

A piece of my corner office

MJ Baumann

What were my early years like?

I grew up in Mansfield, Ohio the first surviving child of an immigrant father and native-born mother. I am the oldest of four children with three brothers. I'm the shortest in the family and we were all born within the span of six years—meaning my mother was likely exhausted. My father also had polio as a child and the results of this disease were to ravage his immune and musculoskeletal system for his entire life. We grew up knowing that a simple cold could kill him and he spent many long stretches of time in hospital when we were very young so I spent a lot of time living with my large, extended family—I am one of 37 first cousins. Because of the nature of the immigrant/refugee experience, we were all programmed from birth to work hard, to succeed, and to never count on tomorrow. I have such affinity for immigrants who must work so hard to not only process the loss of their home but go on to learn a new culture and build their lives from nothing.

What did you do outside of class?

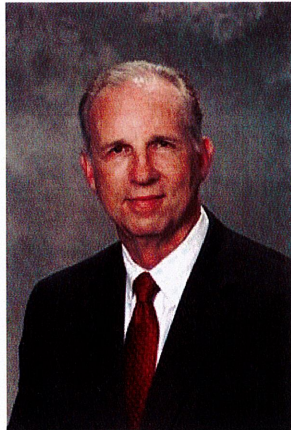
I played outside (I have fond memories of gangs of neighborhood children playing baseball and basketball), studied, read every book I could lay my hands on, and played the piano.

Why engineering and what have you learned?

Engineering for me was the safest career I could choose—safety was a big thing in my family—and I can safely say I had no idea what engineering was until my junior year when I really fell in love with the field. It taught me to take a systems approach to any problem and to collect data, assess the trends in the data, and then make hypotheses and most importantly, test the hypotheses. It taught me to break down problems into manageable steps and to not lose sight of the forest for the trees. It's about making my bed every morning as the start to a productive day and to not lose sight of the little things as well as to not make assumptions.

Jeff Coleman on Servant Leadership and the Golden Rule

Describe an effective leadership style that you have experienced during your career.



I have been very fortunate in my career to have been exposed to a number of different leadership styles. Very early in my career I was fortunate to work for a boss that demonstrated true servant leadership and followed the Golden Rule in everything he did. He treated every employee with respect and, even though he was in a senior leadership position, he always gave you the sense that he truly understood what it took to for you to get the job done. He was there in the trenches with you if need be, and always went out of his way to give support or a kind word. He took the time to get to know his employees on a personal level and took great efforts to ensure his staff were able to maintain a healthy work/life balance. He was a servant in the best sense of the word. His genuine servant leadership created an incredible work environment where employees had great pride in their work and willingly went the extra mile. I know that many of his former staff have maintained contact with him long after his retirement and consider him a good friend.

What about a not so effective leadership style?

Later in my career I had a boss that led by fear. He was driven primarily by short-term financial results and took little interest in the personal lives of his staff. As a result of his leadership style and the example he set for his staff, the work environment was toxic. The company experienced steady talent drain, especially of the high performing employees. Although the company experienced modest financial success during his tenure, and he no doubt retired with great financial wealth, the company continues feel the impact of his leadership style both financially and operationally.

So what are some lessons learned?

The golden rule and servant leadership go hand in hand and lay at the heart of organizations that achieve true long-standing success.

Poor leadership can have a long-lasting impact on an organization.

We cannot expect our staff to effectively serve our students and coworkers if we as leaders don't effectively serve our staff.

The best test of servant leadership is whether our staff become servant leaders themselves.



Full Circle

Why did you become a lawyer?

I always liked to problem-solve. When I graduated college I thought I could solve problems by directly serving persons who were returning from incarceration to civilian life. I also worked at the Community Action Commission which was part of LBJ's War on Poverty by trying to help empower poor folks to effect change in their communities. It turned out I wasn't very successful, because I quickly learned of the many impediments to their success which was beyond their and my control. I figured I could better address those impediments as a lawyer, than as just an advocate with a BS in Criminal Justice.

What happened?

