Changing Academic Life Podcast: Nov 2018

CAL37 Leysia Palen


Geri: 00:05 Welcome to changing academic life. I'm Geraldine Fitzpatrick, and this is a podcast series where academics and others share their stories, provide ideas, and provoke discussions about what we can do individually and collectively to change academic life for the better.

Geri: 00:30 Great that you could join us today for this conversation with Leysia Palen. Leysia is a professor and founding chair of information science at the University of Colorado Boulder. She's also been really instrumental in establishing crisis informatics as a research area. In this conversation Leysia shares her career trajectory in getting to this place as head of a department. What I was particularly surprised to learn was that she only really got tenure, some short years ago relative to his seniority and position in the research community. Hers is an amazing story of being a first generation college student, dealing with impostor syndrome and moving to a new university to support her spouse. It's also a story of focus and perseverance in really working at defining a research area that she connected with where she felt she could make a difference and then being supported for years by soft money from her own successful proposals. Before finally getting a half time faculty position while also having a family and growing the internationally recognized project EPIC doing the Crisis informatics work leisure, Leysia also talks about her challenges and lessons learned in setting up and leading a whole new department. It's an inspirational story that I'm sure you'll take a lot from. So here is my conversation with Leysia.

Geri: 02:00 Leysia, thanks for joining me. It's great to be able to talk together because we've been part of the same research community for a long time.

Leysia: 02:10 Long time I think, you know, 25 years.

Geri: 02:16 So you've had a really interesting career. I know you're now a founding professor, chair of a whole new department and I'd love to get to discuss that. And, you've also been instrumental in shaping up a whole new research area around disaster informatics. Before we get there, just a little bit of a quick background of your history for people who don't know you.
Leysia: 02:45 Sure. So, as I get older, the further back in history I seem to go as I understand how some early maneuvers and things ended up, and accidents, mind you, help shape where I am today. So, I ended up at UCSD as an undergraduate student. What is sort of a thing I've started returning to, which is a sort of a big thing I think in American scholarly discourse these days around who gets to participate in Higher Ed, is that I'm a first generation college student and I grew up in San Diego and I wasn't able to go off to college somewhere far and wide and I ended up at UCSD, which at the time to me felt like a consolation prize. Like, oh gosh, I really wish I could have gone further afield.

Geri: 03:39 Because that's part of the culture here, isn't it? You do tend to go ....

Leysia: 03:44 And I understand in Australia it's a little bit less than that ... One of my phd students is Australian and explained that to me, but yes it is. And so, I stayed at home and I went to UCSD. Now, little did I know that UCSD was really sort of an incubator, one of a few incubators of human computer interaction research. And so after changing my major three times, I changed. I started as a civil engineer. My very first course was in Fortran for engineers. I loved Fortran, I love programming. And so I switched into computer science and I liked it and I did well, but that's when Don Norman and others were starting the cognitive science department in UCSD. And so I switched for a third time, so that I could move into this program rather late. And so that was well into my third year at university. I ended up doing a fifth year so that I could get enough of the cog psy education program to be able to get a degree in cog psy. And it was there that I worked with Aaron Cicourel who is a student of Garfinkel's. So it was early exposure to ethnomethodology, although I didn't. So when ethnomethodologists and other highly... scholars of very high standing because of their intellectual work, teach to undergraduates, they will often sort of gloss over sort of the philosophical or sort of details of what they do.

Leysia: 05:10 And so I learned how to be an ethnomethodologist without even knowing that that's what the name of it was honestly. I worked with Ed Hutchins who had just been named a MacArthur Fellow. I didn't know what any of that meant. And so by working in this lab with Don Norman and Ed Hutchins at the time and then exposure to Aaron Cicourel who co-taught some of these courses with Ed and Don. Here I was this sort of bumbling undergrad student, which most of us are, but one really who again, didn't have any idea what research was because of just my background and ended up working in some
of these premier research labs. And so it was with Ed primarily that I did aviation research as an Undergrad. And from there I went to Boeing in Seattle and worked in a flight deck research group and it was there that I worked in this research and realized, wow, not only do I like research a little bit to get my first job out of Undergrad and doing that, I really want to go to Grad school and do more, like this is what I want to do.

Leysia: 06:08 And so then it was in '93 that I ended up at Irvine and I ended up there in September. And then of course Mosaic was released in October. So the whole discourse around the whole set of things that we thought we could do around computing were really, um, we knew they were changing, but they sort of suddenly and dramatically changed the second month I was in Grad school. And that sort of set the course for a lot of other things that happened since. It was a very sort of lucky series of steps of events that got me into Human Computer Interaction. But, but maybe other like interesting steps would have happened if I ended up more in biology at UCSD or whatever. I'd like to think that, you know, there would have been a lot of interesting tracks. I would have hoped and I think academia was really a place I just wanted to really be somehow, someway

Geri: 06:56 What connected about it?

Leysia: 06:58 Human Computer Interaction?

Geri: 07:00 Well, academia and research more generally, I guess.

