

Foreign-Born Faculty and Academic Leadership in America: The Myths, Realities, and Opportunities

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INTRODUCTION

The presence of foreign-born faculty (FBF) in university campuses across the United States has grown exponentially in the last half century (Cole, 2017). It is estimated that more than 22% of faculty in post-secondary institutions in the U.S. are foreign-born (Furuya et al., 2019). This number is significant compared to the population of international students enrolled in American universities at 6% or the population of foreign-born teachers in non-post-secondary institutions at 11% or just the total population of immigrants in the U.S. at 13.1% (Furuya et al., 2019; National Academy of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2015). This number is, however, not matched by a similar representation of foreign-born faculty in higher education academic leadership (Kim et al., 2020).

Academic literature is replete with studies investigating various aspects of FBF in American universities, including, but not limited to: integration of FBF into the American society and institutional support (Gahungu, 2011; National Academy of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2015; Theobald, 2008); equity issues (Whitford, 2020); contribution of FBF to the American society (Cole, 2017); professional and cultural experiences, talent importation, and job satisfaction (Foote et al., 2008; Hernández and Damián, 2019; Kim et al., 2011; Lin, 2009; Omiteru et al., 2018); and career mobility (Kim et al., 2020). More recently, there has been a sustained interest in FBF involvement in academic leadership. While Skinner (2018), Marklein (2016), and Foderaro (2011) focus on globalizing the American university presidency, Kim et al. (2020) and Whitford (2020) have focused specifically on academic leadership and administration. According to Kim et al. (2020), for example, despite similar career mobility patterns with their U.S.-born counterparts, FBF are less likely to move into administration and academic leadership, for both voluntary and involuntary reasons. Despite sustained interest in the topic, however, there has been limited work devoted to the factors that hold back FBF as regards to academic leadership or the benefits of their involvement in academic leadership in American institutions of higher learning.

In this paper, I offer a personal opinion why more FBF should consider academic leadership as a career aspiration. The piece opens with some operational definitions followed by my personal story and leadership career trajectory. I use my own experience as a foreign-born faculty member to offer thoughts on the underrepresentation of FBF in academic leadership – demystifying persistent myths and uncovering some realities. I also use personal experiences to offer advice on leadership preparation for FBF. Later in the piece, I highlight opportunities that open with involvement in academic leadership and also identify potential challenges. I conclude by offering a personal take on and encouraging FBF to consider academic leadership as part of their career trajectory.

Definitions

Foreign-born faculty (FBF) refers to faculty members in American Universities who were born in countries other than the U.S. (Furuya et al., 2019). This includes faculty who have been naturalized into U.S citizens as well as those who have retained their original citizenship. FBF does not include children of immigrants born in the U.S. or American citizens born outside the U.S. Faculty is used to refer to instructors in post-secondary institutions, including community colleges and 4-year degree granting intuitions. These include, but are not limited to fulltime lecturers, assistant, associate, and full professors. Due to the temporary nature of their contracts, part-time adjunct faculty members are not included in this assessment. Academic leaders in general refers to individuals with responsibility over academic units such as departments, colleges, and universities. While academic leaders range from department chairs, deans of colleges, to provosts, this piece will focus primarily on department leadership, which is the most immediate academic leadership opportunity for faculty members.

Why focus on department leadership?

Department leadership is perhaps the most important leadership position in a university. Gmelch (2015, p. 1) puts it this way, "... the department chair position is the most critical role in the university, and the most unique management position in America." In his assessment of the critical role of academic department leadership, Lane (2018) notes:

... academic departments are to universities what mitochondria are to cellular organisms. Each cell is full of these little entities called mitochondria, which collectively are responsible for regulating the metabolism of the cell through respiration and energy production academic departments serve as the regulators of an institution's metabolism — they ultimately determine whether an institution operates at peak performance or not. (para. 3)

As every institution looks to improve student success, increase enrollment, and grow their reputation in the face of declining funding for public universities, the department chair's role has become even more important. Furthermore, the department chair position still remains the only leadership position in the university that deals with all of its constituents. These include, but are not limited to students, faculty, staff, central administrators, alumni, parents, industry, professional and local communities. Departmental leadership gives an individual a complete picture of how the university functions at all levels. It is no surprise that 80% of university decisions are made at the department level (Hecht et al., 1999). Additionally, department level leadership is selected due to one's first-hand personal experience within an institution, which then leads to the fundamental question: What exactly is involved in department leadership? Therefore, in the section that follows, I discuss the role of department leaders using a more generalized approach.

