

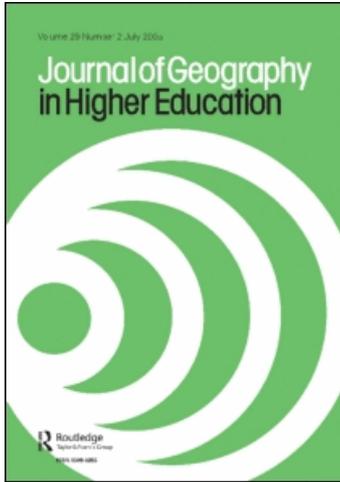
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Access details: Access Details: [subscription number 901732821]

Publisher Routledge

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Journal of Geography in Higher Education

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/title~content=t713430794>

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To cite this Article Collins, Jennifer M.(2008) 'Coming to America: Challenges for Faculty Coming to United States' Universities', Journal of Geography in Higher Education, 32: 2, 179 – 188

To link to this Article: DOI: 10.1080/03098260701731215

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/03098260701731215>

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SYMPOSIUM

Coming to America: Challenges for Faculty Coming to United States' Universities

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ABSTRACT *'Coming to America' is a journey filled with obstacles for some new faculty from abroad. This paper reports the findings of surveys conducted with foreign-born faculty and their students in order to explore the key issues these faculty face at US institutions. They identify substantial concerns about cultural differences, including relations with students, feelings of loneliness and the difficult process of obtaining permanent residency rights. The paper concludes with recommendations of strategies that could ease the transition into US academe for foreign-born faculty in the future. These include improving mentoring, networking and training opportunities for foreign-born faculty and providing more information and training for chairs so that they are better able to help foreign-born colleagues.*

KEY WORDS: Foreign-born faculty, US education system, cultural differences

Introduction

This article stems from my personal experience as a British citizen who came to the United States to work at a US university. Being a new faculty member in an American university is demanding and involves learning new policies and procedures, preparing to teach, and worrying about tenure and promotion, irrespective of a person's nationality. But my experience and my conversations with colleagues in the same situation have led me to see that foreign-born faculty in US universities face a set of challenges different from those of their domestic counterparts. My decision to explore the issues more systematically was prompted by a panel session titled 'Mentors and Mentorees: Immigrant/International Geographers in North American Academe' at the 2004 annual meeting of the Association of American Geographers (AAG). It was clear from the high attendance and the emotions in this session that we should no longer ignore the problems that foreign-born faculty experience.

Among the trends and developments in higher education in the United States in recent years has been a desire to increase diversity in terms of gender, race, ethnicity and national origin. The 'Jobs in Geography' section of the AAG newsletter (published on the Web at

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ISSN 0309-8265 Print/1466-1845 Online/08/020179-10 © 2008 Taylor & Francis
DOI: 10.1080/03098260701731215



<http://www.aag.org>) clearly shows this aim of increased diversity through the phrases attached to advertisements for academic positions stating that an institution: “is an equal opportunity employer, committed to hiring a diverse faculty to complement the increasing diversity of the student body”, “Women and minority candidates are strongly encouraged to apply” or “has a non-discrimination policy that includes sex, race, color . . . *national origin* . . .”. Such advertisements ring false if universities do not provide the help and resources needed for these faculty to succeed.

Previous research has documented that new institutional settings may be particularly demanding for faculty who take positions at institutions where the academic culture and norms differ from those of the institutions at which they received their terminal degree (Fink, 1984; Sorcinelli, 1992; Menges, 1999) or their undergraduate education. Solem and Foote provide the example of “someone earning a PhD at a large research university who takes a position at a liberal arts college” (2004, p. 891). Such demands may be even greater for a foreign-born faculty member who not only finds that the academic culture and norms of the US education system differ from those of her/his home university but also that the social norms outside the educational setting are unfamiliar, a theme addressed in the introduction to this symposium.