Leysia: 07:04 You know, I think it's just, um, I can say now, I'm not sure I knew it then, but just some pursuit of understanding the fundamental, the fundamentals of what makes us who we are, what makes us human, what makes it possible for us to accomplish all these things that we accomplished as we're sitting here looking at the New York skyline. Like how do all these things get built? How do we coordinate in ways that we accomplish social interaction and the construction of society? What are all the small ways in the end, the accumulation of all those small ways that then become these very significant kinds of structures that we organize around and that I think is fundamentally interesting to me, including all the ways in which those things go wrong. Um, and I think that was proper. I think that's the reason why I like research so much

Geri: 07:52 And you've played out that theme in multiple different ways. So you talked about luck as well, which I find interesting because so many people do talk about luck, but there's something about just responding to the opportunities that arise and the names
that you mentioned, for people who aren't familiar with this, with the field, are just some of the most senior influential people. What a privilege!

Leysia: 08:19 And you know, they were quite humble because I didn't know they were, they were just professors I didn't really appreciate until later who they were and what it meant to be sort of taken under their wing. So just kind of a readiness to be taught by anybody now. These happen to be incredible people, but there were plenty of other people who taught me along the way who perhaps don't have the same credentials but who were invaluable.

Geri: 08:44 Influential.

Leysia: 08:44 Yeah.

Geri: 08:47 So you did your PhD at Irvine, then went...

Leysia: 08:51 Then went right to Colorado, University of Colorado Boulder.

Leysia: 08:55 Yep. And I was a trailing spouse, so it was my spouse who secured the position there. There wasn't, at the time at Colorado, this would be 1998 now, so 20 years ago, almost exactly, that I ended up there and the closest fit for me was Computer Science and so it was kind of an accommodation by all, both the department and me and everyone to kind of make it work and so, so it worked and I was grateful for the opportunity, but it wasn't an easy fit.

Geri: 09:27 Was it an easy decision? How was that decision process for you?

Leysia: 09:33 Yes, and so yeah, so people often ask, oh, did you? So the formal language in the US, the US academy is to call to call what I was a trailing spouse, which has a negative connotation, negative connotation, and they asked how I felt about that.

Leysia: 09:49 The truth was I still was uncertain if I belonged in the academy. I still, I think had a feeling of not quite knowing if I could be one of those folks. Like was I smart enough that I have what it takes? There was still a little bit of, kind of some last a long time. There was a feeling of imposter syndrome and so I thought perhaps I'd be better suited in an interesting industry to be honest with you. I bet a lot of that I now kind of reconcile and realize it was sort of imposter syndrome, um, but I wasn't unhappy that we could live in such a beautiful place and I wanted to live in a place like Boulder, Colorado to raise a family.
and other kinds of things. Um, and so it didn't feel like a sacrifice at all. I think some I had, I was pretty naive and thinking that, oh, things will work out.

Leysia: 10:42 And I knew, so the thing I did was I stayed in research. I kept my research going even at the cost of other things. Like I couldn't teach as much and I couldn't quite do as many other things while we were sort of, you know, my spouse and I were kind of making things work and he's a very, very good inverse, very supportive partner. One of the things I advise people now is even if you're in situations that are less than ideal, either because of other people's design or your own or just the way life takes you, if you love research, research, stay in research and that will most likely, that will almost always ensure good opportunities later on if you are a scholar and want to either be in the academy or do industrial research, but keeping that research thread going is essential. I think that's what sort of helped me eventually become a more permanent member of the University of Colorado.

Geri: 11:32 And so were you not permanent to begin with?

Leysia: 11:34 No, I was in what's called a soft money position. These are again all US terms, I think, I don't know. I think, I think they might be US terms. So all grant money. So as a researcher, I was a research Assistant Professor, so it was all soft money, meaning I had to bring in National Science Foundation.

Geri: 11:49 So you have to get your own money?

Leysia: 11:51 Yeah. Yeah. And I did. Yeah, I did. So I did. I just was determined. I was a little bit determined and very naive. I just thought, well, okay, I can get my money.

Geri: 12:06 Did your first proposal get accepted?

Leysia: 12:08 It did, yes. I was so lucky. I mean, again, I was lucky a little bit. I think I was, I was smarter than I knew and I was more naive than I knew. So I mean, I mean I just have to say, but I mean maybe everyone who's 30 is a little bit naive. I don't know.

Geri: 12:32 Yeah, that's really brilliant that you were able to get the funding and to keep the research going because if you do have that break it can be harder to get back in or be competitive then in faculty hiring processes.
Leysia: 12:46 It really is. The research record must be there. And it's not to say that teaching isn't important. I think it is so essential. But one doesn't enter into research universities without research.

Geri: 13:00 Absolutely.

Leysia: 13:01 And there's a presumption, perhaps wrong, that one can learn how to teach well. I mean, I think one can. I think teaching well is not an automatic thing. I think it must be learned like everything else. But for some reason we don't quite put the focus on that and at least US universities, um, and I think we should put more focus on it, but the coin of the realm is research and then you have...

Geri: 13:25 It is. Any hiring committees I've been on, even if they say research, teaching, Admin, whatever, with some weighting research is king in the actual final decision made is.

