

Interviewee: Dang Yang

Interviewer: Brian Dombrowski

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Abstract:

Dang Yang is a Director for the Office of Multicultural Affairs at UW Eau Claire. He identifies himself as a Hmong American that was born and raised in the Midwest of the United States. Dang discusses the how the COVID-19 affects his personal life as well as his professional life. In his discussion he emphasizes the challenges of operating an office in at a higher learning institution as well as the issues of racism that came about with the onset of the Coronavirus and isolated racially charged events that happened during the pandemic.

BD: All right, so it is November 30, 2020 at 11 o'clock in the morning. To start off with giving some numbers in the United States alone for COVID-19 cases, there are 13.7 Million deaths. In the state of Wisconsin, there are currently 384,701 cases with 3,370 deaths currently. So I guess we're going to start off with what is your name? And do you have Do you mind sharing demographic information for this study such as race, ethnicity, gender age?

DY: Yeah, I'd happy to. Yeah, so my name is Dang Yang, um, and my racial and ethnic background and cultural background is racially it's Asian. But I'm Hmong-American. I'm I am between the ages of 35 and 40. And I was born and raised in the state of Wisconsin. I am a father of two. I have a partner that I'm married to. And I have I'm a transplant here in the city of Eau Claire, you know I've lived in the Midwest all my life. I've been in, I've been living in the city of Eau Claire for the last 14 years. And so I feel very much like oh, Claire is home.

BD: So, you live in Eau Claire. And so what is it like there.

DY: Um, Eau Claire is very similar to my hometown, my hometown is Wausau. And that was one of the biggest draws for me originally when I moved here. I moved here to Eau Claire as a college student, in fact, many a number of years ago. And I remember one of the biggest things that really interested me in the Eau Claire community was because it reminded me so much of my hometown in Wausau. And at the same time, it provided a level of novelty, since it was different, it was a different group of individuals, you know, I felt that coming to Eau Claire, and the opportunity to the the outdoor activities that were available. And the college was exactly what I was looking for. I wasn't too far from home, but I was far enough from home to kind of create and develop my own personal identity. And I feel that Eau Claire has really given me a lot in regards to my personal development and my professional development, because I work here in the city of Eau Claire, not too as well. And that's been really, really beneficial. And that's been

really wonderful, because I feel that I have a lot to give back to the community too, as well. And so I think that's to some extent, the way in which I've always processed and understood my role here in [time?] really is not just to take and engage in the community, but also to give back to the community. And that's kind of part of the reason why I do what I do in higher education. And that's a lot of the reasons and the rationale behind what I do in the community, the volunteer work that I do the engagement that I do. And that speaks lots, I think, to some extent about my own upbringing, the cultural values that have imposed upon me that I subscribe to as a home American, you know, being very connected with the community, feeling very much a part of the community wanting to give back to the community, see myself as a member of the community as someone who contributes to the community. And so I think that that's really important part of my own understanding of who I am and my role here in Eau Claire.

BD: Great. Yeah, that certainly a lot. [laughs] That's great to hear that you're so involved in the community and everything. Do you mind sharing your position and fulfilling what you do for job or for living and things like that?

DY: Yeah, absolutely. And so professionally, right now I serve as a Director for the Office of Multicultural Affairs at UW Eau Claire. And I really enjoy the work that I do, because it really aligns with my personal mission, as well to create a world that is a better place for my family. Not just my own family, but my extended family too, as well. And so working specifically to support underserved populations of students, specifically students of color at UW Eau Claire, and by extension, doing very similar type of work in the community to as well is a big part of what I like to do. It's a big part of what I feel is, is my contribution to the community, my contribution to the institution in my contribution to to my family,

BD: I feel is very important as well, but yeah, that's good. So moving on to like the talking about COVID-19 and the whole pandemic, when you first learned about the COVID-19 What were your initial thoughts about it and how have you thoughts changed since then?