As is also mentioned in the introduction to this symposium, for new faculty in the field of geography in the US several support programmes are now available. At the local level, for example, universities often offer an orientation programme that focuses on university policies and procedures. At the national level, workshops such as those offered by the Geography Faculty Development Alliance (GFDA) (a programme that has been funded by the National Science Foundation (NSF)), provide a forum for early career faculty to come together to receive mentoring and advice from experienced faculty drawn from an array of institutions across the country. This programme also fosters the development of a post-workshop network. The particular needs of foreign-born faculty should also be addressed in a similar context, both at a local level within the university and at a national level. In this paper I discuss the main issues that are specific to foreign-born faculty at US institutions, emphasizing the concerns of the newly hired. I offer recommendations for easing the cultural transitions for future foreign-born faculty.

Methodology

Like Heike Alberts whose paper is in this symposium, I also conducted surveys to explore these issues. Although there is overlap between our approaches, Alberts focuses most of her study on the experiences of and opportunities for foreign-born faculty in the classroom. She relies on a large survey of students supplemented by interviews with a dozen foreign faculty. My own study seeks to address the experiences of foreign-born faculty both inside and outside the classroom, particularly their perceptions of support offered by their institutions and their perceptions of students. However, I also surveyed students at my former university to see if students’ perceptions aligned with some of the points raised by faculty.

To identify problems faced by foreign-born faculty, I conducted a survey of two groups: one a set of foreign-born geography faculty who either had attended one of the GFDA workshops or whom I had met at a conference, the second a set of foreign-born faculty teaching at the university where I was employed in 2003. I choose these two groups to provide a cross-cutting perspective on the study issues. The geography faculty came from

Table 1. Data collected in survey of foreign-born faculty

Theme	Information gathered
Background (13 questions)	Gender; age; country of birth; is English first language; level of fluency in spoken English; age at arrival in US; length of time in US; country in which undergraduate degree was completed; countries in which graduate degree(s) were completed; teaching experience in graduate school; Green Card obtained or applied for; was lawyer used to apply for or obtain Green Card; who paid for lawyer if used
General professional challenges (5 questions)	What do you perceive to be the most challenging job issues related to your job? How are you managing these issues? What do you perceive to be the most challenging job issues related to your international background? How are you managing these issues? Have you ever been very upset regarding experiences you considered to be related to your international background rather than to issues faced by other faculty?
Support in department and on campus (4 questions)	How supportive is your department chair person? (Likert scale) How supportive do you consider the international office? (Likert scale) How knowledgeable do you consider the staff in the international office? (Likert scale) Is there a recognized group or organization for foreign-born faculty on campus? If so, how active?
Perception of students (2 questions)	Do you think the students see the benefits of having a foreign-born professor such as yourself? Have you had problems from students which you believe relate to your international background?

one discipline but are employed at very different institutions in terms of size and location; the faculty from my former university come from a range of disciplines but teach at a single type of institution. This institution emphasizes undergraduate programmes (the highest degrees offered for geography are BSc and BA), enrolls approximately 8000 students, and is in a rural location.

Of the 40 faculty I asked to participate in the study, I received responses from 30, 16 geographers and 14 from other fields, mostly from related disciplines such as anthropology or sociology. The respondents had come to the US from Australia, Canada, China, Croatia, Egypt, India and the UK. Some came from countries where English is considered the main language (seven respondents) and others where it is not (23 respondents). The survey employed a mix of open, closed and Likert-scale questions relating to the respondent's background, general professional experiences as a foreign-born faculty, as well as the types of support offered by their department and university and their perception of students (Table 1).