In law school I got very interested in real estate, zoning, and land use and went into that practice. For over 30 years I represented private parties, public entities and large corporations in financing and developing real estate. I also represented almost all the non-profits in the Cincinnati area who developed affordable housing for persons with low and moderate incomes. While I liked almost all my clients and enjoyed the work I did and the successes I helped my clients reach, I especially felt fulfillment when my non-profit clients finished a project and I saw the families living in safe, decent and affordable housing and knew that I had a role (sometimes a critical role) in making that available.

What happened?

Many times I've said beware the Jesuit who invites you to lunch! In my practice I also did significant work with Xavier and UC, especially, but not only, in real estate development. At UC I worked on over \$500MM of development projects which transformed the communities around campus. At Xavier my work was more rewarding since it effected change inside campus: closing Ledgewood was huge, acquiring the land to build Cintas, the Hoff Quad and what became U-Station was at times very challenging, but very satisfactory to succeed and now to see the transformation that resulted.

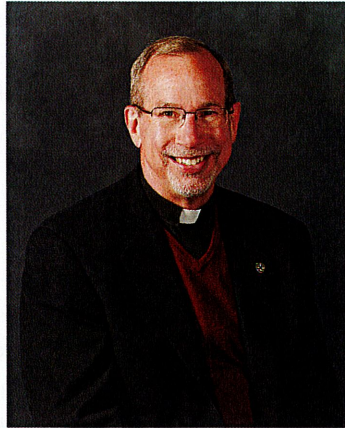
Back to lunch. In March 2011 Mike Graham asked me to join him for lunch and asked me to become Xavier's first General Counsel. Oddly, for a person who wants to effect change, I personally find it hard to change. Marcheta says it's because I'm stubborn, but I think it's more because I always make my very best effort to feel satisfied in whatever I experience, and changing from a satisfying situation to one that is uncertain is hard. When I met with Mike I was very satisfied. I saw myself working to retirement at my firm with clients and lawyers I really liked. But, after significant reflection I came to realize that the greatest joy I got from my work was the work I did for mission-driven non-profits. So, I overcame my hesitancy and took the leap of faith...kind of literally.

How's it different at Xavier than at the firm?

Well, now I'm part of a mission. One that has hundreds of years of history, and one that grows and evolves every day. Also, being an in-house lawyer is totally different, and so much better for me. External lawyers really only give advice and are pretty cautious about suggesting what a client should do. You really best serve the client from the outside by clearly informing the client of the pros/cons of certain action, but allowing them to make the decisions they deem best. As in-house, the lawyer provides the same type of advice, but also is able to, and really responsible to, provide opinion about how to proceed. So, now I am in a position to effect change as I started out to do, and as part of that I am supporting a great educational institution, and my colleagues here, to help students become persons who will effect change for the betterment of others.

THE CORNER OFFICE

Mike Graham, S.J.



What were your early years like?

I grew up in a small Iowa town in the 50s and 60s, the oldest of seven kids. All that stuff you read about first borns and how they tend to be achievement-oriented type “A” types, that’s me. I had three brothers and a sister before I was five years old and consequently learned independence early on. It was the height of the baby boom and our neighborhood swarmed with kids. Mom made sure that our house functioned as the neighborhood’s base. Dad got me started loving books by reading to me evenings. I was good at the things that schools rewarded. I didn’t play sports because I wasn’t very good at them and hated losing. Toss in years of piano lessons, a paper route and weeks with my grandparents in a tiny Iowa town in the summer and there you have it: a safe, loving, and incredibly nurturing home environment.

When you went to college, did you have a particular career idea in mind?

For sure I knew I wanted to be a teacher. I’ve known I wanted to be a teacher since about the fifth grade, although what I wanted to teach changed depending upon who my favorite teacher that year was – math in eighth grade, science in ninth grade, eventually social studies. I had a horrible experience with an education course in college and shifted sights to university-level teaching and went on to graduate school. The pattern of changing my mind continue there; I had gone to graduate school in experimental social psychology but ended up hating it and so shifted into an interdisciplinary American studies program. And then the Jesuits came along.

How did that happen?

The 30-second version is that I was beginning to take my own faith seriously again when I went to grad school and bumped into a guy with good Jesuit bona fides – Boston College High School, Boston College, Jesuit parish growing up, two Jesuit uncles – and we began making retreats together at Loyola University Chicago with a priest recommended by one of his uncles. He decided not to enter and I did. The rest is history.

