Altaf Merchant, the now-interim dean of the Milgard School of Business at the University of Washington Tacoma (UWT), thought he would become an accountant like his father. He tried it for about six months until he realized, "That’s not my calling."

He then got a master's degree in marketing from the University of Mumbai in India, and went on to work as a brand manager for products like Lysol, Aquafresh, Sara Lee, and more. "I have to feel the energy," Merchant said when asked about what prompted his seemingly sudden career change from brand manager to university professor in the mid- to late-aughts. "I had a lot of creative energy that was not being harnessed."

Merchant credits a moment in 2004 for providing that spark during a lecture he gave at the University of Delhi's Faculty of Management Studies Program. "I was fascinated by my interactions with students," he said. "I decided it’s now or never."

Within a year, Merchant had begun his journey by pursuing a doctorate from Old Dominion University in Virginia. He later filled roles as a visiting professor at many universities across the globe, including Aix-Marseille University in France and the MICA-School of Ideas in India before finally alighting on the UWT campus in 2008.

Since then, Merchant has moved up the ranks from visiting lecturer to his current position as interim dean. "I think what I really like about being dean is being able to shape the direction of the school," Merchant said. "Not only am I influencing the future of higher education in the school, but also how the school is able to be embedded in the community."

Through collaborative programs, such as the Sports Enterprise Management Program — which is conducted in partnership with the Tacoma Rainiers — the Milgard School connects the classroom with the real world. "It creates this bridge between theory and practice," Merchant said, "which is what I really love, and that goes back to my philosophy as an administrator."

Read on and see how Merchant strives to build these bridges between the university and the greater Tacoma community, one day at a time. — BY CARLISLE HUNTINGTON

Altaf Merchant
Interim Dean of the Milgard School of Business,
University of Washington Tacoma