What is involved in academic department leadership and why does it matter?

Gmelch and Miskin (2004) developed the ten most important duties and responsibilities identified by 75% of department chairs. Using their framework, I condensed the roles of chairs into eight categories including, but not limited to: providing vision and direction, curriculum and instruction, constituency relationships and communication, faculty matters, department growth and health, department resources and budget matters, department governance and office management, and research and scholarship. While this list is not exhaustive, the duties outlined touch about every aspect of the university. Similarly, academic department leaders deal with a diversity of

stakeholders from the students, staff, faculty, central administrators, parents, alumni, industry, professional and local communities. As such, participation in academic department leadership offers FBF a glimpse into the inner workings of the university. In the next section, I highlight my academic leadership story, as a foreign-born faculty, to provide a snapshot of my FBF leadership experiences, thus, setting the tone for subsequent observations.

My leadership story

Upon graduation from West Virginia University (WVU), Department of Geology and Geography in summer 2004, I was offered a tenure-track position in the Department of Geography at the University of North Alabama (UNA) in Florence, Alabama beginning August 1 of the same year. The Department of Geography at UNA was a mid-size undergraduate program with over 60 majors, a dozen minors and comprised of four full-time faculty members (including me). When I hired in, I was on an immigration visa status known as Optional Practical Training (OPT), a one-year permit accorded to foreign students to work in the U.S. before returning to their home countries. Because I was on a tenure-track position, the university petitioned for me another immigration visa status known as H-1B visa. H-1B is three-year renewable visa that allows foreign-born professionals to work in the U.S. I acquired my permanent residency (a.k.a. Green Card) in 2008 and later U.S citizenship in 2015. Alongside navigating the immigration landscape, I simultaneously worked towards my tenure and promotion to associate professor, both of which I attained in 2010. Four years later in 2014, I was promoted to the rank of full professor.

How did my leadership come about? Within my first eight years at UNA, I was involved in various leadership opportunities including, but not limited to: developing and directing the first study abroad to an African country, co-founder of Kenya Scholars and Studies Association (KESSA), founder of Diaspora Community of African Geospatial Scientists (DCAGS), Chapter President of the Phi Kappa Phi Honor Society, member of the President’s committee on diversity and inclusion strategic planning, shared governance committees, faculty and senior administrator’s search committees, member of various funded research projects, faculty advisor to African Students Organization, chaired faculty searches, organized student events, and volunteered and took lead on various other departmental initiatives. During this period, I also earned a campus-wide Excellence in Teaching Award. In the community, I had been nominated to serve in the City of Florence as a Planning Commissioner.

The appointment: In summer of 2011, I conducted the first ever study abroad trip to an African country for UNA. When I returned from study abroad, I found a note in my mailbox asking me to make an appointment to meet with the dean of the college. Scary as that sounded, I made the appointment and met the dean on a Friday morning where I received the ‘shocking’ news that my department colleagues had approached him to appoint me as their next department chair with a start date of fall 2011 – in three months’ time. Not knowing how to respond to the unexpected news, I requested to be given time to think it over. Like many other FBF, department leadership was not even remotely on my radar as a career aspiration. Of course, I believed I was not ready because I assumed there were others more qualified than me and better suited for the job. It was only in a matter of time before I could convince everyone that they had better options. After negotiations, I agreed to serve for one-year, which, in my mind, meant ‘watching’ for a year hoping they would find a more suitable candidate. Fast forward, I assumed the chair position in fall 2012. At the time, the department comprised of eight full-time faculty members (including myself), three adjunct faculty, one staff, undergraduate and MS programs, and about 130 majors. Four years later

in 2016, I was awarded the most Outstanding Department Chair Award for my college. When our associate dean left the university on a short notice in 2017, I was appointed as an Interim Associate Dean in the College of Arts and Sciences, which I served for a year. Later in 2019, I applied and was hired as the Chair of the Department of Global Studies and Human Geography at Middle Tennessee State University in Murfreesboro, TN, a position I held for one year.