DY: Initially I was I took it very seriously. You know, I I wanted to understand the details of whatever meant for COVID-19 to be a novel virus, you know, and knowing that there was very little information about that was, it was scary. It was there was definitely anxiety, there was uncertainty. And immediately simply because of the work that I do professionally, in my own personal interests, I was particularly interested in the ways in which this type of news would exacerbate existing systems of oppression. And, you know, that really played out right away. You know, a lot of the conversation was not just about the health and well being of the community, but also the disproportionate impact of that had on black indigenous, Latin x and Asian communities from a health standpoint, and then even in the first two or three months, we were seeing increased reports of racism against Asian American communities. And that was my particular focus at first, you know, the, the, the idea that COVID-19 and Coronavirus, was exacerbating existing prejudices, specifically against Asian American communities. And it wasn't just a health perspective at that particular point. But it was a socialized perspective. You know, I recall that there were a number of different national and regional agencies that were attempted to track the hate crimes and the bias incidents that that were perpetrated against Asian American community members. And some of them were very violent, that got physical

altercations. And many of them were discrimination, you know, inappropriate language and appropriate conduct workplace discrimination. I remember, a lot of the reading that I had done at first focused a lot on those interpersonal interactions, the racism that would take place and the bias incidences that would happen across the United States. And then, after a while, the conversation shifted to the workplace discrimination and how that played out. And on a national scale, the conversation started happening, about started taking place about you know, like, why is this happening? And a lot of individuals like myself, who have been entrenched in the kind of social justice work that we've been doing really have been talking a lot about. And we recognize that the COVID-19 really simply exacerbated existing prejudices, existing biases, and existing systems of oppression. And we knew it wasn't necessarily something new, but because of the novelty of the Coronavirus. We knew that it was something that serve as an easy scapegoat for for individuals to kind of openly articulate those biases and prejudices. Um, and then from a health standpoint, you know, we were I was I was particularly worried about how that would impact first and foremost, my immediate circle, my family and my friends. And I think that I felt very fortunate and somewhat insulated. When the pandemic first came out, back in March and April, and he didn't throw me and some of it through the summertime, as well, primarily because a lot of the conversation about where the Coronavirus had the most impact was large metropolitan areas. And, you know, we saw that what New York went through over the summertime. And so there was some level of distance. You know, while I while we were still able to see how serious this was, there's some level of distance, but I've been finding now that now that it in November, the end of November, and almost in December of 2020, that circle of the impact that has had on my circle of influence has really started to close in on us. You know, I've had like really close family members who have gotten sick, close friends who have gotten sick. With COVID, I've been very fortunate that I haven't experienced any deaths associated with 19 yet. And the stories that I hear of individuals who have been directly impacted by COVID-19, the deaths associated with that have been devastating. And so I have been thinking a lot about the type of anxiety type of uncertainty, the the feeling of being boxed in is really beginning to to feel more real. The in the immediate impact that that I have personally been seeing is is certainly concerning to me.

Because as soon as as soon as one of my close friends who lives here in town, got sick, you know, the he had gotten sick, his wife got had gotten sick, and his one one of his children gotten sick and they all, you know, we're ill, but not too seriously. But I do remember trying to understand the immediate impact. Because you hear on the news that has an impact on people's jobs as impacted people's health, it has impact on people's childcare, there's all these different elements. But then, the moment that had happened to someone that I directly knew, seeing on a day to day basis, what that really looked like, because um, my friend has three kids. And only only one or two of the kids got a little sick. But both parents were really, really ill. And they were bedridden for quite some time. And so I'm trying to figure out, what do they need? What do kids need. And so, you know, we were very fortunate that, you know, my friends, we were able to come together, and they had a good support system, some extended family that lived in town. So we put drop off food, drop off supplies, you know, do some things for them to synaptic capacity. And this is coming from a position of privilege, because, you know, my friend is relatively well off, my family is relatively well off economically considering. And so we had