Leysia: 13:37 It is. Yeah.

Geri: 13:38 So that was, that was a very wise decision then to have made.

Leysia: 13:43 Yes. I think I'm more wise than I give myself credit for it, but in the moment it felt like, sort of, I just, just, just, just for our listeners, I mean it's not like this was all part of a grand design. Sometimes it felt like I was bumbling around, but then on a few things I had to reduce my life too, that I could do well while I was also having, in my case, children. It's like I ended up reducing them to. My instincts were right. I reduced them to the things that would give me opportunities later on And support in my family and my partner in also thinking about them together. How does this all work as we grow into a bigger unit? I mean, you know, it's, it's, it's, it's important that both people be valuable in terms of how other people measure value, right?


Leysia: 14:34 So yes. And that's what I mean. Sorry. And that was, thank you for that. Meaning taking care of each other's careers and helping each other because in the end you're kind of in it together and it's, it's the, the idea of whether it's more the idea of being a team than being wedded. That really I think helps with thinking about creating and then evaluating opportunities as they come along later on.
Geri: 14:57 So you talked about having kids or what, how does it play out between being on soft money having kids and obviously you got into a faculty position at Boulder eventually. How did that all happen?

Leysia: 15:08 So, um, so I have three children. I'm very lucky to be able to say they are just such joys to me. Um, I had the first two while I was on, no I had the first, sorry I had the first one while I was on soft money. The second one came along after I managed to secure a halftime tenure track position, which itself is kind of a weird thing and I appreciate my university for being creative about the solution. But it was a tricky one to actually navigate. It's not clear to me that I would hire anyone as a halftime tenure track position. It's not clear what it means...

Geri: 15:49 How does that work?

Leysia: 15:50 There isn't a solution, right? There isn't a solution. I suppose it cuts teaching in half, but only. It really only cuts it in three quarters because if you're going to teach, they want you to teach in your, your what would be your hardest class. So if you're going to teach two courses a year or whatever it might be, maybe it's three courses a year of four courses a year, you. So there's three courses a year. It's really hard to figure out how you cut that in half. So you basically do two, one, two, one.

Geri: 16:17 And a faculty meeting is also a faculty meeting. You can't go to half a faculty meeting.

Leysia: 16:20 You can't do half the grant proposals. You can't write half a final report. I mean, it's not, half isn't easy. I suppose it released me a little bit from external service. I mean, who, who knows how to evaluate that. So it was, it was tricky. It was a way in to a university that at the time and a university, I love by the way, um, and one now, but it was, you know, this was 20 years ago, right? Or maybe 17 at this part of the storyline and I was in a very traditional college of engineering in a very traditional computer science department and it's a series of steps around everyone trying to accommodate each other when they didn't think there was a disciplinary fit. And so there's, I think a negative spin to that. I think the positive spin is that disciplines are always trying to identify who they are constantly. It's always a question with every single hire, every single move they make and when I see what they were trying to do in relation to me, the generous interpretation is they were trying to make it work even though I didn't fit into the particular identity of computer science and the College of Engineering at the time, but then half
of my work had to be, well, how do I fit into a College of engineering?

Leysia: 17:37 And so one of the parts of that story was when I then wanted to further formalize my research. I really did want to, and I know it sounds trite, but I really did want to make a difference. I mean, I was in a long. I wasn't post PhD by six years at this point and I could see how difficult being in the professoriat really is, the kind of time it requires and the kind of energy to be constantly present. Because to do research and to do teaching, you have to just be so present all the time. Um, you just have to stay with a problem. You have to stay with other people and where they are. And that's a particular kind of energy and I thought, well, if this is lifelong, I've really got to invest in things I care about. So I wanted to do that.

Leysia: 18:23 I wanted to continue study human coordination as it intersects with technology and the digital and analog information. That was kind of a thing. I was always part of safety critical environments with aviation. So there was something about that I wanted to return to, but then I had to recognize that was also in a college of engineering. Colleges of engineering understand disaster because it takes down buildings and infrastructure, right? And so I’m like, wow, this is, this is really a meeting of a heart and the mind and the intellect and local expertise of the College of Engineering that I could bring into the work and optimize on the things that they needed to see me do. And so it satisfied all those things in ways that felt really real to me. And so that’s what I did.

Geri: 19:06 So did this come to you in a sort of, you know, in the shower moment or was it something that you sat down and mapped out different alternatives and then eventually decided on this because that’s a lot of pieces that you’re bringing together? I’m really curious about the process.

