

Life isn't fair, especially in the workplace. Her alma mater, University of California, Irvine, was not considered a "high-caliber school" among the top 50 research institutions. And unlike many of her peers, she lacked a single published research paper, the main currency for academics vying for plum positions. Her advisor argued that none of that should matter. Rather than trying to contort our own experiences into what we think is the standard trajectory toward success, being the prom queen means capturing your special aura by explaining where you have come from and where you are going to guide other people to understand your value. And that value doesn't have to be the same as everyone else's.

In meetings with job search committees, Huang showed college officials her potential by focusing on what made her stand out: her research into the previously unanswered question of how gut feelings figure into entrepreneurial investment decisions. Much to her surprise, the Wharton School at the University of Pennsylvania hired her as an assistant professor. People who put in the most effort often feel jaded when their work doesn't speak for itself, Huang says. It's important to set bitterness aside and find the right way to influence the outside perceptions that drive so many decisions about our careers.

When it comes to achieving success in any field, hard work is a given, Huang says. Gaining an edge requires what she calls "hard work, plus"—and that "plus" amounts to enriching, delighting, and guiding other people so they can see your value. Identify the "basic goods" you have to offer that will enrich others. It's what cofounders Arch "Beaver" Aplin III and Don Wasek did when they opened their first Buc-ee's gas station in Lake Worth, Texas, in 1982. They focused on the things they figured travelers needed most: gas, cheap ice, and clean restrooms. Today Buc-ee's is a road trip destination, with more than 30 sprawling stores offering Texas-themed gifts, Buc-ee's brand beef jerky, plenty of gas (as many as 120 pumps at one store), mountains of ice to refill coolers, and giant spotless restrooms (with up to 33 urinals in a single men's room). In evaluating your own career goals, Huang recommends taking a page from

Buc-ee's and asking yourself: o What are the strengths that set you apart from the pack and provide value? o When people are interacting with you, what is the most basic thing they expect you to deliver? To zero in on your basic goods, trust your gut in figuring out what skills you bring to the table—and what you don't. If your brilliant business idea relies on software programming and you're not a programmer, switch gears. 2. Own your constraints and encourage others to see past them In Huang's freshman year of college, she was shocked to fail a writing assignment. When she asked the professor where she went wrong, he said, "Don't worry. Knowing she might not fit the typical image of a professor—because she's "too young and too female," as she puts it—Huang opened her class by saying, "I know it may look like I'm here to sell you Girl Scout cookies," then redirected her students' judgments about her age, race, and femininity by outlining her professional credentials. That's what Cyrus Habib, who lost his eyesight at age

8 to retinoblastoma, has done. When he ran for lieutenant governor of Washington in 2016, well-meaning friends expressed concern about whether the blind man could handle door-to-door canvassing. Habib responded by telling them he had gone "from Braille to Yale," had found his way through the Port Authority Bus Terminal, plus had navigated the thousand-year-old dorms and cobblestone streets at Oxford. Instead, we have to focus on finding our "edge"—the unique qualities that set us apart—and take strategic steps to make other people see our value and open the doors that will take us where we want to go. "Life isn't fair. We can't just wait around for people to make the right

decisions for us," says Huang, who witnesses plenty of wheel-spinning among the hundreds of entrepreneurs she has researched, including some who can't get funding for ingenious business ideas. Be the proverbial "prom queen" When Huang was in the last year of her doctoral program and was nervously seeking her first academic appointment at a college, her advisor encouraged her to "be the prom queen." Because, she said, "everyone wants to date the prom queen." "It's a myth that hard work is enough. We've all had experiences where we worked hard and still ended up losing out on a new job or a key promotion," says Harvard Business School Associate Professor Laura Huang, who studies early entrepreneurship, where failure is common. It all starts with confronting potential barriers or shortcomings and molding them into assets, Huang says in her new book *Edge: Turning Adversity into Advantage*. While most workers took the two months off to find a new job or take a break, the woman kept showing up to the office, and when new assignments were floated, she offered to take them on. At the end of the two months, the woman was involved in so many critical business operations, she received multiple offers from senior leaders to stay--and she went on to work for the company for 40 years. Huang recalls setting up slides before teaching a new MBA course at HBS when a student entering the room mistook her for an IT support specialist. In *Edge: Turning Adversity into Advantage*, Laura Huang offers a new strategy for uncovering and showcasing your unique value in the face of obstacles. Yet Huang argues that we can't let other people's stereotypes or their views of our faults or limitations, right or wrong, hold us back. "Pinpoint your basic goods and define your circle of competence, then operate inside that perimeter," Huang advises. Indeed, vast research shows that certain groups, such as women and African Americans, have a tougher time getting ahead. Huang says.

1.4.5