

Transcript of Interview with Dang Yang

Interviewee: Dang Yang

Interviewer: Brian Dombrowski

Date: 11/30/2020

Location (Interviewee): Eau Claire, Wisconsin

Location (Interviewer): Unknown

Transcription equipment: Otter.ai

Interview technology: Zoom

Abstract: Dang Yang is the Director for the Office of Multicultural Affairs at UW-Eau Claire. He identifies as a Hmong American that was born and raised in the Midwest of the United States. Dang discusses how the COVID-19 pandemic affected his personal life as well as his professional life. In this discussion he emphasizes the challenges of operating an office 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. He focuses on equity in his discussion.

Brian Dombrowski 00:03

All right, so it is November 30, of 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 and 273,160 deaths. In the state of Wisconsin, there are currently 384,701 cases with 3,307 deaths, currently. So, I guess we're gonna 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, because...

Dang Yang 00:44

I'd be happy to. Yeah, and so my name is Dang Yang. And my racial and ethnic background and cultural background is racially it's Asian, but Hmong American, 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. Even though 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 Eau Claire is home.

Brian Dombrowski 01:33

Oh, so you live in Eau Claire. So, what is it like there?

Dang Yang 01:37

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 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 it 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, now 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 to some extent, the way in which I've always processed and understood my role here in town 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 Hmong American, 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 the lair.

Brian Dombrowski 03:41

Great, yeah, that's certainly a lot. That's great to hear that you're so involved in the community and everything. Do you mind sharing your position and filling what you do for job are you there for living and things like that?

Dang Yang 03:54

Yeah, absolutely. And so professionally, right now I serve as the 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 too, 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 and my contribution to my family.

Brian Dombrowski 04:36

I feel it's very important as well, but yeah, that's good. So, moving on to 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 your thoughts changed since then?

Dang Yang 04:51

Initially, I was I took it very seriously. You know, I..I wanted to understand the details of what 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, and 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 wellbeing of the community, but also the disproportionate impact of that had on black indigenous l...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 the 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 incidences that that were perpetrated against Asian American community members. And some of them were very violent. They've got physical altercations. And many of them were discrimination, you know, inappropriate language, inappropriate 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 served as an easy scapegoat for...for individuals to kind of openly articulate those biases and prejudices.

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, my friends. And I think that I felt very fortunate and somewhat insulated when the pandemic first came out. Back in March, April, and even throughout May, and some of it through the summertime, too, 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 a little distance, but I've been finding now that now that we're in November, the end of November, and almost in December of 2020, that circle of the impact that it's 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 coping, 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, the type of anxiety, type of uncertainty, the...the feeling of being boxed in is...is really beginning to, to feel more real. The...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 of his

children had gotten sick and they all, you know, were ill, but not too seriously. But I do remember trying to understand the immediate impact. Because you hear on the news that it has an impact on people's jobs, it has impact on people's health, it has an impact on people's childcare, all these different elements. But then, the moment that it happened to someone that I directly knew, seeing on a day-to-day basis, what that really looked like, because my friend has three kids, and only...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, trying to figure out, what do they need? What do their 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 and some extended family that lived in town. So, we're able to drop off food, drop off supplies, you know, do some things for them to assist in that particular capacity. And this is coming from a position of privilege, because, you know, my friend is, 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, you know, school. And that was even more eye opening. I think that as the months have gone on.

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 the institution, the students that I work with have, you know, had significant negative impacts, I guess significant would really mean like, you know, like them, specifically passing away. At the same time, I think that I worry a lot about long term impact that this has to as well. I think that when I when I want to talk with my students, when I talk to my staff, and when we 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 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 that I'm hearing to. I think that mental health from the beginning was a really big concern. 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 who did not already have existing and formal relationships or support systems in place before this happened. I think that those individuals, from a student's 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 equation, 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 to as well and we'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 it 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, or trying to find the right platform. I think by now over the last 9-10 months, people have gotten used to utilizing multiple platforms to 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. I remember, like I had a student who, who in the spring semester, last year, moved 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 they lived in an 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 still 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 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.