stable jobs. And even then, we all had trouble dealing with the situation already, as it is on a day to day basis figuring out daycare for your school. And that was even more eye opening. I think that as the months have gone on, um learning more about how this impacts different people has been the most eye opening part of it. You know, listening to my students, you know, early on, about the impact that it's had on them has been pretty eye opening too, as well. And I think that we've been fortunate that we have not seen any student deaths. But we have seen students whose family members have passed... And some staff members whose extended families have passed, but no one directly associated with institution. Well, the students that I work with have, you know, had significant negative impacts, I guess, significant, we would really like them specifically passing away. At the same time, I think that I worry a lot about long term impact that this has too as well. I think that when I when I talk with my students, when I talk to my staff, and when I talk with my family, a lot of things that come up really is the idea about the anxiety, the uncertainty, about how long it's gonna last, the impact that our everyday activities may happen, whether we wear a mask, whether we don't wear a mask, who we're engaged with who we're meeting on a day to day basis, you know those things, there's a hyper vigilance to a lot of those things. And the hyper vigilance really takes a cognitive toll. Because it takes energy to always be vigilant in that particular capacity. And I think that that is that type of COVID fatigue is definitely a big part of my own experience and the experiences from faculty, staff, and students and community members I'm hearing but too. I think that mental health from the beginning was a really big concern. Um, and over time, what we've been finding is that that is still pretty consistent. And, you know, there have been a lot of resources for mental health services for students and for the community members and different strategies that people can utilize. And I'm finding that it's the informal support systems and networks that have been really, really vital. And the formalized services like counseling services, and counseling and therapy is one part of that. But I think that the hardest part throughout this is individuals who have already who did not already have existing informal relationships or support systems in place before this happened. I think that those individuals from a student perspective or even staff perspective, have had the hardest time dealing with the mental health components of this that I've seen.

And I'm finding that while formal therapy and formal Mental Health Services has been an important part of the vision, it is not in of itself a silver bullet, because outside of formal therapy, formal mental health services, it's a support structure that needs to be built up too as well and you're finding that that's been the biggest challenge for our students and for faculty and staff and community members too, as well. So I don't know how others have been addressing that. And I think that makes it that much more difficult being in a virtual platform. I remember, when we first transitioned, like virtually, it was chaotic, trying to find the right technology, I try to find the right platform, I think by now over the last 9-10 months, people have gotten used to utilizing multiple platforms, zoom, Microsoft Teams, or other apps, Facebook Live or other ways in which they can connect with different people. But before that, you know, the ability to, to me virtually was dependent on whether or not people had access to broadband internet, Yeah, I remember, like I had a student who, who in the spring semester, last year, um, move back home, because our campus closed in March for for fully virtual services, and virtual classes. And at that particular point, they went home, which was the living area that did not have great broadband Internet, and the institution, you know, to their credit, did everything that they possibly could to

assist students to get the technology necessary. But that stuff takes time, the infrastructure, it takes time, I think that we have a better infrastructure now than we did. But while the technology infrastructure was important, I think that one particular concern that I continue to have really is the the social infrastructure. And that varies from person to person, from community, to community, and from need to need. And I don't know how well social structures are adapting in a fully virtual platform. Um, I, I see a lot of trends to try to keep people occupied. I remember at first in April, in May, there was a big interest in like, making sourdough bread. I never really understood that. [laughs] But um in now, over the summertime, you know, seeing everything that has happened. Um in, in Minneapolis, in Kenosha, Wisconsin, the movement towards anti racism, anti oppression, which is, I think, an important conversation to have. I don't think that we have the infrastructure in place yet to do that well, on a larger scale. And I'm, um, optimistic about the move towards anti racism, the move towards anti oppression, because of the deaths of, you know, so many black and brown community members at the hands of, you know, police officers, but not just police officers, but like state sanctioned violence against black and brown bodies. I think that, um, having a larger and wider narrative and awareness of these of the reality that this community members have been going through already, really has been, has had a double edged sword, the silver lining here really is that the conversation is being had on a much larger, much more national scale. At the same time, I worry about whether or not we are ready to move in either direction, because it takes a lot of infrastructure to build in. And social infrastructure is so much more difficult. And because it's not tangible. I think the technology infrastructure is very tangible component. I think that.. I I want to see more social infrastructure, more intentionality, being built in place to support those traditional interrupts in populations. You know, even the Eau Claire area, we're seeing affordable issues of affordable housing. And so from a socio economic standpoint, we've been very fortunate in the community in Eau Claire to see growth in our community. But that particular growth really did not

