



Grace Wang

Executive Vice President for Research,
Innovation and Knowledge

The Ohio State University

Experience real-world research impact

Grace Wang thought she was on track for a career in academic research when a fateful career seminar changed the course of her life. The session explained how technology gets from the lab to the marketplace. In what she describes as a light switch moment, Wang decided then and there that she wanted to see the world beyond academia and experience the impact of research translated into a commercial product.

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Instead of heading to the halls of academia, Wang sought a position in a research lab at IBM. It was, she says, one of the “best thoughts” of her career. It enabled her to understand “the impact of research on reality.”

After eight years in industry, Wang still loved her work but began to think she might be overspecializing. “I was getting deeper and deeper in a narrow area of my field,” explains Wang. “I realized I needed to learn more and broaden my horizons.” She wanted to explore other engineering and scientific fields. “I thought it would be fascinating to know the world more before I did

more.” Wang found the intellectual challenge she wanted at the National Science Foundation (NSF).

When Wang applied for her job at the engineering directorate at NSF, she didn’t yet grasp the tremendous opportunity that awaited her. She later found that NSF was “a very creative, innovative, hard-working, diligent and also academic environment.”

The most striking thing about NSF for Wang was its intellectual appeal. “The intellectual capacity within that organization was amazing. (It still puts) a big smile on my face to think about it. We exchanged ideas and thought about what kind of research and talent we need to empower the future of the country to be even more powerful and at the leading edge.”

Wang did not plan to move to an academic institution. But when a recruiter from the State University of New York (SUNY) contacted her, she paused. She had a “terrific” job at NSF, looking at strategy at a national level and helping to shape the future. And yet, the move intrigued her.

At a large, complex academic institution, Wang would make a local difference with the faculty, staff, and students. “I thought it would be exciting, would be challenging, and would be worth exploring,” says Wang. She decided to make a move.

The transition to academia proved to be smooth. Wang expected a culture difference but found it was much the same.

Wang admits that she assumed things in academia would move more slowly. As someone who likes a rapid pace, she thought this might be a challenge, but found that the pace is faster than

anticipated. Although consensus-building may slow things down, the workplace, in general, is “exceedingly high-paced” and consensus building is much needed.

When she was approached about an opportunity to serve as executive vice president for research, innovation and knowledge at The Ohio State University (Ohio State), the opportunity got Wang’s attention. Ohio State has one of the largest campuses and student bodies in the United States. “The size, the complexity, the scope, and the scale is amazing,” says Wang. “If you want to work on something and make a difference,

you want a platform like this.” Overseeing the development of Ohio State’s 270-acre innovation district also held strong appeal.

Wang had worked with Kristina M. Johnson, president of Ohio State, when Johnson was chancellor of SUNY. Wang’s familiarity with Johnson made the decision to go to Ohio State clear. “(Johnson) has been a tremendous mentor and a tremendous leader,” says Wang. “When you join an institution, organization, or company, you want to make sure that you work with people who can relate to you,” says Wang. “We have a bold, visionary leader, and that’s what you need to transform a university into an even better future.”

For Wang, a key benefit of working in academia is proximity to the faculty, students, and staff to better understand their needs, barriers, and challenges. With this perspective, Wang says she is in an excellent position to spot opportunities for “moving the needle” in academia.

Academia has opened Wang’s mind to new possibilities. “When I first started at a university, I deeply appreciated the fact that research is truly highly convergent and interdisciplinary, completely beyond engineering, physical sciences, and medicine,” says Wang. “But now I also have an appreciation of arts and humanities and social sciences and understand a much broader horizon of the research landscape.

“This (new appreciation) has been exciting for me,” adds Wang. “I didn’t think about it when I first started, but I have deeply benefited from understanding, learning, and appreciating that.”

The most transferable skill from any organization to another, says Wang, is leadership. In Wang’s view, the best way to be a leader is to be genuine. “If you do something you love and believe in, it shows every day,” says Wang. “You can pretend for 10 minutes, but

“I don’t think any stage of a career could be too late for us to pursue something we love.”

you cannot pretend for an entire career.” It’s also critical to work with a team that’s invested in the culture of the organization. “I have been happily surprised in many

organizations about the power of a team working together on leading change. It’s amazing how much we can do.”

Wang’s advice:

- **For early professionals: Expand your perspective.** “If you have broader horizons, you understand the possibilities, and then you know where you can make the most impact.”
- **For the mid-career professionals: Follow your heart.** “I don’t think any stage of a career could be too late for us to pursue something we love.”

Wang hadn’t anticipated beginning her career in industry. Nor did she pre-plan her moves from industry to government or from government to academia. Instead, she followed the excitement when opportunities appeared. Looking back, she says it would have been impossible for her to have pre-planned her journey.

“Throughout my whole career, I’ve been driven by whatever excites me,” says Wang. “All along the way, it has been an interesting, exciting, fun journey.” ∞



The Ohio State University’s iconic Oval.