

# FOREIGNNESS AS AN ASSET AND A CURSE IN AMERICAN HIGHER EDUCATION

By

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## ABSTRACT

Each year, thousands of foreign-born and foreign-educated professionals move to the United States of America as immigrants on temporary visas, including prospective academicians. In some academic disciplines such as science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM), these foreign-born professionals represent a critical mass of highly specialized personnel given the insufficient supply of locally born and trained personnel. However, this pursuit of success in the American academy has its own unique challenges and opportunities for foreign-born faculty.

Key words: Foreignness, American academy, Visa, Immigrant, Foreign-born Faculty

## INTRODUCTION

Each year, thousands of foreign-born and foreign-educated professionals move to the United States of America as immigrants on temporary visas, including prospective academicians. In some academic disciplines such as science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM), these foreign-born professionals represent a critical mass of highly specialized personnel given the insufficient supply of locally born and trained personnel (Gahungu 2011; Webber 2012). In other disciplines, there is also a high presence of foreigners especially in Historically Black

Colleges and Universities (HBCU). This article entails a literature review of issues pertaining to opportunities and obstacles the foreign scholars encounter as they pursue careers in the American Academy. The key questions are what challenges do new immigrant scholars experience? What assets do immigrants bring into higher education? What are the strategies for navigating the challenges to become successful?

As higher education continues to diversify, considerable interest in faculty members who work outside their places of birth is growing. Some studies that have examined the research productivity of foreign-born faculty in US institutions show that, on average, foreign-born faculty produce more scholarly works than US-born peers (Corley and Sabharawal 2007; Gahungu 2011; Hunt 2009; Lee 2004; Levin and Stephan 1991, 1999; Mamiseishvili and Rosser 2010; Stephan and Levin 2007; Webber 2012). However, it is interesting that Mamiseishvili and Rosser (2010) found international faculty members significantly more productive in research but less productive in teaching and service. This is why it is important that the pedagogical roles of immigrant faculty are also highlighted so that their productivity in the research and scholarship can be replicated in the classroom and service roles. As various campuses, strive to internationalize their curriculum, the presence of immigrant faculty needs harnessing to drive the globalizing initiatives in form of study

abroad, teaching of foreign languages or establishing academic partnerships. It is important that those who have successfully transitioned and established themselves in the American Academy share stories with the upcoming generation to equip them for quicker transition as well as preparing them for roles that are more visible. According to Ngwainmbi (2006) foreign born faculty who are invited to serve in the administration are often “stuck in the lower echelons as program advisers, coordinators or chairpersons. In an era when the global marketplace is increasingly seeking graduates who can relate to clients from diverse backgrounds, administrators, hiring units and the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission ought to be paying closer attention to the plight of foreign staff now” (<https://diverseeducation.com/article/6031/>). The wings of globalization are spreading quickly around the world, and an understanding of foreign cultures is no longer optional. It is time to use and exploit foreignness as an asset rather than an impediment to meaningful career progression within and without the classroom.

## TRANSITIONING FROM GRADUATE SCHOOL TO THE CLASSROOM

Faculty members often face challenges when starting new positions at universities across the U.S.A. Change is always difficult to navigate successfully. Change often presents a great opportunity that is fraught with risk, fear and nervousness. Thousands of graduate students navigate this experience as they transition from graduate school research laboratories and lecture rooms to a classroom and laboratory of their own. Typical transition from graduate school to the classroom entails navigating the following challenges including being in a new role and possibly a new institution, developing new courses, planning for teaching, balancing and

navigating the demands of obtaining tenure, balancing work and family life, and understanding institutional policies and culture (Collins 2008; Herget, 2016).

For foreign-born graduate students transitioning into the classroom, their “foreignness” compounds the change experience. These challenges are even much more challenging for a foreign-born faculty when one is new to America or one whose primary language is not English. Challenges for foreign-born faculty may include: being in a new country, new culture, balancing and navigating the demands of gaining tenure, balancing work and family life in a foreign country, comparing home country life and the new environment, being misunderstood, ignored and not made to feel welcome, and struggling to understand institutional cultures (Collins 2008; Foote et al., 2008; Herget, 2016).