Accomplishments: Under my leadership at UNA, we were able to accomplish a lot together in the Department of Geography. In a matter of seven years, we were running a department with 4 major and 8 minor programs; we had developed three new programs; implemented both the undergraduate and graduate programs 100% Online; implemented over 77 major curriculum initiatives; maintained an enrollment at about 110 majors for both the graduate and undergraduate programs; maintained the highest student job placement in the entire university; initiated three study abroad programs; hired four new faculty members and successfully supported five faculty through tenure and promotion; oversaw and managed annual budgetary transactions in excess of US\$ 200,000; secured travel funding for both faculty and students; supported faculty to acquire in excess of US\$ 250,000 in research funding; established a Geographic Research Center in the department; developed a five-year departmental strategic plan; integrated diversity efforts as part and parcel of departmental culture, including student and faculty recruitment, curriculum programming, research initiatives and community outreach; hosted six UNA Geography Alumni Association conferences; and oversaw more than 24 community outreach activities by faculty and students. It came, therefore, as no surprise when in 2016, I was awarded the most Outstanding Department Chair Award in the College of Arts and Sciences, which comprised of 19 academic departments. I report these accomplishments here not as bragging points, but to contrast my leadership contributions in a 6-year period against my initial reservations towards my leadership preparedness in 2012.

But what does my department leadership story tell us about FBF and academic leadership in American universities? Why was academic leadership not in my career aspirations? What did I do to prepare myself for academic leadership? What did I have to do to earn the trust of my colleagues and administrators? What opportunities opened up from my leadership experiences? These questions are addressed below.

Why is leadership not a career aspiration for foreign-born faculty? The myths and realities

Job security: Getting and securing a tenure-track position for a FBF in the U.S is a long, stressful, and complex process. Setting foot in the door is a relatively straightforward part of the process because it is merit-based. The tenure and promotion process is, however, messy and likened to ‘walking on egg shells,’ highly political, and almost entirely dependent on the vote of tenured colleagues who are predominantly U.S-born. Furthermore, the tenure and promotion process can take place simultaneously with another complicated, but often expensive process of petitioning for work visas and permanent residency. In fact, some universities choose not to hire FBF for this reason alone. While these two processes are simultaneous, the waiting period is lengthy, stressful, and political – and sometimes riddled with uncertainty and unpredictability. For example, it took me four years to gain permanent residency and six to go through the tenure and promotion process to associate professor status. Because majority of FBF have young families during these two processes, job security is a high priority. To maintain good relationships with, and to earn the trust and confidence of their colleagues and supervisors, most FBF play it safe and conveniently avoid potentially controversial issues, such as openly showing leadership ambitions.

Not my turn attitude: ‘It is someone else’s turn’ is another immediate and for some good measure, logical reason why leadership is not in the radar for any new faculty member – foreign-born or American. Most new faculty, especially fresh PhDs, consider it too early in their careers to think about getting into administration. However, most FBF, who in most cases start their academic careers in mid and late 30s, take it a step further to exclude leadership from their career aspirations altogether (Kim et al., 2020). This is compounded by the politics of tenure and promotion, which almost entirely rest on the vote of tenured colleagues. As a foreign-born faculty member, however, change of immigration status that enables them to work in the U.S on a permanent basis is often a top priority. Because this depends on a petition by the department, FBF are careful not to harm relationships with their colleagues by openly showing leadership ambitions. Secondly, one must demonstrate effectiveness as a faculty member to be awarded tenure. The amount of time and effort involved in gaining the trust of colleagues for the award of tenure and promotion requires one to walk a very fine line, and especially for FBF. As a result, leadership is often beyond reach and not a career aspiration.

Pursuit of scholarship goals: Another logical reason is pursuit of scholarship goals. Every young professional, foreign or native, desires to make a name and to build a strong professional profile. Therefore, department or academic leadership is generally considered an unnecessary distraction towards this goal. For FBF who must fulfil ‘highly qualified’ scientist status in the eyes of the U.S immigration to earn permanent residency, concentration on scholarship takes precedence over academic leadership.

The academic department can be a toxic place. Maintaining good relationships with colleagues, who must vote for your tenure and promotion, becomes a priority especially for FBF who must protect both their jobs and also immigration status. Because department leadership role, at times, involves making difficult decisions, most FBF avoid it altogether. I have heard FBF remark, “I don’t want to step on people’s toes,” referring to harming relationships with or perceived threats from colleagues.

Compromise candidate mentality: Foreign-born faculty, myself included, tend to live under the assumption that department leadership is preserved for their American (mostly white male) colleagues and that FBF become an option only when others are not interested or qualified. This compromise candidate mentality can be true sometimes, but also false. It is an open secret that most academic department leadership positions in the U.S are held by middle age white males (Bystydzienski, 2017). While there is some truth to this view, however, my appointment as chair in 2012 suggests that this assumption could be misleading, but in my case was faulty.