Leysia: 19:21 It was mostly the latter I think because, you know, so for those people who are thinking about having children or who have children, if you’re lucky enough to have one, what you do then knows that your days are filled with lots of quiet hours. And so unlike now with the kids older, I really had a lot of time just to think a lot of that walking and thinking. And so I did. It was more the latter. I really thought about it because I want it to be deliberate. I wanted to choose to be in the academy. I wanted to sort of, even though I knew I liked research, I wanted to do research on something that can sustain me for a lifetime potentially. So it was still, it was very deliberate. I will say then it was this moment too. I mean, I was starting to watch disasters
around the world and more as a researcher would, rather than as a reader of a newspaper would, I was starting to pay attention, um, as a researcher. And then I would say it kind of all came together when the Indian Ocean tsunami hit on December 24, 2004. Um, and it was clear, I mean, if it wasn't clear before, I thought disasters are mass coordination and mass discoordination events. Information converges. It is, there is a dearth of information, there is an abundance of information, good and bad, all jumbled up in different places in different ways. How can we think about this in a very big way? It was also the dawn of really thinking about ubiquitous computing and really the commercial sense.

Geri: 20:58 But before our smart phones and Twitter and things like that.

Leysia: 21:01 That was before smartphones. That was before yeah, it was before most social media as the sort of the public thinks about it. You know, those in computer science were doing these kinds of things for awhile. But at our desks, um, we didn’t have data services at the time. And so then what I did when, when all that came together, I spent the spring semester, I hunkered down in the natural hazard so we still have time, so it wasn't teaching in the spring. So I hunkered down in the natural hazards library, which is a national treasure and on our CU campus. And I was like, wow, it's as though this was meant to be an I, I, I was there all day, every day, eight to five, reading as much as I could about the social science of disaster so that I could write a genuine thoughtful proposal. Well, I wanted to make sure I had a research design for which there could then be a research proposal to submit to the National Science Foundation in it, in it. And I worked really hard.

Leysia: 21:55 But then going back to my early training in anthropology and sociology with Aaron Cicourel and then Hutchins I knew, knew that the good questions came from being immersed in the domain. Nevermind that I was interested in technology and digital this digital that. It was less a fascination with what could be and more an understanding of what the genuine problems were that motivated a set of good questions that I think helped with ultimately getting the funding for that work.

Geri: 22:18 So this, this was really brave because no one was really doing this work at this intersection. Did it feel brave at the time?

Leysia: 22:30 It felt necessary and it felt like, chips all in, like this is what I really want to do and I hope it works out and if it doesn't then maybe it's a sign that I haven't found my life trajectory. Um, you
know, all sorts of things. So yeah, I guess I guess when you say it, I can say maybe it was. At the time it just felt necessary.

Geri: 22:55

Like something you had to do and I can almost see that sort of sense just in the way you talk about. So obviously that grant was successful as well and you ended up developing, building up a whole research center on this with multiple students and lots of really important work.

Leysia: 23:16

Yeah. What was exciting about that? Well, I'll tell a story that made it, makes it a little bit. I was a little regretful when I actually got the funding because the grant proposal, I just want to be fully honest here. The grant proposal was due in July, um, and then Hurricane Katrina hit the end of August and I found out in November I got the funding. I was in Denmark at the time, actually flew back to the US Gulf coast. Reason to do a little bit of research to understand what it meant to be there in the field doing the work. So I flew back from Denmark and and so when I found out in November I got the funding my first reaction was that I felt really bad about it and that's because it just felt, um, it felt that the cost of this disastrous, truly disastrous thing happening. The NSF wasn't funding much disaster research at the time. Um, and so I thought, gosh, that was unfortunate. Like the, it's just wasn't, it was, it was, it was fortunate for doing the research, but not fortunate for the people who were suffering. And then I read the proposal again and I was really surprised to see how much in that proposal was really articulating the things that we started to see in Katrina. And then it doesn't take long, when you just open the newspaper and you live outside the US. These natural hazards are happening every day across the globe. And then you say to yourself, I said to myself, no, this is just, if anything, a chance to really try to make a difference. But the first, the first feeling wasn't elation or satisfaction. It was actually a whole bunch of sorrow until I realized that. And then of course I knew there was just a big obligation here to do the work and so then we started it.

Geri: 25:05

That's probably something that you're navigating all the time though with this sort of work. Because the very nature of any field site you go into, or any data that you're collecting entails human suffering and tragedy.

Leysia: 25:17

Yeah, it does.

Geri: 25:21

Even though you know, you know that you're doing stuff that you want to make a difference with, how do you care for yourselves? Care for your research team?
Leysia: 25:31 That's a very good question. I think there are some folks who do it better than I. So one way to think about it is divide and conquer because the problems are so big, but actually the benefit of doing that is not everybody's immersed in all the concurrent things that are going on. So there's. So there's some separation of all the different things that you could worry about. You focus on one set of things. I think some people go to therapy. Actually, I'm just being completely honest. I think we talk a lot with each other. Um, and I think, you know, it's one of those things where once the veil is lifted you, you just have to stay in, right? Because there's work to do there.

Geri: 26:15 Yeah, so you buy into the increase sort of urgency and importance

Leysia: 26:19 Yeah. And then you realize there's people all around the world who are always helping in major events like this and you're one of them. If anything one feels that one can't act fast enough because research takes some time to do well because if you get it wrong... You could do it fast, and that's satisfying I suppose for some people who want research answers, but what if it's not right? And so there's this kind of, there's this balance between expediency and accuracy and that's when we're, that's if anything where I feel the tension because you know, in the middle of that is human sorrow I suppose

Geri: 26:57 Really interesting tensions in multiple ways to navigate. So how did that all factor into eventually getting tenure?