Garlander (2013), a foreign-born scholar in U.S. testified about his own transition from graduate school starting with searching for a job:

“Two months ago, on a particularly sweltering afternoon at a large, southern R1 university, I bumped into Arun, a fellow PhD student in the humanities. Facing a job market that is at best “uncertain” (seemingly one of the most popular euphemisms), we chatted about the general trials and tribulations that face all graduate students: getting specific application materials together, finishing the dissertation, and trying to “move on.” Apart from the shared experience of anxiety about cover letters, CVs, and job postings, we discussed another aspect of the job search that affects a significant segment of this country’s higher education workforce. If we “foreigners” want to stay in this country and in the field in which

we've worked so hard to make our mark, we have to find an academic job.” (Garland, October 20, 2013).

Those who successfully land jobs after graduate school, new challenges emerge (Ngainmbi, 2006). According to Emmanuel Ngainmbi (2006),

“When any academic embarks on a teaching career, he must confront three challenges — tenure, promotion and recognition. He must be continually evaluated on his ability to teach, conduct research, publish and perform other duties within and around the campus in order to augment the relationship between the institution and the community. However, the challenges grow even more difficult for foreign-born faculty. About one-third of the professors at historically Black colleges and universities come from developing areas, mainly Africa and India. Though highly qualified, many say they are overworked, underpaid, underappreciated and face discrimination from African-American professors, students and staff”

(<https://diverseeducation.com/article/6031/>)

Apart from institutional-wide challenges, there is also stress in the classroom including adapting to the classroom technology, quality and nature of the students, mode of instruction, connecting with the students, fellow faculty and staff. Moreover, as they are struggling to have a grip on the course content and how to transmit it effectively to students, the faculty member is quietly dealing with personal issues relating to the legal status to work and reside in the U.S.A., on not only a short time basis but also long

term. So behind the scenes, the Visa status for a foreign-born faculty is a troubling issue that not many people can help resolve (Foote et al., 2008; Herget 2016). It is surprising how many institutions demonstrate a lack of understanding and sensitivity to the importance of visa processing for their own faculty. The lack of institutional experience at handling visa issues or support in handling and filing of the visa is troubling and stress inducing factor in many-affected faculty and their families. This causes anxiety, stress and a feeling of insecurity, which evidently affect a faculty member's focus and productivity in the classroom and laboratory.

#### WHY THIS TOPIC MATTERS

International scholars continue to have an increasing presence in American higher education. According to the Institute of International Education, the number of international scholars in the United States has increased from 115,098 in the 2009-10 academic year to 124,861 in the 2014-15 academic year. Nearly 75 percent are in the science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) fields, with China, India, South Korea, and Germany being the top countries of origin (Herget 2016). Health and Kinesiology also continue to draw on foreign-born faculty to teach courses such as Biomechanics, Exercise Physiology and other Motor Behavior courses. For the first three decades of the 20th Century, German universities reigned supreme. They earned many Nobel Prizes in the years from its inception until 1933. American educational leaders traveled to Germany on fellowships either to observe the extraordinary research done at these universities or to enroll and earn degrees there (Cole 2017). They brought back to the United States the idea of the German research university, and from the late 19th century, they wished to imitate and improve on many of its structures at

institutions in the United States. With the rise to power of Hitler in January 1933, everything changed (Cole 2017). Indeed according to Cole (2017) by April of 1933, Hitler had purged the great German universities of their intellectual stars—either on religious or ideological grounds (about 25 percent of their pre-1933 physics community and fully 50 percent of their theoretical physicists emigrated, for example). This purging led to the great intellectual migration to the United States and England. This extraordinary tragedy in Germany had enormous positive consequences for American research universities (Cole 2017). The trends of the best minds moving to America continues to-date. Recent statistics on America’s success at conducting Nobel-quality research suggest that the contribution of immigrants to domestic universities is still very much alive. In 2016, Six Americans won prizes in physics, chemistry, and economics. Each of these winners was an immigrant. They became Americans by choice, “bringing their energy and innovation to the nation.” (Cole 2017).

According to Franzoni, Scellato and Stephan (2014), insights from the knowledge recombination theory suggest that mobility of people facilitates mobility of knowledge and more knowledge from distant sources is associated with greater idea generation and creative attainments. This echoes a similar sentiment raised by Hargadon and Sutton (1997) as well as Fleming (2001). The basic argument is that because knowledge is largely tacit and embedded in individuals, migrant scientists can arguably be exceptionally productive because mobility places them in position of arbitrage, where they can exploit rich or unique knowledge sets (Agrawal et al., 2011; Saxenian, 2005). Additionally mobility can enhance productivity because of specialization. Jones (2008) maintains that when highly specialized skills owned by high-skilled

human capital are surrounded by complementary specialty skills, then they are in a position to deploy their full value in the new settings. This is significant in the academy as matching of a variety of expertise in unique laboratory and other research settings with specialized technologies harnesses the talents in team settings (Stephan, 2012).