at the ground level, taken to like a strong enough consideration of the impact that would have on like housing and rental prices. And I think that they're making a lot of progress. Now. They're making they're taking some initial efforts. But I think that looking at it after the fact really makes it much more difficult, because it's not baked into it, but the normal processes of what it is that we do, I think that as I look at COVID-19 to Coronavirus, and the impact that that's had. I see all these things through the lens of equity, inclusion and diversity. um, like the successes that we've seen, I see it from an equity lens, the limitations that we see in COVID-19, the hospitalizations, the health impacts the social impact, I see it all through the lens of equity, diversity and inclusion, and I can't help it so Because of the my profession, as well as my personal interests in that particular area. Um, and I think that the way in, which has changed over time is, is that it's reinforced what we've known, scholars and practitioners have known all along that the underlying issues of equity diversity and inclusion is the fact that we subscribe to inequitable social narratives. And we ourselves perpetuate those narratives unintentionally. And therefore, the outcomes of themselves of what happens are inequitable outcomes. And I think that this, the silver lining, again, in this conversation, really is the fact that that level of awareness is being raised. That is, it's transcended beyond just the individuals who have been doing this for a long time. It's trends-the conversation about anti oppression has transcended beyond conversations within practitioners, beyond the conversations with scholars beyond the conversation of

individuals whose position descriptions or personal missions are to address inequities in the community. And I think that that is a good place to be going. Um, I, I'm really happy to see that there's some level of light at the end of the tunnel too, as well, when it comes to the health aspect. You know, with the announcement of two, maybe three potential viable vaccines with high levels of efficacy. I'm really excited about what that mean. But again, I see this from an equity lens, the conversation has, has shifted to who gets who gets prioritized for these vaccines. And I'm really sad to see and to hear that on a federal scale. The Coronavirus task force at the federal government has identified that they're distributing vaccines based on population to states, even though the recommendations have been to take a look at the most vulnerable populations within the states and disseminate vaccines from that particular standpoint. And I think this just goes to show that even though the conversation is being had about anti oppression and inequities, you know, like, its decision makers, who are really impacting how...how those things are put into practice, how those conversations are being put into practice. And I'm just reminded again, about the minimal number of individuals in a decision making capacity, who can make decisions that are equitable, or from a federal standpoint, or at least from a state standpoint, I think that we have a lot of work to do too, as well, even from a community standpoint, you know, in those capacities in those, those contexts, we're seeing progress, but I think but, you know, there's still a lot of work to do a long way to go. And so again, you know, I see all of these things surrounding COVID-19 from equity lens, and I can't help but think about, you know, the decisions that are being made, and whether or not those decisions are made through an equity lens, you know, to meet the needs of the most vulnerable populations, those most disadvantaged. I remember, you know, and shifting gears regarding resources to unemployment. I I think that one of the things that I saw recently was that was it \$4 billion or \$4 million,

um, as of middle of November in the state of Wisconsin was disseminated out by unemployment. And I can't remember exactly what that number was, but, you know, the unemployment dollars that have been provided to individuals because of COVID-19 related factors. I, I wonder if it's enough, it feels, I think that um-that um the state's unemployment system is indicative of our overall infrastructure and systems that we are not at all prepared. And and I think that we feel like we're, we're alone in addressing these situations. I think that that comes-the unemployment, I bring that up as an analogy, because it's only one very specific system in the state. And, you know, it was overwhelmed immediately. And I feel that that is an analogy that can be applied to a lot of different contexts. You know, higher education was overwhelmed, the health systems were overwhelmed, there are overwhelmed. Right now in state, Wisconsin, I think that, you know, most ICU beds are, as of like, last week or two weeks ago, are pretty much full, I read a story about an individual who lived outside Lacrosse area, who had Rochester just to get an ICU bed, because it didn't have any, any, any and any ICU beds locally. And I think that, what that tells me, and what I take away from those stories, is the fact that it doesn't seem to be a larger, coordinated effort to address these situations. And really, the coordination of this and leadership is absolutely vital. And again, I look at this from an equity standpoint, you know, to address equity, you have to have a strong infrastructure for leadership, but also grassroots movements, and all these different things that support them from the leadership component, or not having consistent leadership. Yeah, I very much feel like even in my department, we have some guidance from the institution, we're expected to make decisions for our staff, to my department