In addition to investigating the perspectives of faculty I was interested in exploring the reactions of students who had taken a class from a foreign-born faculty member. I therefore conducted a second survey of students at the previously mentioned institution. This included students in nine classes, taught by six foreign-born instructors, in three

**Table 2.** Data collected in survey of students

Theme	Information gathered
Student background (5 questions)	Gender; age; year in college; whether born in US; whether parents born in US and, if not, where
Perceptions of foreign-born professors (8 questions)	Gender, age, and country of origin of professor Level of fluency in spoken English of professor Was fluency a positive or negative factor in your learning experience with professor? List positive factors relating to the international background of this faculty member List negative factors relating to the international background of this faculty member Have you had other foreign-born faculty members in your university courses? If so, how many?

departments. Few of these students are foreign-born. Table 2 shows the question themes, the number of questions in each category and examples of questions that the students answered. In total, 334 students responded; however, they were given the opportunity to complete more than one questionnaire if they had taken classes from multiple foreign-born professors, so that in total, 444 responses were submitted.

Foreign-born Faculty's Perspectives

As the faculty reflected on the most challenging or important aspects of their situation as foreign-born faculty, their responses fell and were grouped into three categories: (1) obtaining the 'Green Card' was reported by 28 of the 30 faculty respondents (93 per cent); (2) addressing cultural differences was noted by 26 respondents (87 per cent); and (3) coping with loneliness by 19 respondents (63 per cent).

The 'Green Card' is the term commonly used for the legal document that certifies that the holder has rights of permanent residency in the United States, including employment rights. Securing this permission has become a protracted and expensive proposition. Some faculty noted that they had sacrificed some career goals in order to obtain the Green Card. They wrote, for example, that while the lengthy processing of the application was in progress, they had remained in their current positions rather than perhaps seeking a better one at another university because the Green Card application is sponsored by the employing university. If they change institutions, the application process must start again from the beginning, yet the individual has only a limited time after arrival in the US to apply. Further, although some universities contribute to the fees associated with the application, this is not standard practice. Thus faculty have to finance substantial legal expenses. As one respondent commented, "this is a particularly difficult obligation for early career faculty who have recently graduated and may have to pay off student loans with a junior-level income".

Compounding the financial problems are the time demands of the application process which faculty considered made their work suffer. Solem & Foote (2004) note that time management is one of the most significant issues for new career faculty, specifically as they try to balance the demands of teaching, research and service. The time to prepare the paperwork and complete the Green Card application processes adds to the pressures on foreign-born faculty members, potentially affecting their opportunities to carry out the

research and writing that they will need to advance towards tenure and promotion. Thus they face dual stresses: uncertain about whether their application will be successful, which affects their possibilities of continuing work in the US; and whether they are making the necessary progress in building their credentials. The situation is not unlike that which has been reported by minority faculty who are faced with dealing with challenges related to their 'race', colour and gender as they work towards tenure (Cooper & Stevens, 2002). They experience high levels of stress because of the particular obstacles and setbacks on their path. Research on foreign-born students has likewise identified stresses. Writing specifically about students who have come to the US from China, Kline and Liu note that, "[d]iffering language and cultural values ... isolation, alienation, and discrimination have all been identified as constructing an environment for higher levels of stress" (2005, p. 369).

Like the foreign students described above, the faculty who responded to my survey also report stresses related to cultural differences, frequently indicating that they were not coping well. They report having come to the US with different world-views (particularly regarding materialism), familial relationships, religious beliefs, expectations and social and cultural conventions which are sometimes challenged. Cultural differences may be subtle ones, reflected in behaviours such as the degree of formality deemed appropriate in social or professional relationships, where American style is often more informal than that of their home countries. Religious and political views may also become matters of contention. One faculty member, for example, mentioned an altercation with a student that arose in his class presentation about the greenhouse gas debate and the Kyoto Protocol. The faculty member commented on the American President having prioritized economic over environmental concerns in not ratifying the agreement. The student assumed that this interpretation represented a general criticism of the nation by a foreigner, rather than an assessment of a position on a specific policy.