What are some key leadership lessons you've learned along the way?

I think the most important thing is having a vision that comes alive for people directly through the work they do and so the ability to make connections between the vision and the details is crucial. And the vision without a plan doesn't typically go anywhere and so a plan is also pretty important. And communication is also key. Leadership is all about inspiring people to do stuff together and so that equation has always been key for me: Vision plus details plus communication.

How do you hire?

My role in hiring means that I don't need to worry about the technical competency of people we're hiring to do the job we need them to do. Others can judge that in a more informed way than I typically can. For me, it's all about chemistry. One of my trustees once said to me that if he hires a person he is really excited about working with, he's wrong about 10% of the time. But if he hires someone he is not enthusiastic about working with, he's wrong about 90% of the time. That's stuck with me. That is something I watch for very closely – is this a person that I'm going to really enjoy working with, someone who will be a great addition to the team and who will help keep me fresh?

Any advice for new college grads?

You have to get good at doing two things at once that are very different and to some degree make war with each other. The first is to take the long view and understand that you are in a marathon and not a sprint. As in chess, you need to be thinking down the road, several moves ahead. And at the same time, you've got to invest yourself absolutely in that which is immediately in front of you and do it as best as you possibly can. The way the two make war on each other is that sometimes what is right in front of you to do will lead you in unexpected directions and force you to reconsider those long-range ideas you have. In my experience, some of the best things that have happened to me were not things that I had planned for or anticipated. You have to be open to surprises. Like becoming a Jesuit.



*A New York Times – Corner Office Style Interview
Dr. John F. Kucia
Xavier University Administrative Vice President*

*“A life and career...that more resembles
the painting of a picture
than the building of a skyscraper.”*

What were your early years like?

I was born on a Saturday, so as a child... I was destined to work hard for a living. I was the second child of 5, first son in an average, middle class, Catholic family. Midnight paper routes – griddle cook at Jerry’s - Kroger cashier & Assistant Manager in Frozen Foods (My mantra displayed over the walk-in freezer door – “Many are cold, but few are frozen.”) So, work was always a part of my growing up – leading to a certain, perhaps healthy balance of both responsibility and freedom... to experience (to marry at 21) and to find my own way.

Tell me about your parents.

My father, Frank Kucia...a first generation college student...parents from Poland who spoke no English ...father a blacksmith.... Was recruited from Holy Name High in Cleveland to play football and basketball at Xavier...It was a tradition that the President of the X-Club was designated to be the escort of the Homecoming Queen. In 1937, his junior year....Frank Kucia... President of the X-Club.... was the escort of the Prom Queen, Eileen Kispert a Mt. St. Joe first year student.....fast forward.... Frank and Eileen married in 1939...raised a family of 5....and the rest is history.

So how did you and your career connect with Xavier University?

After completing my BA degree and MEd in Counseling at Xavier, I worked for 13 years in Mental Health, Criminal Justice and Substance Abuse (I like to joke... which prepared me well for my first job at Xavier as Alumni Director). Those 13 years placed me in close working relationships with a rich variety of people, cultures and belief systems...which deepened my experience and valuing of diversity. I learned through experience that personal contact can lead to familiarity and comfort (even trust) with a wide range of people. I also learned that *all* rich people are not smart, and *all* poor people are not dumb. I learned much about people and leadership from just listening.

Interesting...tell me more.

My Xavier counseling training emphasized listening for the values, beliefs and attitudes that motivate behavior and, more importantly, patterns of thinking that lead to self-awareness, learning and improvement. Since 1971 I served in administrative and leadership positions within public service institutions, euphemistically referred to as systems; the Criminal Justice System, the Mental and Medical Health Care System and the Higher Education System- each one complex with proud traditions, critical public responsibilities and all were dedicated to serve individuals and society at large.

Your experience across institutions offered you a unique advantage, Yes?