about, you know, what's appropriate, we're expected to make decisions for our students. And it feels very much like it's a piece meal plan. I don't know, um, I think that there's some strength, and pros to that, because it gives us autonomy and making decisions that's contextualized for specifics. Um, and at the same time, it really feels like I'm making decisions by myself, in my own sphere of influence. And I imagine that states feel the same way too, as well, not having a coordinated federal response to the COVID-19. You know, I know that there's been a lot of news articles and conversations about states doing their own plans, and, you know, each individual respective communities coming with their own mask mandates or guidelines, each county on plan in their own guidelines. And it feels a bit disjointed and doesn't really feel like, like, it's part of a bigger picture. I think that's been the hardest thing for me, you know, feeling to some extent, not necessarily alone. But feeling like there's, there's a lot of weight on your own shoulders to make decisions. As someone who has some semblance of influencing decision making process of one specific department. At the same time, it feels that if I make a specific decision, because I look at things from an equity standpoint, I'm thinking about it from how it impacts the entire system. Like if I make a decision about our office, how does that impact the rest of the institution? or How did institutional decisions impact my office and my students and my staff? And so I can't help but think about that. And at the same time, I can't coordinate those decisions with others either, because I don't know what they're doing. I don't know what decisions that they're making. I don't know how to communicate with them. Because I don't know. Like, I don't know what decisions they're being asked to make other departments. And I and I imagined that other counties are feeling the same way too, as well. about, you know, since they're being made at a local level. I don't know.

I think the hardest part for me has been just feeling feeling the weight of having to constantly make those decisions, but not knowing how they're going to impact the larger you know, social systems and the infrastructure of the campus, the community, the students staff. At it isn't to say that the institution hasn't provided guidance, because they have provided recommendations, guidance, some semblance of infrastructure. And they've given us some autonomy to make decisions. But you know, at the same time, while we were given autonomy to make decisions, I always feel like there we there are pieces of information that we don't have to make the best decision. And sometimes after the fact, we learning or hearing about some things and rationale, but institutional decisions that really impact our department, is when you know, we look in hindsight see that. Okay. I probably would have made a different decision in that capacity. I don't know. So Brian, I I don't know if this is helpful. I'm kind of I feel like I've been jumping around a lot talking a little bit about comparison between the beginning of COVID-19 and where we are right now? Um...

BD: No, that's perfect. We're trying to get every single aspect of it, you know, we get? No, we're trying to get, you know, basically just, you know, general community and professional things like that. And you're kind of added to that path professional aspect. So all this is great. This is this is exactly what we were looking for. Um, I guess, because we know we're getting a little bit pressed for time. Um, Kind of the final question that I have is, knowing what what you know, now with everything in place. Do you think that individuals communities or the government, what do they have to keep in mind for the future?