Cultural differences in educational practices and discourses can also lead to misunderstandings between faculty members and students. I have personal experience of such situations. In my first semester at a US university, for example, I taught an introductory-level class on weather and climate that was designed to meet a general education requirement rather than being a course specifically for geography students. I clearly stated on the instructions of a homework assignment that temperature should be plotted on the x-axis and altitude on the y-axis. A handful of students instead plotted the chart showing temperature on the y-axis. In subsequent discussions, it emerged that since I had not explicitly taught which was the x-axis and which the y-, I did not meet their expectations of providing necessary preparation. Conversely, I had assumed that students at this educational level would have known this convention.

As noted earlier, 63 per cent of faculty respondents indicated that they were not coping well with loneliness. They reported feelings of isolation and of loss relating to friends, family and their former ways of life. While some commented that their institution had established groups to support foreign-born faculty, many noted that such groups were not very active or well publicized. One commented: "I heard that there was an international faculty club but not only have I never been given any information about it or seen any announcements for meetings, when I asked around, people commented that they understood that there was an international faculty club but they did not know of anyone I could contact to find out more information." Another remarked that "[i]n my job interview, I was told about a club for foreign-born faculty. This was one of the things that stuck in my mind when

making the decision to accept that position. However, when I arrived, no one (including the International Office) seemed to know about the club—this was very disappointing!”

Given the challenges that faculty have identified, it is important to consider what support might be available to assist them in coping. Two potential sources of help are the chairs of their departments and the institution’s international office. In response to questions asking them to evaluate these sources, faculty indicated that they found both to be not always supportive. The international office was rated negatively by 22 out of 30 respondents (73 per cent) and two-thirds (20 out of 30) also reported that their department chairs were not always supportive. They felt as if they were going through the adjustment process alone with very little help. Other research suggests that these findings are not unusual for foreigners working in American universities. Gravois, for example, wrote of a graduate teaching assistant from China who reported such a lack of support saying that, “there was no effort to socialize her as a foreigner into the mores of American higher education” (2005, p. A1). He quotes the teaching assistant as saying, “Had I known the problems I was to get myself into I wouldn’t have come”. This sentiment coming from a graduate student teaching assistant may be stronger than those of the faculty I surveyed, yet it is clear that they too were frustrated by the limited support offered to them.

US Students’ Perspectives

Surveys were completed by 334 students who had taken classes with foreign-born faculty. If they had studied with more than one foreign-born professor, they were eligible to complete a questionnaire relating to each individual. In total 444 questionnaires were returned. The responses indicate that students considered being taught by a foreign-born faculty member as a positive experience regardless of whether English was the faculty member’s first language or not, that is 96 per cent of 254 respondents reported positive experiences when English *is not* the professor’s first language as compared with 98 per cent of 190 respondents reporting positive experiences when English *is* the professor’s first language. Additionally, when asked to list any positive or negative aspects of being taught by these faculty members, the students’ responses were more positive than negative (Table 3). Indeed, aspects that some students identified as negative, others viewed as positive. For example, while some commented that it might be difficult to understand the faculty member’s accented English, others noted that the accent was a benefit to their learning experience because it required them to listen more intently; they were thus prompted to pay more attention in class. This finding is contrary to reports and newspaper articles noted in the introduction to this symposium which seem to indicate that many US students react negatively to the accents of foreign-born instructors. It could also be argued too that a factor initially perceived by the student as negative may have positive implications in the long term.

A comment by the Provost of North Dakota University, R. Craig Schnell, suggests why this may be so. He notes that “[w]e’re going to live in a global society and we have to be prepared” (Gravois, 2005, p. A10). Citing this comment, Gravois reminds us “there are now many times more non-native speakers of English in the world than there are native speakers of English, and the gap is likely to widen” (2005, p. A10). Students’ responses suggest that they thought having a foreign-born professor offered a range of benefits for their learning experiences such as offering new and different alternative perspectives

Table 3. Anecdotal comments given by students taught by a foreign-born faculty member listed in order from most to least often mentioned