A common reality I found within each of these institutional systems was a growing public pressure to change - a public expectation for more accountability and relevance, calling for a

review of traditional practices, a challenge to *think beyond institutional walls* and ultimately, a mandate to reinterpret their mission, in light of an evolving public need. However, each institution evidenced similar patterns of behavior; insular, static and driven by traditional rules and regulations, *ways of thinking and ways of doing things*. I left public service to join Xavier in 1984 with the belief that the impetus and energy needed for change is created only through a *collaboration of key people from inside and outside the institution* focusing on the public need.

You joined Xavier as a Director and quickly became an Administrative Assistant – what the hell happened?

In 1986, after two years as the Alumni Director, I jumped at the offer to serve Xavier's President as his Assistant (did not sound like a promotion, eh?). However, this move provided me with a series of challenging and unique opportunities to coordinate and lead numerous transforming and strategic University initiatives. But, more importantly, from the President's Office (while serving 4 Jesuit Presidents and one Marine) I was afforded a vantage point for viewing Xavier, not by division nor as a closed ivy-covered system, but as a whole, open system that impacts and is influenced by outside forces, a community asset that has become more than a community anchor; that has become a catalyst for collaborative partnerships and change.

I love your story...so now you serve President, S.J. #5.

In 2001, President Mike Graham, S.J. asked me to play an important role. He asked me to lead the development of Xavier's emerging role as an engaged corporate citizen through *collaboration and partnering* to better serve our contiguous community, and in doing so help reinterpret Xavier's mission in light of the evolving public need. And to supercharge me, Graham hatched a plan with Dr. Doug Toma at the City Tavern in Philadelphia, that was confirmed by Xavier Chairman, Mike Conaton, agreed to by P&G CEO, A.G. Lafley, and finally approved by Mary Kucia, my wife since 1968, that provided me with the most exciting intellectual and professional opportunity and challenge of my life...to earn a Doctorate in Higher Education Management at the University of Pennsylvania, culminating in a dissertation titled: *Leadership in Balance: the role of collaboration for leading change in a living organization*.

John, what a career path...just like you planned it – let's end with your Xavier Bio.

Dr. John F. Kucia, Xavier's Administrative Vice President, has spent nearly 40 years as a practitioner of collaborative leadership in the fields of healthcare and higher education, specifically in the areas of strategic planning, leadership development and training, organizational change, intercollegiate athletics, property acquisition and urban redevelopment. He has drawn upon his extensive experience to research the unique and unstudied topic of "*the way leaders think, developing the premise that leaders are built from the inside out.*" Dr. Kucia and co-author Dr. Linda Gravett, wrote the book *Leadership in Balance: New Habits of the Mind*, which was published by Palgrave Macmillan in April 2014.

Gary Massa Looks at Magis as a Way of Life



What were your early years like?

I was very blessed to grow up in a loving family in Cincinnati with three siblings educated in a Catholic environment. I had a chance to go to St. X High School which was a huge influence in my life. It became apparent at that time in my life that being a Man For Others was an important way of being. All four kids in our family were competitive and had the opportunity to play sports collegiately - football, volleyball, and basketball so athletics was a very big part of our family. I was able to get a scholarship to Xavier for basketball. I learned a lot from my sports experience....team work, discipline, time management, handling adversity, pushing yourself to do things you didn't think you could do were all takeaways from my athletic experience.

Tell me about your work career.

I was very fortunate to have worked for really good people-people that I would call mentors. I had the chance to work in the spirit and wine business for seven years for a company called Heublein-we had great, global brands. I worked for an athletic footwear and apparel company (Reebok) and then in the insurance business with Midland. I can look back on that 17 year business work history and tell you that it prepared me in an amazing way, I think, for the challenges of the job and the responsibilities that I have here at Xavier, which is now 19 years.

What are the key leadership lessons that you have learned?

I think the number one thing is to obviously treat people the way you would like to be treated. I think that is key for anything you do but I would also say I've always admired one of our greatest presidents, Ronald Reagan. One of his strong beliefs was to have the confidence to surround yourself with really great people and then let them go do their job. I think that is really important and I think we have been able to do that at the places I have been. Thirdly, work to create a culture of balance where people have a work/life balance and if you do that and provide some flexibility they are going to be happier and be better employees and better leaders themselves.

What is your philosophy on fundraising?

