

# 2023 Joint Statistical Meetings

Director's remarks as prepared for delivery

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## Serving Through Leadership: My Approach to heading a Federal Statistical Agency

- Good afternoon, everyone. As always, it's great to be back among my fellow statisticians. It's hard to believe that I last addressed you virtually 2 years ago for my presidential address. And so much has happened since then. We all live in a different world, now . . . hopefully a better one, despite the fact that the tragedies of COVID and civil unrest have touched us all.
- If you recall, my ASA presidency year was 2021, our first full year living with COVID. I'll have you know, I spent that year doing my best to comfort and support our members. We were all going through our own personal challenges with family and friends, with work, and with our own selves. That's why I decided to ditch the classical President's Corner format of our monthly AmStat News. Instead, I used that space to tell personal stories of resilience and hope, and to illustrate the value of helping each other. It's what I thought we all needed at the time—someone just to say “Hey, we'll get through this, folks . . . if we just stick together.” Now, for most ASA members, those 12 blogs likely went unnoticed for the most part. And that's fine. But hey, writing those blogs was cathartic for me. I do think it helped some of our members. And that's all I was trying to do. It was a labor of love.
- And that's what today is for me. I'm so honored to be presenting the ASA President's Invited Address. Special thank you to our President, Dionne! We all know that JSM is our go-to conference for learning about cutting-edge theoretical and applied statistics and data science. So, I'm not going to bore you with a statistical presentation. Nope, no formulas . . . sorry.
- Instead, I came to talk to you about something that occupies more than a little of my time these days. I'm here to talk about . . . leadership. Specifically, I'll present my approach to leading the largest federal statistical agency in the United States, and how I came to be the leader that I am. And I've brought my haversack of life and career experiences with me. I'm going to draw a few . . . and use them to tell a few stories. And guess what? They're designed to show how becoming a leader can be much more than learning the art of decision-making or learning techniques to herd cats. I hope you find it interesting and useful.
- In fact, I'll tell you my conclusion now, and then build my case around it over the course of my ramblings. Ready? OK, based on my personal experience I believe the following: Virtually every person can grow into a competent, sage leader. By the way, I'm still growing and have a way to go. Now, your leadership journey transcends whether you are an introvert or extrovert, whether you are a mathematical statistician, a data scientist or an applied statistician or anything else. Sure, many of us have taken trainings to help build leadership skills, and they can be really valuable. But that's not really how you become a leader. Becoming a leader is necessarily a never-ending growth process. You need to try things out. You need to fail and learn from it. You need to succeed and learn from it. And that transformation process requires that you recognize and incorporate your strengths, your limitations, everything about you. Being a leader needs to resonate with who you are as a human being. You can't fake being a leader. Your leadership has to come from within you. I like to think of this as “bringing your whole self to the table.” But what does “whole self” mean? Well, it's your life experience way beyond that of just your career. It includes your culture—in the way that we draw from our ancestral culture . . . in the way that we acculturate to our beautiful multiethnic and racial society. It includes the values you live by, and even your aspirations about who you'd like to be. And, of course, it includes your technical expertise, training and education.

Stir those ingredients all together in a mixing bowl, and that's what I'm talking about when I say "whole self."