Outsider perspective: ‘I am an outsider’ is another common assumption. FBF tend to have the “good guest” mentality – that because they are not citizens or permanent residents of the U.S., being offered a job, in and of itself, is a good enough gesture of kindness, and therefore leadership aspirations would be asking for too much – a wrong assumption for any professional in the first place. Others are intimidated by the demands of the department leadership position itself, especially dealing with difficult colleagues, making difficult decisions, and taking responsibility for failure. Unfortunately, and rightly so, there are some FBF who do not believe they can be supported by their American colleagues to lead a department and, therefore, do not bother with academic leadership even if offered. As unfortunate as that sounds, this reality does not make it a firewall to academic leadership for FBF.

Other reasons FBF do not consider academic leadership in their career aspirations have to do with cultural differences, perceived threat to their American colleagues, the general stress of life for foreign-born individuals, inadequacy feelings and lack of confidence, especially among female FBF, language barrier, fear of failure, and lack of encouragement from their peers, and mentors.

What can foreign-born faculty do to raise their leadership profiles and earn the trust and confidence of their American colleagues to lead them?

Most department positions are appointments by a college dean. In most cases, deans consult with faculty in the department before they make chair appointments. Other department chair positions are elected by their colleagues while others ascend to the position through a leadership rotation among tenured senior faculty members. In other cases, department chairs hire in through competitive national searches. Regardless of the method through which faculty members assume the position, academic leadership appointments involve significant input from faculty colleagues. This leads one to ask: what can a FBF do to earn the trust, respect, and confidence of their colleagues to lead them?

Be good in your craft: To earn respect from your colleagues good enough to be trusted with leadership, you must perfect your craft. Whether it is teaching, research, or service, you must demonstrate effectiveness in your faculty duties. As faculty members tend to look up to their leader as a standard, you must make sure you are effective in your instruction and scholarship. As a department chair, I learned quickly that faculty constantly ask themselves why they should follow you. Excellence in your duties is always a good reason.

Be an outsider insider: A foreign-born faculty comes in with an outsider label. To crack the insider shell, FBF must get involved in and significantly contribute to their department business. The hard reality is that as a FBF member, your colleagues see you as an outsider and do not necessarily have you on their leadership radar. Good news: I learned through my experiences that while your colleagues may not publicly float your name as a potential leader, privately they are not necessarily opposed to the idea. A FBF, therefore, bears the burden of proving himself or herself in order to earn the trust and confidence of other colleagues by getting involved in department business in a significant way. Furthermore, they say ‘leadership starts at home.’ To earn the confidence and trust of their colleagues, FBF must show that they can lead by performing other leadership tasks in the department. These include chairing faculty searches, organizing student events, managing labs, coordinating internships, coordinating graduate program, planning field trips, and so on. It is the sum of the small internal responsibilities that will convince your colleagues that you can be trusted with bigger responsibilities such as department leadership. Put differently, a FBF has to give his or her colleagues enough reasons to be trusted with leadership.

Be a team player: ‘Minding my own business’ attitude is not a good leadership trait for anybody. Furthermore, you are less likely to earn the trust and respect of your colleagues by being a lone ranger. Get involved in department initiatives, collaborative research projects, team teaching, volunteer to do things and sometimes make sacrifices for the sake of others, and these things will gain you more trust in the department.

Stay away from factions and camps: Many academic departments tend to have factions sometimes based on ideological, philosophical, and petty personal differences and preferences. This creates awkward situations for FBF who may not identify, especially with ideological inclinations of other

faculty colleagues. Unfortunately, these factions and camps have a bearing to elections, appointments and other departmental decisions. Staying away from factions and camps is perhaps the best advice anyone ever gave me as a fresh-from-college FBF member. It is not worth the energy, it is not good for your mental health, and does not advance good relationships with your colleagues.

Build a strong professional network: A strong professional network is essential, especially for mentorship purposes. Furthermore, those that wish to seek leadership outside their own institutions will need support from others in their discipline. You can build extensive professional networks by joining professional organizations, participating in training opportunities, and through collaboration. There comes a time when you are not sure whether to make a career move and professional mentors always come in handy. Some of these considerations are not necessarily unique to FBF members, but it does not work the same as for a native-born American faculty.

Why should more foreign-born faculty consider academic leadership in their career aspirations?