I didn't know anything about fundraising coming into Xavier and I think what I have learned is to use common sense in your approach. I tell our staff and feel strongly myself that it is never a situation where you beg for a gift and really what you are doing is helping to facilitate a dream that they may have. You should always leave where the donor feels wonderful about what they have done and our job is to really educate them and expose them to some of the needs and how they can help build the University and again fulfill a dream, facilitate something they can make a very positive thing happen on

campus. I like the fact that with many of our donors you create and build lifetime relationships. Many of them, over my 19 years here, turn out to be very close friends.

What are you most proud of during your time at Xavier?

There are some things to be proud of for sure. With the help of a great team and solid leadership with Fr. Hoff and now Fr. Graham and our Board, we have raised nearly 90% of what has been raised in the history of the University in the last two decades. Almost a half a billion dollars has been realized to transform campus. But I think the thing that I am most proud of is the fact that we have taken the time to hire quality people who are passionate about the mission not only development people. That has created a culture of continuity and stability that has served us very well.

How do you hire?

We have actually shied away from people that have development experience. Rather, we look for people who have a sales skill set who are clearly passionate about our mission, preferably alums. That methodology has served us well and I think helped us have continuity and stability.

How would your staff describe you?

Hopefully, that I am honest and fair and that I don't take myself too seriously and that we have been able to create a respectful and fun culture at work.

What advice would you give college grads?

Find something that fills your heart. Look for something where you can make a difference. Get involved with the community; the people who are involved in helping the community often become friends. Network, you can never have enough contacts.

What does Magis mean to you?

To me I think it is pretty simple. If you are Jesuit educated, certainly there is a simple prerequisite and expectation that you are successful in whatever it is you do. If you are a teacher, a lawyer, a doctor, a businessman, a business woman, whatever it might be that there is a level of expectation that you are successful but there is more. The Magis is more; there is an expectation that you help others to make this world a better place. It is really important to me that we realize the world is not centered around us but that we are here to do things for others and make the world a better place.

Can you share some of the "Wow" moments in your life?

Our wedding day was one...if I've overachieved in anything it was the selection of my wife. I'm very proud of our marriage...27 years this week. Obviously the birthdates of our four kids stand out...the joy of being a Dad mixed with realizing the magnitude of the responsibility that comes with it. I would also say the most intense moments of my life centered around the serious illness (Neuroblastoma) of our middle daughter. She survived but it was a horrific experience that put things in perspective and still does today. I'm grateful every day for her well-being.

Do you have a bucket list?

Yes, first of all, we have four kids that we are very proud of, we want to see them happy, healthy and successful and have them build good lives for themselves and, God willing, some day grandkids. I guess from a little selfish standpoint, we would love to get back to Italy; we would love to go to the Holy Land and Ireland and I guess a crazy one is that I would like to see a live great white shark.

Favorite Charities:

Besides Xavier University, of course, I serve on the Boards of St. Vincent de Paul, Mount St. Mary's Seminary (also known as the Athenaeum), Xavier's Center for Catholic Education and now the Life Learning Center where our daughter, Katie works.

Corner Office Interview
Aaron Meis
Direct Reports Meeting
September 11, 2017

What were your early years like?

I had a pretty typical upbringing. I grew up in suburban Chicago and attended very good public schools. My parents were public school teachers so even though they are (and were) devoutly Catholic, they believed in public schools and wanted me to attend them. I was a little gawky – I was typically picked last for pick-up basketball and football so not terribly athletic though I loved sports and it's about all I did as a kid. I spent most of my family time with my Mom and sister – my Dad worked summers and taught night school to make extra money so he was gone quite a bit. I grew up around education and education issues so it's looking back it's not terribly surprising that I ended up in education, though it wasn't really an intentional path when I started – it was actually supposed to be a pit stop before law school.

What did you do outside of school?

I was a pretty social kid. I was fortunate to have a large number of kids my age in my neighborhood, most of whom went to the same school. So every day after school and every day of the summer and weekends it was pretty much get up, go play until lunch, go back out and play until dinner and sometimes keep playing after that. In 5th grade I started in the band and really ended up taking the musical route instead of the sports route. That really ended up being because of typical lack of self-confidence that a lot of kids face. Looking back I do wish I had been more involved in sports. My kids are completely different as a result – they have been involved in sports since they were in kindergarten and my girls – who are high school juniors – are still involved.