- Now, the moment you realize that everything about you affects who you are as a leader, well, that's the moment you become a better leader. <pause>
- So now let's buckle up and take a ride on my own leadership journey. And hopefully, it can help the students and early career staff traverse their own leadership journeys. And who knows, maybe it will help others, too, as we are always a work in progress. So, let's do this.
- My leadership journey begins with one of the most profound things that happened to me long ago. It's a story about a mouse, a pecan branch and a little boy. And it has significant relevance to this talk today.
- The story starts in my childhood years around 1960. We lived in one of the many barrios of San Antonio, just south of Woodlawn Lake for those of you who know the city. Our humble abode was one of those wooden bungalow homes with a small yard. I'll just say they were "loosely built," meaning that even in fall, the house seemed cold because heat always seemed to pour out. In fact, each room had its own natural gas heater. Yet there was no risk of carbon monoxide because the house was so drafty. Anyway, on a cold night when I was about 6 years old, I was in a lovely, comfy deep sleep lying on my back under the covers. And wouldn't you know it—we had mice in the house. They liked the inside warmth, too . . . well, what little remained. Now, on that night one of those mice decided to check me out. It climbed the bedpost at my feet. Once atop the bedcovers, it proceeded to run in spurts alongside me on the bed approaching my head. I awoke suddenly to the sound of pitter-patter and I froze in terror. I prayed it was only a nightmare. But then I felt the furry critter ascend and cross the covers on my chest. It then spurted back towards the bedpost at my feet. This commotion was way too much for any child to bear. My survival instincts kicked in and I gave an ear-splitting shriek, flying out of bed and barreling to the other end of the house like a bull in a china shop. In the process, I scared the heck out of my brother with whom I shared a room, and I awoke the entire family. Let's just say they were incredibly annoyed. I was admonished when of course no one could find any signs of mice in the room. The episode was quite a debacle. But I was so deeply rattled that remained that way for days. I couldn't shake the emotional trauma. I refused to go to bed at night. Hey, I wanted to avoid a repeat performance at all costs. But a few days later, something really interesting happened. My abuelita—my grandmother—showed up at our front doorstep for a special visit. She had provided day care for me until the year earlier than this incident. Well, she enters the house, looks me over, doesn't say a word, and then proceeds across the house and out the back door into our backyard. So I snuck over and peeked through the blinds to see what she was doing. And I see her reaching up to one of our pecan trees and to snapping off a small branch by hand. Then still clutching that branch, she reentered the house and stood before me, looking down. Our eyes met. I was totally confused. In Spanish—that's all she spoke—she commanded in almost a whisper that I go to the bedroom and lie on my bed—the same bed that was the source of my trauma. So I lay down face up and she then orders me to shut my eyes and shut my mouth. Then, with eyes wide shut, I begin to hear the whisperings of a prayer. I feel the leaves of the pecan branch brush the length of my body as the prayer continued. Only then did I realize that she was administering a special blessing. In the Mexican culture, it's called the asusto blessing. Asusto means fear, by the way. After a couple of minutes, the process ended and I was allowed to get up and go on my merry way. At first, I didn't think much about it—just my grandmom doing her thing. But guess what? I distinctly remember that I actually felt better. I was cured. That night and the nights thereafter, I slept like a baby. And no, she wasn't a curandera. But she did know her way around folk medicine. The way I see it, she was just living her culture, exercising the values and traditions she learned growing up in Northern Mexico—in a small village called Paras de la Fuente, Coahuila. That town, by the way, featured the first wine vineyards in the Americas, founded in 1598 by the Spaniards.

