

Laura Tyson (by Caitlin Hartley¹)

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Laura D’Andrea Tyson joined the UC Berkeley Economics department in 1977 and acquired tenure in 1982. Born and raised in New Jersey, Tyson obtained her economics B.A. from Smith College in 1969 and her Ph.D. from Massachusetts Institute of Technology in 1974. She was an assistant professor in the Economics department at Princeton before coming to Berkeley, where she began her academic appointment in the Economics department before transferring to the Haas Business School in 1990. A prominent economist in the political, business, and academic worlds, Tyson’s story provides key insights into the dynamics and history of gender roles in academia at UC Berkeley.²

Professor Tyson was born in Bayonne, New Jersey in 1947. Growing up during a period of rising economic prosperity, a growing middle class, emerging civil rights and gender equality movements, and cold war geopolitical conflict, Tyson found herself drawn to public policy. Her father received his college education through the GI Bill, and she grew up in a home where college education was highly valued as the foundation of a middle class life.

Tyson attended a small co-ed Catholic high school, where Catholic ‘do good’ ideals aligned with the potential for positive impact through policy. Here, she also discovered her talent for math. She was encouraged by consistent support from her teachers who were mostly nuns, including a tough-minded, demanding math teacher – a contrast to the ‘girls aren’t good at math’ narrative that persists in high school classrooms today.

What drew me to economics really started in high school. I went to a Catholic school. There was one particular nun. She was very clear that I was very good at math and that I should stick with it. (Tyson, interview with the author, p. 2.)

Tyson attended Smith College, a women’s liberal art college and the largest institution of the Seven Sisters, intending to pursue a math degree. Once there, however, she realized that a math major was not the right preparation for a future career focusing on public policy and social change. Just as she was beginning to question whether to major in math, she discovered economics which provided a happy balance between her mathematical skills and her policy interests. Even though economics was widely viewed as a “male” discipline with degree numbers to match, this bias did not exist at a women’s college.

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² As we all grappled with the bumpy transition from in-person to online worlds, technical difficulties were experienced. Unfortunately, Professor Olney forgot to press the record button and the first 40 minutes of this interview was not recorded. Due to this, we relied on the transcript as well as after-the-fact edits and written communication with Laura Tyson to compose this document.

Smith College was a women's college with many gifted students. Nobody thought of economics as a male discipline. It was, when I was there, the second most popular major at Smith. (Tyson, interview with the author, p. 3.

Gender differences in economics became more apparent when Tyson went on to pursue her Ph.D. at MIT, where women accounted for less than 10% of her doctoral program. Still, Tyson encountered few barriers from gender discrimination and was supported and mentored by several male professors who were committed to her success. She was also inspired by the rise of feminism and the women's liberation movement's message that women must recognize and challenge gender discrimination.

There was a way in which my failure to recognize that economics was a male-dominated discipline for a long time really helped me. At Smith I simply didn't think about it! applied to MIT, but when I realized that there were likely to be very few women in my program and that there were very few well-known women in economics, I started to have my doubts. I actually wrote a letter to MIT saying I was not coming, and it was my parents, particularly my father, who said "Tear the letter up and go try. Just go try. It might be fine." Once I got there, it was very important that several faculty members really seemed to care about me. They were more than just mentors--they became sponsors and offered me research and fellowship opportunities. . (Tyson, interview with the author, p. 1.)

Emphasizing the power of networking, her MIT advisors recommended Tyson for a job at Princeton, even before she began her job market pursuit. She interviewed and accepted a job as an Assistant Professor in economics at Princeton. She proved to be a gifted and popular teacher and continued her research, but over time she questioned whether the Princeton Economics department was the right place for her given her interdisciplinary, comparative and policy interests. At the time, the Economics department at Berkeley had two very powerful senior professors in the field of comparative economics, Ben Ward and Gregory Grossman, who encouraged her to apply for a job there.

I came to Berkeley [from Princeton] on leave, to write up my dissertation as a short book. I realized while I was at Princeton that I really preferred a more interdisciplinary environment than the Princeton Economics department was likely to offer me. Berkeley had two very powerful senior professors in my research and teaching field, and they really encouraged me to apply for a job. And they were very supportive of me once I accepted the position. (Tyson, interview with the author, p. 3.)

Once at Berkeley with their help she established a community both in and outside of her department. Berkeley has a rich history of interdisciplinary research and a "number of interdisciplinary centers outside of departments that can provide homes – intellectual homes, resource homes, and networks to [the] outside world for young scholars." Tyson became actively involved with the Center for Soviet and East European Studies where she worked with many senior Berkeley faculty members, including two women, from a variety of departments. In addition, she played a leadership role in the development of the interdisciplinary PEIS (Political Economy of Industrial Societies) major which became one of the

largest major programs at Berkeley. Several female faculty members were active in the PEIS curriculum and many female undergraduates became PEIS majors. In her work inside and outside of the Economics department, Tyson felt a sense of sisterhood with her female colleagues and was especially close with Professor Clair Brown in economics and Professor Vicky Bonnell in sociology. These support networks created an environment in which Tyson could excel as a woman.

Although Tyson didn't recall experiencing any sort of sexual harassment personally, she knew it was something that was very common during this time for women academics. She was an invited participant in a 1970s conference organized by the American Association of University Women for women who had recently received doctoral degrees in scientific disciplines. About 2/3s of the conference attendees reported experiencing sexual harassment and advances from male classmates and professors! As a graduate student in the economics department in the late 1970s and early 1980s, Martha Olney recalls an incident involving Tyson that she found shocking at the time. A senior colleague told the not-yet-tenured Tyson, "You better not wear those tight jeans when you teach Econ 1. You'll make all the boys crazy!" As Olney recalls, Tyson and the men in the room laughed it off. Tyson often used humor or as a way to deflect sexist remarks.