What are some key leadership lessons you've learned?

First – happy employees lead to happy customers. You have to take care of all your people and in particular your front line folks. If they are happy, engaged, energized and feel like they are a part of the big picture, they are going to bring their A games every single day.

Second – you have to spend most of your time on hiring the right people. A bad hire is the single biggest disaster you will face. It is even worse than a good person leaving at a bad time or losing a key leadership position because a bad hire can poison all the people around them. Then you have to spend time making sure those folks are OK and moving to get the bad hire out. So, the lesson here is spend the time making sure you – and the people who work for you – are hiring folks with the right attitude and work ethic, which leads me to....

Third – forget about talent. I will hire a person with the right attitude and work ethic every single time over someone with talent and knowledge of the business. I have seen us hire people who know our business very well and who are recommended by our network but whom we could just feel were not the right fit – they were big on drama and negative people. Spend the time making sure you are figuring out in the interviews how these people handle adversity and how they approach their work and use reference checks to do the same.

So leadership is really about getting the right folks in the right places first and foremost and valuing them.

What are some specifics about your culture?

First off – no drama. Just communicate with each other like grown-ups. Don't be afraid of conflict – just say it honestly and don't assume bad motives. Solve it right then and there and then let's move on. Same if you disagree with me – just tell me why you think it's a bad idea. I will listen, consider, and then either adjust or decide. Once a decision is made, let's move forward. Drop the gossip and attitudes. If you don't, you might not get fired but you'll get sidelined.

Second – we need to be attentive to results. That's not always comfortable in higher ed but it is the norm in Enrollment Management. Folks aren't always prepared to be held accountable for results but we have to be. It's not the only thing we worry about but it's one of the main things. That doesn't mean that the ends justify the means – not at all. It means that we focus on getting things done at the time they need to be done and doing them well. Execution typically leads to good results. But execution often needs people need to be made uncomfortable when I push a sense of urgency that not everyone in education has.

I also think we do a good job of celebrating victories. I make it a point to get around and say thank you to our teams and celebrate when we win so our teams feel energized.

If you only had five minutes to interview someone, what would you ask them?

'Give me a specific example of when you had a conflict with someone and how you handled it?' This is more difficult for recent grads but you can ask "how would you handle a situation like this..." and see how they react. Their reaction is probably better than the answer.

'Give me a specific example of what happened last time you were asked to do something important outside your job description by your boss or by a colleague at a stressful time?' Again, reactions and body language are better than the answer.

In both cases I'd rather they shared an example in which they handled it badly but owned it and said they learned from it. It's easy to give a self-serving answer in both of these cases so you're really looking for candor. d

Debra K. Mooney of Xavier University on the *Real* 'Hard Skills'



What was your first leadership experience?

I was a lifeguard and swim instructor during the summers of my teen years. Although I was a painfully shy girl, my years of experience as a competitive swimmer made me surprisingly confident as an instructor – even with a pool surrounded by on-looking mothers. During my college years, pre-professional training and early career time, I felt that I would know I was a “true professional” -and looked forward to the time when - I would feel that same sense of assuredness and comfort.

When did that happen?

It has happened but I can't point to any moment, situation or time frame. I think a cycle of “stretch-comfort-stretch-comfort...” has continued with every “next step” in my career trail –and, to be clear, I think this cycle is good for both growth and confidence. The ‘comfort’ times have certainly lengthened with age and experience. During those early [severe] ‘stretch’ times, I reminded myself of the advice of Eleanor Roosevelt - “You must do the things you think you cannot do” - Im a quote person.

Do you have a favorite quote?

Thomas Paine's, “The harder the conflict, the more glorious the triumph. What we obtain too cheap, we esteem too lightly;...” It has inspired me for over 35 years.

What about your college years?

I was a psychology major and a D1 athlete throughout college. I learned a lot during my athletic career that I have found invaluable in my personal and professional life – time management, goal setting, team work, overcoming setbacks, motivation/positivity, etc.

Do you find having a psychology background useful in your current position?