- Over the years, as I grew into adulthood, I've repeatedly returned to this profound incident of my life to self-reflect and to learn from it. It's helped me come to terms with who I am as a person. It's showed me the benefit of leveraging my culture and values in my work as a statistician, in my career, and more generally, in life. It's allowed me to develop insights in work and life that I don't think I'd ever have come up with, otherwise. And it's helped me decide who I wanted to be as an investigator, as a project manager, a supervisor, and, yes, as an executive leader.
- Nowadays—like my abuelita—I too, live the culture and traditions of what I learned growing up as a Mexican-American in San Antonio. My life experience in my neighborhood was proven to be profoundly formative to me as a professional. Combined with my life experiences that came after childhood, I still find myself reflecting on and drawing from them daily to help me be a better researcher, a better scientist, and a better director of the U.S. Census Bureau. <pause>
- OK, let's talk about leadership more directly. And I'll start with a question for you to contemplate: What exactly is leadership?
- Well, if you look it up in a dictionary, you'll see definitions that talk about things like:
  - Leading a team for the "win."
  - Managing people to realize a mission or achieve a goal.
  - Being a good steward.
- I found that all kind of interesting.
- If you do your own digging, you'll come across types of leaders. There are those who are autocratic, others are democratic, some practice laissez-faire, and even those who are transformational.
- But let's get real, people. Exercising leadership is so much more complex and nuanced than simple categorizations. Sure, there are some leaders who embrace a single approach: maybe like Atilla the Hun. Actually, I've known a few of those in my time—you're either totally loyal and beholden to them, or you're treated as being against them. Doesn't make for a productive work environment, right? Anyway, from my viewpoint, true leadership is more about the tailored use of a variety of leadership types and techniques—plus a lot more! And to be honest, none of those characterizations really matter. Why?
- Because exercising leadership is too personal. And applying it is too situational. Look, I've been faced with some rare situations where I've needed to be the autocrat. All leaders have. For me, they're crises situations. Crises require quick action to avert catastrophe, and you lack sufficient time to garner consensus.
- And there've been other times when a democratic or a consultative approach was best for the situation. I've found that leaders engender buy-in and reach effective decisions when folks are actively part of creating a solution. That's why I'd never develop a strategic plan alone in my office. It takes a community, if you want the community to embrace the plan.
- Ultimately, what I think really matters is what you believe leadership to be and how you use it to achieve specific objectives. Leadership is not what someone or some book tells you it is. Your effectiveness as a leader must flow from being your true self as a human being.
- So let me tell you how I've done that.
- My approach to leadership can be described as leveraging three inputs:
  - The first, of course, is knowing who you are and bringing your whole self to the table. Look, none of us is perfect and we never will be. So, you need to recognize your strengths and limitations and work with them. It also includes knowing your values and leveraging them in all that you do—in your decisions, in your interactions, and in the processes that you put into place. I also draw upon my life experience, my culture, and my expertise as a statistician. I also recognize that at my core, I'm an introvert even though I taught myself to be an extrovert when

operating in structured roles, specifically those related to leadership. And, honestly, there have been some rare instances where my core shyness influenced me more than I'd like to admit. On the other hand, my introverted self has rewarded me with the gift of introspection, enabling me to learn from my life experiences . . . like the encounter with my little furry friend when I was a kid. So, I believe that bringing your whole self to the table makes you a better leader of a federal statistical agency or any organization.

- Now, the second input is about organizational knowledge. It's understanding the organization that you lead, especially its culture, and its history. And it's not as easy as you might think. No, it's not about browsing the organizational website, reviewing leadership bios, or even talking to a couple of folks. It's about knowing how the place operates, how decisions are made, how staff grow professionally, what types of things have been tried, where folks think the organization is headed, and how the staff think of leadership.

Because I've been active in the statistical community, I've had the honor of working with many Census Bureau staff over my career as a statistician, including on research contracts and advisory committee memberships. I've worked side-by-side with many staff over the decades on association boards, including ASA and the Association for Public Opinion Research. I've been a vocal supporter and provided critical feedback over the years as a stakeholder. All this experience allowed me to have a sense of the culture and the way things worked at the Census Bureau before I was even nominated. And it fed into the way I've chosen to lead this exceptional agency. So, take my role as director of the Census Bureau. I have the honor of leading a group of exceptional senior executives and scientists at the Census Bureau. These are the same leaders who miraculously navigated the pandemic while executing the 2020 Census. Most have decades of experience at the Census Bureau. I choose to manage this group of leaders by enabling them, by working with them to set priorities collaboratively. I intentionally refrain from handing down decrees and meddling in day-to-day operations. And this approach was developed because of my knowledge about the Census Bureau's history, its staff, and its culture.