Before the transition to Evans Hall in 1989, the Economics department was located in Barrows Hall, and riding up the typically somber elevator in Barrows one day, Tyson sparked conversation with John Zysman, a professor of political science and comparative political economy whom she had met while they were both graduate students at MIT. He suggested co-teaching a course together. She agreed and the course became a turning point in her research and teaching interests which gradually shifted from a focus on planned economies to a focus on advanced industrial market economies. After the course she continued to work with John on several articles and book projects on global competitiveness, a topic of growing significance among policy makers. Based on her work in this field, she was invited to be a visiting professor at Harvard Business School and upon returning to Berkeley, she requested to move her appointment from the Economics Department to the Haas School. She had already received tenure, was advanced in her career, and saw the direction of her work shifting – it made sense to switch. Comparable to her experience in the economics department, Tyson felt great support and little gender bias at Haas.

New laws established by the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) in the 1970s pushed academic institutions and companies to diversify, also creating a *de jure* system to hold them accountable. Tyson believes that combined with her qualifications and accomplishments the fact that she is a woman created an advantage at various points in her career, including her admission to MIT, her appointment as assistant professor at Princeton, her promotion to a tenured professorship at Berkeley, the offer of a tenured appointment at the Harvard Business School and President Clinton's decision to appoint her as the first woman to serve as Chairman of the President's Council of Economic Advisers (CEA) in 1993. At the time he chose her for this position, there were no women on the 'short list' of top economists identified as contenders.

I didn't think I was going to get the job, okay, I did not. I wasn't even vying for it, I didn't even think it was possible. There were lists around the country of the 20 top economists who people thought could get this job. They were all men. I wasn't on the list. No one thought I was going to get this job. (Tyson, interview with the author, p. 4.)

President Clinton knew of Tyson's work on competitiveness and agreed with her policy positions on manufacturing and trade. He was also committed to gender diversity in his cabinet appointments.

The fact that I was a woman was a positive, not a negative. The fact that I got [the job as chair of the CEA] strikes me as ... a plus there that comes from the decision of that administration to value diversity in its appointments. (Tyson, interview with the author, p. 4.)

When Tyson acquired this top position she endured derogatory comments via the media from some of the men who had been on the 'short list' and who thought they were more qualified. Their criticism did not deter her from carrying out her responsibilities and from pressing for inclusion in all top leadership and cabinet meetings. At the time, men routinely insisted on inclusion which was granted, while women did so less frequently and thus were generally included less. Alice Rivlin was in President Clinton's cabinet at the same time as Tyson and was familiar with this battle for inclusion - she pushed Laura to start asking for inclusion in all White House meetings. This is exactly what she did, and as a result of her insistence, she created a weekly economic briefing with the President, played a role in all major Administration economic decisions, and was appointed as the Chair of the National Economic Council when Robert Rubin left that position to become Secretary of the Treasury. "I think you do have to be willing, you have to be bold to ask... you can't wait for things to come your way because you're just really good at doing them." This remains true in many realms today.

After she announced her intention to leave the Clinton Administration at the end of its first term (1996), Tyson's reputation and visibility as a top economist along with the business community's emerging interest in gender diversity led to her appointment to several corporate boards. Even today, however, despite progress women remain underrepresented on corporate boards, holding only about 20% of board positions in the S&P 500 companies.

With her family, Tyson decided to return to Berkeley and resume her role as a professor at the Haas School. After 2 years of teaching and research, she was named as its first female Dean, and after a 5-year term there she was chosen as the first female Dean of the London Business School. At the time of her appointments to these roles, there were no other female Deans at major global business schools. Today, there are several.

For many women, it can be difficult to strike a balance between motherhood, family and career. Coined the "motherhood penalty," women generally experience systematic compensation and promotion disadvantages in the workplace when choosing to have children. Tyson, however, was guided and supported well in terms of familial life. At MIT, Tyson's professors advised her to wait to have children

until after acquiring tenure. This is what she did. Furthermore, Tyson has an extremely supportive spouse, Erik, who as a freelance writer worked from home and was willing and able to share childcare responsibilities. This allowed her to focus on her research and career, but decisions and successes were still about the family unit and not just about the individual. When President Clinton asked her to take another cabinet position during his second term, the family decided that it was time to return home to Berkeley.

Tyson sees several threads that run through her experiences and those of many other women: the role of supportive partners, the importance of sponsors, both male and female, and confidence and a willingness to put yourself out there.

My personal story underscores the importance of having active sponsors in your career at certain points. There are pivotal moments when there's a position, an opportunity, which a sponsor can help bring to your attention and help support you to be the person who gets that opportunity. Faculty leaders, university leaders, top business executives and political leaders, they absolutely have to own that responsibility. (Tyson, interview with the author, pp. 5 and 6.)

At the same time,

I think for women . . . you can't wait for things to come your way because [you think] you're just really good. . . That's just not how the world works. You have to be good. . . but often to be in the running, you have to put yourself out there. . . You have to be willing to go and either ask, or insist, or say, "You know, this is what we should be doing here. We deserve to be here. We need to be here." (Tyson, interview with the author, p. 6.)

Works Cited

Tyson, Laura. Interview with author. Berkeley, CA. 16 April 2020. Transcript archived at <URL>.