Definitely – and not only in my current position but in all positions. While I am no longer practicing professionally (although I maintain my license and have volunteered with Mental Health America and Aviatra Accelerators), I believe that leadership is all about interpersonal relations. While others call them ‘soft skills’, I think they are the ‘essential’ skills.

What lessons did you learn from your parents that you find useful in your professional life?

My father's ‘middle name’ is “don't burn bridges.” From him, I have learned the importance and value of navigating, maintaining and deepening close relationship of all sorts. My mother is very respectful of authority. From her I learned to affirm and support the complex structures and systems within organizations.

What do you look for when you hire?

After qualifications are reviewed and finalists selected, it all comes down to personality – the ‘essential skills’ (the *really* ‘hard’ skills). I value interpersonal sensitivity and awareness as well as conscientiousness and creativity. I typically ask the question, “If you were in charge of hiring for this position, what would you be looking for?” The responses reflect an applicant’s beliefs and values – and personal qualities. I also ask an individualized/unique question stemming from an item on their resume – not a predictable question that they have anticipated; I am less interested in their specific answer and more on their style of relating. Similarly, an eye on process is important; how do they relate to people and situations beyond the formal Q&A process? – everything is a behavioral sample that has a high probability to transfer to their on-the-job style.

What career or life advice do you give to college students?

I asked my 21 year old daughter how she would respond if she were asked, “Does your mother give career or life advice?”. Her answer was an immediate: ‘Yes! ‘Do the best you can do and don’t worry about it’ (- helpful college advice passed-on from my father.) She added, “Last year when I was at Orientation Leader Training, we were asked to post a common saying from our parents. I said, ‘My mom says that there is not much that a good night’s sleep and a bath can’t fix.’ ‘Nuf said 😊

September 11, 2017

Janice B. Walker, Chief Diversity and Inclusion Officer at Xavier University in Cincinnati, OH, has learned that she should not aspire for perfection.



Q. Tell me about your early years.

I was born in the pre-civil rights era in Mississippi, but I am not going to tell you the year. My family lived in a rural small town (pop. 2400) where my father was the school principal and my mother stayed home as the primary caregiver for six children. When I was 7 years old, we moved near Jacksonville, FL and then relocated three more times before settling in Madison, FL (pop. 3100). There, my father was an administrator at a community college, my mother taught elementary school, and Jim Crow was alive and well.

Q. Tell me about your parents.

Both parents were educators. Each was the first and only member of their immediate family to attend college. They placed tremendous emphasis on education and had no tolerance for doing less than your best. We excelled; three of six children have doctorates and five majored in STEM disciplines. My parents gave their children a lot of advice; little seemed welcomed. Unlike my siblings, I was able to strike a pose that convinced my parents I was listening. Years later, I discovered that my parents were on target with their lessons and, even more surprising, that I actually had listened.

Q. When you went to college, did you have an idea what you wanted to do for a career?

Not exactly. I figured that I would have a career in a STEM area and would likely teach in a high school or possibly at an HBCU. Career options for me at that time seemed somewhat limited. I took two mathematics courses from the math chair during my first year, and he strongly encouraged me – no, he was relentless in his efforts – to major in mathematics. In my sophomore year, I declared math as my major and never looked back.

Q. What are some lessons you've learned over your career?

I can strive for excellence but I do not need to be perfect. As a math major, my goal was perfection. As an African American female who was “the first xxx,” I often felt the spotlight and the need to be perfect. But I am also human and no human is perfect. To avoid failure, I would have to avoid taking action; this is not an option. Many of my best lessons have come from failure. Rather than dwell on what I should or could have done, I have learned to reflect on failures, let myself off the hook, and move on. In this process, I've learned another lesson: be nice to myself. While I can walk away from others, I can't get away from me.

Q. What career and life advice do you give to new college graduates?

I would tell new college graduates these things:

- Set aside time to experience, explore and expand your mind. There will never be a better time.
- Commit to excellence and follow through with hard work. There is no substitute.
- Face fear; it gets easier. Courage is not the absence of fear but the ability to act in the midst of fear.
- All successful individuals fail. Don't stress out over failure and just learn from it for the next time.
- Be your own best friend.