- The third and final input is your goals for the organization. Leadership must advance the mission and the goals should flow from organizational values. Moreover, all staff must know and accept the mission and values, why they are being espoused, as well as what they can help accomplish. For the Census Bureau, that's pretty easy because the career staff fully embrace our mission and are proud of our organizational values . . . at least based on my experience meeting with and speaking to the many staff at all levels of the Census Bureau. But, hey, it's one thing to know our mission and values. It's quite another thing to live them. It's like the difference between policy and practice. This is an area I believe I can help as a leader. How? Well, I try lead by example. I try to point out how we are using our values in decision-making. And if we stray, then I bring them to the forefront for consideration. Notice, by the way, that I use the word try because I don't do it all time, but I do try. I'm a work in progress just like all of you. Anyway, I'm a big believer in communicating our mission and values. I do this through blogs, broadcast messages, media interviews, internal meetings, as well as external engagements like this address. Just to be clear, those values are scientific integrity, objectivity, transparency, and independence, sprinkled with the principles of diversity, equity and inclusion. Most people know that I'm a champion of integrating diversity, equity, and inclusion—or DEI—into the workplace. You don't even have to use those three words or the acronym to embrace DEI in the workplace. It's about basic respect, valuing diverse perspectives in decision-making, having an open mind, and of course, helping others. I've found that our values along with our DEI principles can amplify excellence. They can promote the development of a more talented workforce. They motivate innovation, critical thinking, and excellence. And for the Census Bureau, this means better methods, better insights, and higher levels of data accuracy, relevance, and utility.

A notable example of my approach is illustrated through my policy speech at this spring's meeting of our National Advisory Committee. I laid out how we at the Census Bureau can live the principles of diversity, equity, and inclusion in our everyday work. The remarks are available at our census website if you are interested in seeing them. Another way I promote our goals in my role as director of the Census Bureau is by being the "inspirer-in-chief," so to speak. I constantly encourage all career staff to think differently about their work by bringing their whole selves to the table to achieve new levels of excellence.

- Well, I've just described my leadership of the largest federal statistical agency through a lens of three inputs—a personal whole-self approach, the use of deep knowledge of an organization and its culture, and the leveraging of goals and priorities.
- My leadership approach at the Census Bureau seeks to reinforce our ongoing transformation and modernization initiatives that the agency has undertaken. We are turning our survey-centric, siloed model of operations on its head, and instead adopting a single-enterprise approach that integrates all data collected from all sources. This data-centric approach combines and links all data we acquire using common enterprise-level system platforms for ingesting, processing, storing, and disseminating data in ways that transcend current data products. But a key component to this transformation is the evolution of our work culture. And every employee has a role in making the transformation happen. That is why—as a leader—I am a strong advocate for bringing one's whole self to the table, for thinking differently about how we do our work by drawing from our values and principles, and for actively seeking and leveraging diverse perspectives from internal staff and external stakeholders alike. Our staff-based cultural evolution is every bit a part of our technological transformation as a 21st century federal statistical agency.
- Now, I haven't always had the leadership perspective I just espoused. It's evolved over the course of decades of observing other leaders, trying things for myself, and engaging in lots of introspection. And there were a couple of milestones that I want to share with you.
- I'll start with my very first professional job as a statistician. I started at Temple University's Institute for Survey Research in early 1982 as their Sampling Statistician and Manager. I came straight out of graduate school from the Department of Statistics at University of Michigan, still working on a dissertation that I unfortunately never finished. Oh, but please permit me to give a quick shout out to North Carolina State University for awarding me an honorary doctorate of science this spring. Thank you, NC State and go wolfpack! Ok, back to my story. I was manager of sampling department, but I knew nothing about management but everything about mathematical statistics and sampling design. I had learned from and worked with some of the best in these areas. My new job wasn't a big lift when I started because there were no staff in the department; it had been gutted. Guess I should have checked that out ahead of time. Anyway, my sampling work heated up pretty quickly. Back then we did most of our sampling by hand, so I needed sampling clerks . . . a lot of them. Besides many other projects, we were drawing the sample for the NSF Recent College Graduates Survey. It required processing and hand sampling of close to 1,000 commencement lists from 300 universities. Different STEM fields were sampled at different rates, so sample selection was a complicated mess. Well, inevitably we relied undergraduate students to execute the sampling protocols. Tap the inexpensive labor pool, right? Well, I hired about 20 or so students for part time work on that project alone. It was immediately clear that my young hires were going through the motions to get some quick bucks on the side. They had little interest in what they were doing, and that was contributing to my quality control misery. Mistakes were rampant. Now, I never thought about this till decades later, but I unconsciously drew upon the two things that I value most in my career—statistics and helping people. I started weekly all-hands meetings to expound on the importance of the study and how their work fit into learning about the college graduate experience. I told them I needed their help because of our atrocious error rates, and they were the only people who could help me. I had created some rather sophisticated hand sampling protocols that just weren't working in practice. So, I tasked them to take notes about their work, what they thought was working and what wasn't. We'd meet weekly and talk about how to improve, try it out, and then talk the next week. Yes, quality metrics were involved.