Leysia: 27:07 So, so eventually, so it was only about 10 or 11 years ago that I actually finally earned. I got the full time position because I went to the university.

Geri: 27:16 Really? Despite getting all this funding...

Leysia: 27:17 Right. So that first grant came in and that grant, they get other grants, right? So very large grants to help enable these multidisciplinary teams, which is what I really love. Um, and I, I think what I, if I could speak to the HCI community, human computer interaction and a human centered computing communities, as we see differently call ourselves, is that it turns out, so I'm still doing this in computer science, still doing this in a very traditional college of engineering. Um, which itself has since modernized for the time was still, you know, you had to explain why you cared about the social and I'm sure many of us would. And I think, I mean, I, I feel that I can talk to colleges of engineering about this now and not feel, and bring up useful lessons rather than sort of old wounds, right? Like, oh, there's a
lesson to be learned from this. I had a very positive sort of set of feelings about what one can learn from these things. Um, so let me see. I lost track. Where was I? Oh. So one of the things I really felt strongly in is that if you actually originate these large research programs with a human centered computing question, it enables lots of different kinds of basic science in various computing disciplines, in various social science disciplines and humanities and we were able to bring that altogether in service of the question but not at the cost of those individuals also who are doing the work, also needing to do basic research in their particular area of expertise. And so that's something I really cared about. So sometimes where I get the sort of the relief from the disaster question is thinking about the bigger enterprise of scholarship and multidisciplinary and the emergence than of disciplines and how they emerge and I think this is how they emerge into this multidisciplinarity. So, you know, it was about 2007 where I said, folks, you know this, this isn't quite working half time position. Can we, can we talk about a full time position?

Geri: 29:20 Were you funding yourself for the other half time from your grant?

Leysia: 29:23 What was I doing? I don't want to be inaccurate in my reporting. I think it was a mix of things because I was having children along the way and sometimes the halftime situation worked to my advantage so I could take care of a young child and not have to worry about a course and things like that. So, I did things, so I, I used it to the advantage of my family and I think to others, even though it didn't always work quite often,

Geri: 29:48 I was just going to ask was it a difficult juggle to do, you know, because you said the halftime position really was not. It was more than half time in the work that it actually needed.

Leysia: 29:57 Yes. And so some people, even here at this conference that we're, we're both attending asked me how I balance these things and I, I realize, and this is, I think an, an, it's a true answer. It might be unsatisfying and maybe hard to understand, but my, the world in which I am physically mobile is actually very small. I do do field research and go to disaster sites less so now a lot of my students do that. Um, but my world is quite small in terms of my physical presence. Like I, I'm very personally, yes, with my physical movement which just to say I'm at work and at home and I take advantage of all the wonderful things we can do with shopping online to reduce a lot of the extraneous movement in the world. I know that sounds funny, but like I am, I am one of two places. I'm even here at
this conference. I am, I have been here and I've been preparing for a number of things and the way I would love to see more of New York. I'm, I'm not. And I think there's a time in my future where I can do that to manage the family and professional life with the, with the intensity of the professional life, the intensity of family life.

Leysia: 31:02

Um, so, but luckily my intellectual world and the people I get to know, like you and the people I get to work with and the things I get to think about people I get to help. That's huge. That's global. And so that's how we get everything done. Both, both my partner and I right, is parsimonious, physical movement, really efficient, so efficiencies there, but then the world in our, in our minds and in our papers and the people we reach we hope is big,

Geri: 31:32

That also sounds like you have a sense of this is what it needs to be for now to get through with and these are the ways that we're managing and the tradeoffs whether online shopping as a trade off. Not, but do you know what I mean? Like the choices to make it happen and that you reflected that it is likely to change and that's okay. That's just where you're at at the moment.

Leysia: 31:53

It is. Yeah. And it's, I think it's very hard to get into if you've lived a big, big, big life, uh, or you know, a world where your movement, physical movement, it's funny. People think that's a funny thing to talk about, but where your physical movement is completely free. Um, and when you get more constrained like this, it can be hard and then you realize it's, it's satisfying. You can get a lot done and I'm not unhappy with the tradeoff at all.

Geri: 32:21

That's, that's great to hear. Yeah. So having got a... finally I find that I hadn't actually realized that it was so long,

Leysia: 32:32

So then a full time position in 2007, I think it is. I have to look at my cv to make sure I'm right about this. Forgive me listeners if I'm wrong, but it was about then, 2007, and then I still wasn't tenured and I didn't get. And then I went up a couple years after that again, we'd have to look at my cv. So a lot of this I just erase and I became an associate professor without tenure in the US and that was because I asked for that. So in 2007 I got the full time position and then um, but it was a. and then sometime after that I had to go up for associate, but without tenure because there is still some concern, I think that it wasn't enough. I mean my record at this point was probably...