DY: I think...I think the biggest lesson learned that I that I would articulate to anyone in the decision making role would be that coordinated efforts matter. Infrastructure matters. Information matters. And I think those three specific things are really important. I think that the way in which we disseminate information, and to who would send the mission, that's vital, you know, the infrastructure to make the things happen, is absolutely vital, whether that's a you know, supply chain infrastructure, to getting people to the right place, and the right people, or whether that has to do with social infrastructure, we're making sure that we put in together like, for example, like the idea of wearing masks is a specific task, but they-but the infrastructure and social infrastructure in place was the cost of reminders, you know, the expectation overall, from businesses, from communities, agencies, from organizations, from departments, that it is a normative practice to wear your mask regularly, you know, those social infrastructures are absolutely vital to as well. And then, you know, the, the coordination of the specific events and activities and resources, you know, to make the biggest impact with the limited resource that we have limited time limited people limited, such as that those are absolutely vital. And I continue to walk away, thinking so much about those three very specific things, you know, the the coordination, the resources, and infrastructure. And I think that,um, there are a lot of lessons learned from this particular experience. Um, the type of preparation that we need to do beforehand, and during the dissemination of lessons learn the route. the the-and demand or throughout any sort of crises is important. Um, you know, I've been very fortunate, I think that in the role that I play on a professional standpoint, crisis management is something that I'm regularly doing, whether it's an individual student who's engaged in crisis situation, or it's an institutional crisis, however you define that, you know, I'm, I feel that I'm very fortunate that I have some experience in that. [Today, I just mentioned?]. Um, and I think that I suspect that your questions management, in and of itself is going to be an ongoing skill set that people are going to be looking for, in the professional capacity, you know, how good are you at adapting into last minute changes? How good are you at addressing crises when they when they occur, how good you are coordinating those appropriate resources, making decisions when you have limited information. And so even then, as someone who feels somewhat not competent, I never feel competent in crisis management, but I feel informed. [laughs] I feel informed enough in crisis management where where where I can engage as someone who feels competent in in that particular capacity to some extent. I feel very fortunate that I, that I have been able to over time able to do those things and make decisions when they're necessary. But at the same time, COVID fatigue has really taken its toll because crisis management is not meant to be an ongoing process. It's not meant to be in a normative state of mind. And it takes a lot of cognitive energy to be in that particular place. And so I do that [sighs] I think that COVID fatigue is something that's going to impact us long term. And I think that government's decision makers need to prepare for the aftermath of that. The health impacts, yes, will will have the vaccine social impacts, yes, we're going to be we're gonna continue having conversations about anti racism, anti oppression, working with individuals, you know, from an economic standpoint, you know, working with individuals who have experienced job loss, you know, but the aftermath of COVID-19, what normal is going to look like after this, I think that

I think that, whatever it is that we set in place, is going to be important, because that's going to set the tone for what happens over the next decade or two, but how we operate in the workplace

about how we operate, you know, socially, large gatherings, events, concerts, activities. And so I think that it's gonna require a lot of leadership, to redefine what normal looks like, and to start kind of pushing that narrative in a way that's going to be empowering. And, you know, and considerate of those populations that are most and traditionally underrepresented and most vulnerable. And so I think that those are the things that I really would point people to, to think about, how are we going to redefine what normal looks like, if we don't intentionally do things that's going to help empower people, that we will accidentally fall into situations where, you know, different communities will, will feel empowered, because they had one of the good leadership, and different communities will feel disempowered, because, you know, the overarching narrative is is more negative, and deficit focused than anything else. And so I really think that how we structure what normal looks like, over these next few months, and over the next year, is going to really dictate how we see our role, how we perceive our lives, and how we interact and engage with people and in our community over the next couple of decades. And I'm really hoping that we put things in place that normal is empowering, but normal is equitable, but normal is inclusive. Because we don't then you know, we oftentimes will, you know, subscribe to our most basic biases. And I don't want that to happen. I want to be intentional about, you know, the expectations, the social systems that we put into place, as well as the, you know, the other infrastructures for Workforce Development for education for all those different pieces, too, as well. So, Brian, I hope I answered some semblance of the question that you asked.

BD: No, that's great, that that's exactly what I was looking for. Yeah, so I know, you're a busy person, so I won't keep you. But yeah, you pretty much hit everything that I wanted to hit so. So that's that. That's great. Thank you so much. And on behalf of the University of Wisconsin, and the Chippewa Valley COVID-19 project. Thank you. And thank you for your time. And this is a great conversation. And I think a lot of important aspects were brought up that I think in the future, and for future people that are looking back on this and trying to do research. I think this is a very important project. And I think it's everything that was talked about today. It's it's important for the future.

DY: Great, thank you very much, Brian, for all the work that you've been doing too, as well in your role and kind of getting this organized and reaching out and getting things so archived. So thank you very much as well.

BD: Thank you.