Career advancement: By the time they earn tenure and promotion, most faculty members have sufficient institutional knowledge, seniority, and the requisite leadership skills needed to lead an academic department. FBF are no exception to this rule. While academic departments should utilize FBF as leadership resource on one hand (Gahungu, 2011), FBF should make academic leadership as career option in their own professional development. Academic department leadership also opens many opportunities for training in various aspects of leadership. Furthermore, faculty productivity tends to plateau upon attaining full professor status, making academic leadership a logical career choice.

For equity reasons: Data from the Institute of Immigration Research at George Mason University indicates that FBF constitute over 22% of faculty in post-secondary institutions in the U.S. (Furuya et al., 2019). In other words, one in five faculty members in the U.S. is foreign born (Lin et al., 2009). Unfortunately, the high turnover rate at department leadership position makes it difficult to determine the percentage of FBF in academic leadership positions. Generally speaking, however, the number of FBF in department leadership positions is abysmal compared to the proportion of faculty that is foreign-born. For purposes of fair and proportionate representation, I argue that more FBF should consider leadership in their career options.

Increased global leadership and perspectives: To be clear, one does not have to be foreign-born to possess a global leadership instincts and perspectives. However, FBF possess lived global experiences that bring unique perspectives to the leadership arena (Gahungu, 2011; Hernández and Damián, 2019; Lin et al., 2015). With increased globalization of the American academy, from student population, faculty, to the top leadership, it makes logical sense that mid-career foreign born faculty in post-secondary institutions should consider leadership in their career options. A similar trend in the rise in recruitment of foreign-born leaders has been seen at the presidency level in American universities as well as in tech companies. In his article “Globalizing the Academic Presidency: Competing for Talented Leadership,” Skinner (2018) confirmed a report appearing in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* in 2011 that of the 61-member institutions of the Association of American Universities (AAU) at the time, 11 of them were led by foreign born chiefs (Foderaro, 2011; Skinner, 2018). In my opinion, foreign -born faculty represent a valuable pool of leadership talent that is severely underutilized.

Diversity in university leadership: Foreign-born students, faculty, and staff in post-secondary institutions in the U.S. comprise a large proportion of the academic community. These students make up more than 6% of the student body in post-secondary institutions while foreign born faculty comprise more than 22% of the faculty body. Unfortunately, this is not matched by a similar diversity in the leadership circles. Understanding the value of diversity in the workplace, and increased participation of FBF in academic leadership, would add a crucial element of diversity at any given institution (Cole, 2017; Gahungu, 2011; Kim et al., 2020).

Learn the system from inside: Most foreign-born faculty have grown up and educated in systems and cultural settings different from those in America. Many have only an outsider perspective of the American system and how it works. Participation in academic leadership offers an opportunity for FBF to get an insider's perspective of the American higher education landscape. From faculty development, curriculum programming, student recruitment and enrollment, budgeting, to communicating with multiple constituents, FBF would gain an insider knowledge of the American system. This knowledge would be useful to themselves, their students, and their institutions.

To give back: Most FBF received their undergraduate degrees from academic institutions from their home countries. For some, attending an American university was an investment from their country of origin and institutions. Involvement in academic leadership in the U.S. would be a fertile ground for FBF to acquire leadership skills transferable to their home countries through writing, workshops, symposiums, training during sabbatical leaves, and other mentorship platforms. Therefore, in the last nine years, I have been involved in academic leadership in some American universities and, as a way of giving back, participated in leadership mentorship of faculty in universities in Kenya and Tanzania.

CONCLUSION

In this opinion piece, I offered my personal take on why more FBF should consider academic department leadership as their career options. I first identified various aspects of the role of an academic department leader. My personal leadership story is not provided as a model of success, but as an example to illustrate positive FBF leadership experiences and contributions. I identified some of the reasons why FBF do not necessarily consider academic leadership as a career option. While some of their reasons are real and present actual challenges, I argued that, for the most part, there are other strategic ways FBF can navigate the landscape and still participate in academic leadership. I offered personal advice on various ways one can earn the respect, trust, and confidence of their colleagues in order to be considered a credible candidate for departmental leadership. Finally, I highlighted opportunities that may open up for FBF's participation in academic leadership, arguing that its benefits far outweigh the perceived costs and, in most cases, extend beyond personal career development. Thus, academic leadership has tangible benefits not only for the FBF, but also the department and university as a whole.

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