Geri: 33:15

Was outstanding.
I think so, I mean that's what people say. Um, and uh, but I was working with FEMA and in Washington DC and I was an assistant professor but getting ever older and some people thought my students were outranking me because then assistant professor sounds like a graduate research assistant in the US and they didn't understand that I was in fact the lead. And so I asked the university to please consider making me associate professor was kind of time they said yes but without tenure. So then I went up for associate without tenure. I got that. And then a couple of years later I had to go up again for associate with tenure and I got that and then to compensate, I finally went up for full. But it was a much shorter clock between than the normal clock you would normally see. So yeah, it was um, while I was a founding the department. So I founded the department and became full at the same time.

So I'm just quite flabbergasted. You know, the, the profile that you had, the fact that you were creating a whole new research area that you were doing all this on part time and the profile that you have in the community and the impact that you, that the system didn't support it, but it seems like you're in a good place now. I think you're one of the few women as a sort of department chair. Uh, and this is a whole new department that. Yeah. Yeah. So can you just reflect on some of the exciting things and the challenges around that?

I mean, you know, I'm ever the optimist and so I speak, I speak with, with, with a smile and maybe maybe people will hear that. Um, and um, it helps to hear that you're flabbergasted because when you're living in these things it's kind of hard to know. Well I knew it didn't feel quite right, but...

It doesn't feel just...

No, but, and uh, but no, most people in our community didn't know that about my, about my situation. Um, but anyway, uh, yeah, no, so one carries on and uh, the university, I think um more than the College of Engineering, which itself has really modernized and kind of grown with the times. I'm really happy to say that and I think my perseverance had a role in sort of helping the college, think about all the ways in which you could have engineers and how engineering can be informed by these ways of thinking. So that was, that's how I, how I will choose to think about it. But the campus was really taking notice on the impact we were having in research and the number, the kinds of students we were, I was producing in the lab was producing, and the number of different faculty who were involved in the research because at this point we had civil engineers,
Department of Transportation, National Center for Atmospheric Research, natural language processing, a scholar in machine learning, more generally, software engineering, policy people all involved. And then my first... So I've graduated seven Phd students so far. They're all women, all seven of them. So I have yet to graduate...

Geri: 36:23 Not by deliberate choice...

Leysia: 36:24 It's just what happened. I mean, I mean, you know, if anything, I'm just sort of skewing the numbers in the wrong direction. I'll graduate two PHD students who are, who are men this year and they're, and they're doing wonderful work, so I'll get a little bit of balance back in my own lab, but the campus started taking notice and so they asked me to advise while I was untenured, it's about seven years ago, on the creation of a new college at the university and they knew they wanted to do something in the area of new media and new media computing. The Arts, you know, is kind of a, it was deliberately fuzzy and interesting ways and so they asked me to advise and I thought, well, that sounds interesting. So we did. And in the end, I mean it's a, it's a, it's a long multiyear story, but I'll just hop to the end. Which was in the end, it resulted in the creation of the new department of information science as part of a new college of media communication information

Geri: 37:24 That you helped shape and define.


Geri: 37:28 Or, you did shape and define

Leysia: 37:30 Yeah, along with Clayton Lewis and some others that helped us. But there was, there were, there were many more, I think on campus that we're also helping to shape the whole college.

Leysia: 37:37 And so in the end, when we were trying to create these six or seven departments within the college, there were a bunch of us interested in these very interdisciplinary - media computing, arts, humanities stuff that we ended up being divided among this group and, you know, Clayton Lewis, I, and, and he's a Human Computer Interaction sort of original. Um, and so he was lovely to work with as we were, as we were developing this department. And in doing so, we had to make the argument both to campus as well as to the state, to the regents. And so it was really a very instructive time for me to think about how research, um, interacts with education naturally, but really
Geri: So in taking on those challenges, how do you, what, what have you done in particular in setting up the new department that reflects that thinking about what higher ed might mean in the future that's different?

Leysia: Well, there's the ideals and there's the realities. So the ideals are around bringing, bringing research into the classroom for sure. Um, so, uh, so, you know, it's pretty challenging to change undergraduate curriculum once it gets going, the structure of it because of the workflows and students have to move to them. Like it's so hard to move through that. And so we tried to create a fairly flexible curriculum. Well, while still pinning things down that we felt were essential. So for example, we have a category of classes called 'Investigations in Information Science' and they, we rotate on the topics so that the faculty who were all research active bring their current research into the classroom and have it be sort of a problem-first orientation to solving the problem. So you might bring things that you learned in your other classes. This is undergraduates, but how to do a little information visualization, how to do some qualitative observation, how to do interviews, how to do a little bit of scraping of data, how to do some descriptive statistics, um, and you, you're meant to bring all these things together in a usable way and knowing that some people will have greater skills than
others depending on the path they took through to get to that class.

Leysia: 41:24

But the front of the room is this expert in crisis informatics, or in the case of Amy Voida philanthropic informatics, or learning creative learning environments for Ricarose Roque or whatever it might be. Brian Keegan does wikipedia studies in and open street map work. Um, so the idea is you could work on real problems that we were currently working on in the real world and have them tackle, tackle little bits of it and then in ideal circumstances, parts, those problems could actually become a part of the formal research program, like a paper or a part of a paper or a stepping stone to a bigger piece that would help both. So it was a way to integrate research and education in very deep ways. I think that was very interesting.