## ASSETS IN THE CLASSROOM

Foreign-born faculty bring rich knowledge in culture and diversity, enhanced the learning environment and excitement. They also facilitate enrichment of student experiences via exposure to a variety of global realities/challenges /personal inspiration; enhanced worldview and global perspectives, intercultural communication skills, capacity to adapt to different realities and to people with different cultural backgrounds. One advantage of immigrant scholars is their narrow focus on the teaching and research productivity. This enhances flow of information from the faculty to students as the faculty prepares very well to overcome the adversity of the new situation as well as making sure students understand what they have brought to share. Indeed foreign-born scholars have more impact on students as they are not distracted by institutional and local politics. On the other hand, students highlight the issue of ‘foreign accents’ and strange names of professors that they can’t pronounce (Herget 2016). It is therefore imperative that scholars delve into this sensitive issue of “foreignness in the U.S. academe” to enhance their performance and their impact in teaching, service and research.

## STRATEGIES TO ENHANCE CLASSROOM TEACHING

It is important that foreign-born faculty develop and embrace a sense of their own identity while striving to engage with the students, fellow faculty and staff in their new institutions. In the classroom, practical ways of enhancing communication and teaching in general is sharing one's cultural background and being clear about accent differences (Herget 2016). These may entail explaining names and the proper pronunciation, using the board to write words, concepts under discussion or using power point to minimize misunderstanding on the part of students. Sharing of personal stories, language differences and cultural backgrounds, helps create a safe and fun classroom environment. The students who buy into a foreign-born faculty's story will engage more and start looking forward to attending the class. Also, foreign-born faculty should strive to prick the curiosity of students by inviting them to know more about the home country by sharing and teaching those simple words such greetings. Such faculty should allow students to practice the new words on one another in the classroom before or towards the end of the class. This interaction eventually creates a feeling of friendship and belonging and the foreign born professor's reputation will grow.

## CONCLUSION

The pipeline of academic talent was opened for a wide range of American research universities in the 1930s that has never stopped flowing—and those immigrants, some of whom have retained their citizenship in other nations, have contributed significantly to the United States' supremacy in the world of higher learning (Cole 2017). For more than 75 years, the United States has been the destination for ambitious, talented, and leading young scholars who have wanted to live and work with the best colleagues and students. A question that is constantly on

peoples' minds given the heightened political temperatures surrounding immigration is the importance of migrant scholars to the U.S. economy and their productivity in general. A survey study designed specifically to study migration of scientists in four fields of science and 16 countries confirmed that migrants perform at a higher level than domestic scientists with or without prior experience of international mobility. According to Franzoni, Scellato and Stephan (2014), superior performance is potentially caused by gains from knowledge recombination and specialty matching subsequent to migration. The researchers explained that superior performance of migrant scientists tend to persist from pre-migration, suggesting that migration is a likely cause of superior performance. This is consistent to predictions of the knowledge recombination advanced by Saxenian (2005) and Agrawal et al. (2011) and specialty matching (Jones, 2008) theories. Despite this superior performance trait in the immigrant workers, it is also important to note that alternative explanations of a superior performance of migrants also exist such as the reality of a discriminating environment in the host country, which pressures the immigrant worker to perform better than domestic scientists. Indeed, I have heard immigrant scholars' remark that they have to work harder and produce more than their local counterparts to have a chance to renew their contracts or earn a promotion. In any case, to be hired in Higher Education on a work visa, one has to prove that one has superior skills that are not available here!

Of significance in my review is the importance for policy makers to provide and expand the opportunities for immigrant scholars to flow into U.S. institutions. It is vital that immigration policies are friendly to migrant scholars so that the local economy can continue to tap their rich contributions (Shen, 2013), and Franzoni et al., 2011). It is

also important to point out that despite the enormous benefits that foreign born scholars bring to the U.S. Academe, they also impact the home countries in powerful ways including remittances to support family and other scholarly engagements that benefit the sending nation. And as Franzoni, Scellato and Stephan (2014) argue,

“the positive effects of migration ... suggest that brain migration is not a zero-sum gain, in the sense that the benefits that accrue to the

destination country do not necessarily come at the expense of the sending country, and that there are conversely positive externalities to be gained by promoting mobile scientists to work with domestic scientists” (p. 92).

In this way, foreignness should be perceived as an asset rather than a liability in the academe, not only in the U.S. but around the world.

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