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. But, and now, over the summertime, you know, seeing everything that has happened in...in Minneapolis, and 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 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 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. And at the same time, I worry about whether or not we are ready to move in that particular direction, because it takes a lot of infrastructure to build in. And social infrastructure is so much more difficult. And it's 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 in 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 rural 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 intentional efforts. But I think that looking at it after

the fact really makes it much more difficult, because it's not baked into the normal processes of what it is that we do. I think that as I look at COVID-19 Coronavirus, and the impact that that's had. I see all these things through the lens of equity, inclusion, and diversity. 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 all through a lens of equity, diversity, and inclusion, and I can't help. So, because of my profession, as well as my personal interests in that particular area. And I think that the way in which it 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. 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 there will be 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, at the very least from 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 and long way to go. And so again, you know, I see all of these things surrounding COVID-19 from an 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, meet the needs of the most vulnerable populations, those most disadvantaged. I remember, you know, and kind of shifting gears regarding resources to unemployment. I...I think that one of the figures that I saw recently was that was it 4 billion or \$4 million dollars as of the 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...I wonder if it's

enough, it feels I think that the state's unemployment system is indicative of our overall infrastructure and systems. But 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 it was overwhelmed immediately. And I feel that it's 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 the state of 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 of Lacrosse area who had to go to Rochester just to get an ICU bed, because they didn't have any, any...any ICU beds locally. And I think that, what that tells me, and what I take away from those stories, is the fact that there 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 strong infrastructure for leadership, but also grassroots movements, and all these different things that support them from the leadership component, you know, not having consistent leadership. I very much feel like even in my department, we have some guidance from the institution. But we're expected to make decisions for our staff in my department about what's appropriate. We're expected to make decisions for our students, it feels very much like it's a piecemeal plan. I don't know. I think that there's some strength, and pros to that, because it gives us autonomy and making decisions that's contextualized for specifics. 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 feels similar to 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 up with their own mask mandates or guidelines, each county on planning 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. And 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 does 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 imagined the other counties are feeling the same way too, as well, about, you know, the decisions that are 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 larger, you know, social systems and the infrastructure of the campus, the community, the students, staff. And it isn't to say that the institution hasn't provided guidance, because they have, they've 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, relearning or hearing about some things and rationale, but institutional decisions that really impact our department, is when, you know, we look in hindsight and say that okay, I probably would have made a different decision in that particular 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.

Brian Dombrowski 30:12

No, that's perfect. We're trying to get every single aspect of it, you know, we get, we're trying to get, you know, basically just, you know, general community and professional things like that. And you're, you're kind of added to that p... professional aspect. So, all this is great. This is this is exactly what we were looking for. I guess, because we don't, we're...we're getting a little bit pressed for time. 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, or the government, what do they have to keep in mind for the future?

Dang Yang 30:57

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 is [distorted sound] something vital. You know, the infrastructure to make things happen, is absolutely vital, whether that's, you know, supply chain infrastructure, to getting PPE to the right place, and to the right people, or whether that has to do with social infrastructure, where 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, social infrastructure in place, was the constant reminders, you know, the expectation overall from businesses, from communities, agencies, and from organizations and from departments, that is a normative practice to wear your mask regularly. You know, those social infrastructures are absolutely vital too, 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 and limited people limited supplies...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 there are a lot of lessons learned from this particular experience. The type of preparation that we need to do beforehand and during the dissemination of lessons, learn the route, pandemic and work throughout any sort of crises is important. 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 is engaged in a 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. And I think that I suspect that, you know, crisis 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

to 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. I feel informed enough in crisis management where we're 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, been able to do those things that 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 a normative state of mind. And it takes a lot of cognitive energy to be in that particular place. And so, I think that I think that COVID Fatigue is something that's going to impact us long term. And I think that governments, decision makers need to prepare for the aftermath of that. The health impacts, yes, we'll have the vaccine social impacts, yes, we're gonna be we're gonna continue having conversations about anti-racism, anti-oppression, working with individuals, you know that 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, about 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 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 hadn't really good leadership, and different communities will feel disempowered, because, you know, the overarching narrative 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 in our community over the next couple of decades, and I'm really hoping that we put things in place that normal is empowering, that normal is equitable, that normal is inclusive. Because if 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 us 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.

Brian Dombrowski 37:56

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's great. I 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...i... it's important for the future.

Dang Yang 38:46

Green, 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 archived. So thank you very much as well.

Brian Dombrowski 38:56

Thank you