Geri: 42:07

That's really interesting. And so I imagine that there's a huge amount of pragmatic logistics planning, recruiting people, putting in place processes and policies and all of that work. And then there's a whole other layers well, of learning how to be the leader of this sort of new department.

Leysia: 42:34

Yeah. Yes. Okay. So, um, that's all correct. More um, and though I thought going in, I, I knew I didn't know everything I would need to learn. I knew that because, you know, we study human coordination organizations. I knew there were things I couldn't possibly dream of that would be coming to me. Um, but it's, it's even more than that. So it's, um, it's learning how to be a chair of a department and one of the things I think we do, we're so we don't do well, we're a, we need to do improve in higher ed is I'm building, I'm a professional development for a academic leadership. Yes. We just don't have pathways for that at all. I mean, we're just now kind of figuring out, oh, I guess we should mentor a brand new PhD to tenure. Oh, let's, let's do that. So we're sort of doing that now. Sometimes. Sometimes we do it well, sometimes we don't. But once you get there, there's really no training beyond that. There's no training on how to lead, there's no training on and so, so yeah. And so I, um, I think that's something I really would like to. Um, it's something I'm thinking a lot about in improving higher ed. I'm thinking about it for the next 50 years on what it will be in the US and beyond in 50 years. And I don't mean to keep focusing on the US it's just what I know. So that's why I named that. Um, so yes, I had to learn how to be a chair and I had to learn how to found a department. One of the things I tell people who have a hard time imagining it, so it's very hard actually to find anybody who has started a new department. It's not that there hasn't been
such a thing because all departments have started at one time or another...

Geri: 44:20 But usually a long long time ago in a whole different climate...

Leysia: 44:24 And those folks aren't around to really talk to. They're just not - I've looked

Geri: 44:29 Interesting, I haven't thought about that perspective.

Leysia: 44:31 It's really challenging. Right. And then in other universities I've been able to find folks, but then there's something about the particulars of your own university at something has to grow, has to be incubated and grow out of the materials of what is local. And so it was um, the job was a little bit lonely for a while until the new faculty started coming and they are all junior faculty with so many good ideas and so much energy that I was really invigorated by all of that. So. And so I care very much for them and they have just done amazing things and they, I think have learned they've had to simultaneously learn how to be a professor and think about, reflect on what it means to be a department and those are really what it means to be a discipline and a department. Those are two different things, so, um, and disciplines, but it can be murky often we bring them together and that's why we have...

Geri: 45:27 So how would you, how would you define those differences?

Leysia: 45:32 So a department is a structure that has to act within the institution that it's really highly localized and living in the particular institution of that local university, indigent to the larger institution of the academy. Um, so there are just, there's some bureaucratic qualities to that. How do students get, how do students enter into the university? A big university like University of Colorado turns out most faculty don't have to think about that. And I would argue that they probably don't have. They shouldn't because we have to do so many other things. But suddenly we have to think about how the production functions of the university. How we produce students, how we produce knowledge, um, from the very, very start, like point of entry, you know, almost as a manufacturing thing to the end and we do the big middle, but there's the very beginning that we have to, that we had to think about in terms of the setting up our curriculum, how to reach students, had to recruit students, how to bring them in as freshmen and uh, what they begin with and all those things that I think we've all had to learn that we sort of didn't really know or have had only our own experience. And that's often not enough. We have to draw on
other people's experiences to do that. So, and then whereas the discipline is always trying to define what it is, right? And in something like information science, which I think should be a response to the world that we're living in today in the world that we might, that we want to live in tomorrow. It should be the disciplinary response. I think computer science should also. I think all disciplines need to be a response to the world that we're living in today. And the world we hope to live in, the thing I'll say about computing professions and disciplines is that this is really an important time to reflect because the technological trajectories that we have been a part of building are intersecting with these other very large introductory trajectories in the world - social, societal, political, economic, a natural world trajectories. And uh, that's been never more obvious than I think it is now.

Geri: 47:44
So I'd love to pick up on the leadership thing again as well. And just, what are the skills that you think would be useful to learn because I actually ran a workshop as part of a conference for the that had a pre conference workshop for the deans of computer science in Europe on leadership issues and you know, to personal development issues for leadership. And it was one of the common responses that people gave back that these are things that no one has ever talked to them about there's no training for, um, we'ed. I think I did a sort of a mentimeter survey at the beginning and you know, like training for that role was just not available. So I think it is something that's really timely and important. I think leadership happens at all levels as well. I mean, you're leading from the very beginning in, in different ways. Right? So what do you think have been the key things that you've been learning?