But after each meeting, I went the extra step. I'd tell them to pull out their resumes and add a skill or an experience that they had participated in that week. It involved things like, helped develop scientific sampling protocols, or was involved in process improvement, or exercised written and oral communications skills teaching and mentoring fellow workers. The students were amazed that they could add this to their resume and couldn't believe they were getting all this experience. They developed a culture of helping each other, and a hunger to strive for excellence. Once we achieved quality standards, we next tackled efficiency. The project was a huge success. But it wouldn't have succeeded unless I had taken the time to show my staff that I cared about them and wanted to help them. I somehow had gotten them to value their work. I had followed my instincts, and by doing so I learned a valuable lesson about leadership. And I've used that lesson everywhere I go.

- The last story I'll leave you with was so simple and yet had such a meaningful impact on who I am as leader. It's a story that comes from the late 1990s when I was doing a boatload of learning as a study section member for a federal grant-making agency. As part of that work, I'd receive a newsletter that would talk about recent and ongoing grant research. So, one day I was casually perusing the newsletter when I came upon the results of a grant that looked at the impact of a comparative study of Spanish-speaking patients seeking health care at a clinic. It's the results that drew my attention. So, the research found that when Spanish-speaking patients presented at a clinic where some of the healthcare staff had even a little proficiency in Spanish, then the patient outcomes were more favorable than situations where healthcare staff did not speak Spanish. Honestly, I broke out loud laughing. My mental exclamation to myself was "you think?" I couldn't shake my perceived absurdity of the underlying research question. Do we really need to do research to verify that people who understand instructions perform better than those who don't? But then it hit me . . . I still get a little emotional when I recount my epiphany. I realized that this was the first time I had ever seen a research project that showed how an industry—in this case the healthcare industry—was acculturating to an increasingly diverse population. Instead of insisting that people seeking healthcare learn English or face the consequences, the institution was recognizing its obligation to adapt culturally to its customer base. And whether fully aware or implicit, the federal grant-making agency was acting on that obligation through this grant. That's a big deal, I promise you. Now, in my leadership roles, I recognize that leaders are an embodiment of the institution they lead. That's why corporate CEOs get canned when they make changes and profits plunge. Leaders of federal statistical agencies are public servants; we serve the public good. That means we're obliged to adapt to an increasingly and beautifully diverse American population. The same holds true of our economy. We need to transform in a way that better serves the needs of our diverse constituencies. That includes researchers, policymakers, governments, tribal nations, rural communities, and businesses, to name a few. And that is why it's so important to actively seek and to value diverse perspectives from staff internally as well as from external stakeholders. And going one step further, that is why it's so important to live our values and principles and use them for decision-making.
- In a sense, this story brings us full circle, back to that little boy who was so freaked out by our furry critter who was checking him out on a cold night. That boy learned the value of being attended to by a grandmother who was just being herself and using her culture and life experience to help her grandson. Fast forward 63 years, and that child has grown into a leader who brings his whole self to the table to serve our country, to serve the statistical community, and to serve the American people. And today, I'm trying to pass on my lesson in leadership to a most superb federal statistical agency and career staff . . . as well as to you, my friends and colleagues.
- Thanks for coming on this journey with me. I invite you to do your own self-reflection. You may be surprised at what you learn.