



Academia was not Associate Professor Paulin Straughan's first choice, but she grew to love her job as a sociology professor because of her students. "I derived a lot of joy from teaching and I've been blessed with very good students," she says. She has also served on various boards and was a Nominated Member of Parliament from 2009 to 2011. ST PHOTO: KUA CHEE SIONG

People

From 'accidental academic' to varsity dean

Incoming SMU dean of students grew to love her work because of her students

Calvin Yang

At her first job interview – with technology giant IBM – some 30 years ago, then undergraduate Paulin Straughan had her hair spiked with gel and wore what she called “beggars’ clothes”.

“I thought it was cool. But everybody else was dressed formally, in black and white,” said Associate Professor Straughan, who was at the time a sociology and statistics undergraduate at the National University of Singapore (NUS).

“I didn’t know how to (prepare for an) interview. I had no internship before this. My interview went on for a long time because they were so flabbergasted.”

She did not get the job. But that lengthy interview stays etched in the mind of the affable 54-year-old, who pursued a career in academia.

Now, the incoming dean of students at the Singapore Management University (SMU) strives to ensure her charges do not follow her example. “You must respect the job that you are being interviewed for,” she said. “Your ‘coolness’ can

come across in other ways.

“We owe it to students that after all they’ve gone through, at least to learn how to present themselves well in front of potential employers. It is not just about grades, but also to prepare them so they can showcase their talents.”

Next month, she will leave NUS’ Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences (FASS) to assume her new role, which supports student empowerment and student life.

SMU’s Office of the Dean of Students comprises many arms, including the Dato’ Kho Hui Meng Career Centre, which helps students make informed job choices, among other things.

Prof Straughan, who will also be professor of sociology (practice) at SMU’s School of Social Sciences, will take over from Professor Ong Siow Heng, who will become dean of international affairs.

SMU provost Lily Kong said Prof Straughan’s experience with students makes her an “excellent fit” for her new job.

“(She) has a wealth of experience in the classroom, and is well-loved by students,” said Prof Kong.

“Her experience working to address student needs and enhance student development opportunities stands her in very good stead for the role. Her students see her as warm, caring, affable, lively and responsive.”

Prof Straughan fell in love with sociology as it helped her “appreciate how things work in the society that we live in”.

After graduating with a Bachelor of Arts in sociology and statistics, she pursued her master’s and doctorate in sociology at the University of Virginia, where she met her American husband, Dr Robert Straughan, an applied mathematician, now 58.

The couple – who moved to Singapore from the United States in 1990 – have two boys, Robert, 25, who will graduate from NUS’ FASS next month, and Timothy, 22, who is a SMU law student.

She partly decided to take up the SMU role after she noticed that her younger son, who used to be reserved, enjoyed the challenge of thinking on the spot and airing his opinions; class participation features prominently in SMU and that “drew him out of his shell”.

She said: “I saw how he was transformed and I thought, how wonderful it would be if I could be part of the team that continues to do this

DRESS WELL FOR INTERVIEWS

You must respect the job that you are being interviewed for. Your ‘coolness’ can come across in other ways. We owe it to students that after all they’ve gone through, at least to learn how to present themselves well in front of potential employers.



PROFESSOR PAULIN STRAUGHAN, on making sure that undergraduates are prepared for their first job interviews.

even better for future generations.

Despite the more “administrative-heavy” job scope, Prof Straughan hopes to be able to find time to teach students at SMU.

“At the end of the day, teachers inspire. Coming to a university means that you have to put students at the heart of everything that you do.”

But Prof Straughan never planned on going into academia. “I think I am an accidental academic,” she said, adding that she considered graduate school only after a visiting professor encouraged her to do so.

And yet, the sociologist, whose opinion is often sought by the media on subjects such as work-life balance, ageing and family, grew to love her work.

“If not for the students, I wouldn’t be there. I derived a lot of joy from teaching and I’ve been blessed with very good students,” said Prof Straughan, who stayed with NUS – her first employer – for over two decades.

She took on various roles, including vice-dean of undergraduate studies at FASS. She noted that going into administrative roles “gave her a bigger voice” to highlight students’ concerns and ensure that those who came through the university’s doors leave fulfilled.

Prof Straughan has also served on various boards and was a Nominated Member of Parliament from 2009 to 2011. In the House, she argued for better work-life balance and a more pro-family social environment.

For those who are unsure of what career to pursue, Prof Straughan urged them to dare to take a leap.

“I tell them that it is okay. You don’t have to be so sure about everything before you make a move.

“The privilege of youth is that you get to explore. Whether or not that is the best job for you, you wouldn’t know unless you try.”

calyang@sph.com.sg