Leysia: 48:40
Uh, well I think because I'm founding chair, I emphasize the founding, not because I'm proud of that, that because of what it means in terms of the work is that, so again, in the US chairs usually report to Deans and Deans report to the Provost. In the founding part of this, I was exposed to senior administration more than I would have been in an, in a more typical chair situation. And so it was that exposure to the administration of Higher Ed and then we call it bureaucratic in kind of disdainful ways. The truth is senior administration is.. They're dealing with extremely hard problems and it was being exposed to really sort of the essence of what those hard problems were that helped me understand my little piece of it and how I, how I could act into that in useful ways, um, both as an individual but as a person representing a faculty, staff and students, and so that exposure to how universities really work, um, I think would be so valuable to faculty and students and staff actually, I don't
think it's just faculty, certainly staff and then students, they should have a bit of a luxury of sort of being insulated from some of those things. But we're talking about PhD students who are moving into the professoriate. We want to expose a lot of those things to them too. And stage. And that's something that Amy Voida, uh, one of our junior faculty at Colorado has been very instructive and doing for our department. And I've taken a lot of lessons from her. Um, the painful lessons I learned early in my career about, you asked, was it like, oh Aha. Did something happen? And you knew that was or did you think a lot about these things? So some of the difficult lessons early in my career, we're all about recognizing that disciplines and how one interprets a discipline, how one interprets how one is pushing a discipline and how that intersects with the local and the local structures that were working in. That I think also clued me in very early on to the ways in which science is. It's naive to think science is only about pursuing ideas that just come to one's head. They have to be good ideas, they have to be tractable ideas and tractability is in both the ability to do them at all. Like you had all the resources in the world, could you do this problem, but also are they tractable in terms of your local circumstances and that by one's own skillset, the kind of other skills you have access to and the kind of a social infrastructure and technological infrastructure you have support of. And so one has to be wise in terms of kind of bringing all those things together to then sort of deliver. And I think that's what I wish more of us could note earlier on. And I think that actually helps with that and research leadership and academic leadership, which is different than corporate leadership, I imagine.

Geri: 51:54 Very different. Right. I think it's very different. Yeah. I mean some overlap, but yes, very different. Yeah. There must be some overlap, different drivers and different cultures. Um, as we sort of come to the end of time and because I know you have to go, are there any things that we haven't talked about that you would like to talk about or any final thoughts or comments or reflections?

Leysia: 52:21 You're a very good interviewer. Geraldine, you've asked me questions that I think about my head and nobody ever talks to me about. So, um, I appreciate that I've shared. I'm more here than I've been able to talk about in other situations, so I thank you for that. I guess I'll just maybe be a little repetitive when I say that I think the problems we take on in computing, which I'll use to encompass a lot of different subdisciplines and I liked the verb use of computing to kind of capture that. I think the more we appreciate the actions that we take in our research and with our students really does have impact on the world. We want to
be positive impact, but it can have negative impact and we really have to understand. I think we need to stand, when to pose our questions in relation to the world, the bigger world that we, we want to live in. And I think if we do that, it's not, it's a, it's an ethical stance, but it's not only an ethical stance, it is a very intellectually productive stance because one can really uncover problems that feel elusive without, if, if one didn't have that stance that really come into view much more quickly because they feel so essential. Um, they're often kind of stated so broadly, but then you start there and then you move them into tractable problems that you can solve one paper at a time with one partnership at a time.

Leysia: 53:58

But when you stand in relation to things that are happening in the world today and the world in 50 years, which is within our view, right? Things we need now are very much in 50 years and beyond, but, but I can see even if we don't have, I don't have 50 years left on the planet but, but, but one can still imagine 50 years out, right? Yes. It's maybe a little harder to imagine for me anyway, 100 years out, but I can imagine 50. Um, and I think, I think by doing that it helps any single person and then any single research program and then maybe even any department or unit kind of sort of endure the ups and downs that we might experience that are intrinsic to our own kind of lives that make life difficult and then extrinsic that just sort of work against the things sort of moving forward otherwise. And I think being true to those things really helps really helps a career and a person and a pursuit and curiosity endure.

Geri: 54:56

I like the way you've brought together, you know, keeping hold of that bigger vision and the bigger difference you want to make and having that longer term view. But thinking about what you're going to do now and tomorrow and next week, and that it is practically a matter of small steps to get there and I think that's a big skill to learn in just becoming a researcher, isn't it? Because you sort of feel like if you're not grappling with the big problem, you're not doing good enough, but if you're trying to grapple with the big problem, you're not doing anything because you can't bite it up.

Leysia: 55:30

I concur completely.

Geri: 55:32

Yeah. Interesting. And how we also train our students as well as from bachelor's on to have these perspectives and critically think about what's the impact of the work that they, they might do when they leave their degree. On that 50 year vision. Interesting challenges. So all the best in your new department
and thank you so much for your time. It’s been just so good to be able to sit and chat.

Leysia: 56:03 Geraldine, this has just been an absolute delight and a privilege to be able to talk to you about these things. Thank you so much for your questions. Thank you.

Geri: 56:19 You can find the summary notes and related links for this podcast on www.changingacademiclife.com. You can also subscribe to changing academic life on itunes and now also on stitcher and you can follow #changeacadlife on twitter. And if something connected with you, please consider sharing this podcast with your colleagues so that we can widen the conversation about how we can do academia differently.