questions. It's admissions season now at SMU. What advice do you have for new students, and do you have any advice for students who are already here?

OH Topic: Advice for Students – Know yourself and find a good fit

Lily Kong: This advice for new students is something that I have been trotting out in the last three years, that as Provost I have had the occasion to use with prospective students. Every year around admissions season, I will address groups of students, and I will talk to them about how to choose your university. Of course, I could stand there and say, of course, you have to choose SMU, but it wouldn't be fair, nor would it be right. I speak to students about knowing yourself, knowing your learning style, what you are comfortable with, what you want out of life, what you want to do in life, not just as a career, but how you want to contribute and make your life meaningful, and finding that environment that supports you and develops you that way.

I have said to prospective students if you really believe in the power of the word, if you really believe that communication, persuasion of ideas is something that you have great strengths in and you would like to grow that, think about SMU, because we are that kind of place that focuses on that, develops that and so forth. But I have also said to students, if you think that is important but it is not your strength at all, think of coming here because we will help you develop that aspect of you. If you are looking for an environment where you want to be deeply interactive, you are the sort of individual who learns through the cut and thrust of debate and discussion in the classroom, outside of classroom, with your friends and so forth as opposed to sitting by yourself and reading the material, then SMU is the place for you. But if you are deeply uncomfortable with engagement, and you learn much better because you have the quiet of your own time going through the material again and again and again, and you think that that's okay and what will stand you in good stead, then maybe a different environment works for you.

If you are interested in interdisciplinarity—being able to take courses across schools, across disciplines, because you believe that is what the world requires—SMU offers you a very good chance, maybe a better chance than other institutions, because again, we are relatively small and criss-crossing campus is entirely possible, even easy, as opposed to multi-campus complexes, where it is a challenge. For prospective students, I try and guide them to discover a little bit about themselves and to find a good fit.

For current students who are already enrolled, please, please make the best of all the opportunities available to you. There are just so many opportunities on campus that are outside the classroom. Growth at SMU is holistic growth, it is holistic development. It is well-roundedness and so many things that you will learn and you will remember and cherish by way of memories, will not just be in the classroom. They will be the freshman orientation camps that you were part of organizing. It will be the community service trip that you made to Myanmar. It will be the internship where you were, excuse the language, scared shit because you have never been in that environment. There are so many opportunities that SMU offers. Avail yourself of them.

Pat Meyer: Anything else that you'd like to add?

Lily Kong: I love being at SMU. It is a grand opportunity that has been offered to me. I am very grateful for my colleagues who have been very supportive, and very proud of our students.

Pat Meyer: Thank you very much.
Lily Kong: Thank you.

Acronyms

BRC-UG	Blue Ribbon Commission for Undergraduate Education
DNA	Deoxyribonucleic acid
HDB	Housing Development Board
NUS	National University of Singapore
UK	United Kingdom
US	United States of America