Positive factors	
1	Accent—interesting
2	Accent—helps me pay attention because I need to listen a little closer
3	Language—vocabulary different (This keeps class interesting)
4	Learning about their country is interesting
5	Different point of view not just getting US perspective. Relates how two countries, the US and another country, handle situations differently
6	They are well trained and knowledgeable
7	More diversity on campus
8	Understands people from different cultures better than US faculty
9	Has a different way of teaching
10	Seeing these individual foreign-born faculty helps us overcome stereotypes of people from that country
11	Knows more about some international places than US faculty so is more qualified to teach about these places
12	Good sense of humor
Negative factors	
1	Accent—Cannot understand instructor
2	Language—Some different terms
3	Stricter than US faculty
4	Anti-American at times
5	Dry humour
6	Difference in scientific measurements

or challenging stereotypes about other people and places. Their views support universities' practices of hiring foreign-born professors as one of the ways of meeting the goals for increasing diversity on campus.

Opportunities for Supporting New Foreign-born Academics

This study has aimed to identify problems in order to provide suggestions for programmes that would ease the transition of the faculty from their own country to the US. The survey highlights several areas where improvements can be made. The most important relate to visa and immigration issues. Here the important effective support and help from international offices and departments is critical. And, although chairs may not always be directly involved in immigration paperwork, their help in providing information and support is needed. In the areas of cultural differences and loneliness, a range of strategies may be useful including improved mentoring and training. Programmes already available for early-career faculty in general offer an array of suggestions that are also particularly relevant for foreign-born faculty given the concerns expressed by the survey participants. Moss *et al.* (1999, p. 414) note that mentoring is particularly important for “women, people of color, and others who are less favorably positioned within the academy”. Foreign-born faculty include people of colour and women, and all foreign-born faculty may be identified as an underrepresented group within academe. Mentoring is particularly important to help them adapt to local academic culture; it is a responsibility that department chairs should fulfil or assure that it is being offered to new faculty. Yet the survey responses indicate that foreign-born faculty find such support from their chairs

is lacking. A range of topics needs to be addressed. For example, given that the faculty member may make assumptions about students' preparation, or that ideas about grading standards may differ from those faculty have previously encountered, it is appropriate to communicate to foreign-born faculty that some of their expectations may be inappropriate in the US context, rather than simply (or entirely) being a question of lowering standards, and that the onus of adaptation should not be left to the students.

Solem & Foote (2004) note that one of the most favoured strategies for dealing with early-career issues is networking, which is seen to have immediate and long-term benefits. They indicate that networking, both among peers and within the discipline, reduces feelings of isolation (a problem that foreign-born faculty identified) and improves faculty performance. Similarly, it is suggested here that networking can significantly aid foreign-born faculty by helping them to connect with others with whom they share experiences so that they do not feel they are facing their issues alone. Colleagues who have not gone to another country to take up a faculty appointment and begin a new life do not understand just what the foreign-born faculty member is going through. With contemporary technology, geographical boundaries and financial constraints no longer hinder the construction of network groups. Having a group physically present is one method of networking, but virtual networks, such as Internet listservs, now also offer a form of community.

Networking and mentoring can occur at multiple levels, beginning locally within the department or university, starting perhaps with an email from the department chair congratulating the new faculty member on being appointed and holding a gathering on her/his arrival to introduce colleagues. Being made welcome and introduced to colleagues may make the new foreign-born faculty member feel freer to communicate his or her questions orally or in writing. Networking and mentoring on the local level is particularly important to address questions about the local community such as churches, schools and other services. Such approaches are appropriate for dealing with any new colleague, but for foreign-born faculty it is additionally important for the chair to offer such support.

In summary, the following actions by the departmental chair would be valuable:

- Contact (e.g. by email) the new foreign-born faculty member on her/his being appointed.
- Hold a gathering on the new foreign-born faculty member's arrival.
- Be aware of the immigration requirements pertaining to the Green Card that the new foreign-born faculty member will face.
- Have informal conversations asking the new foreign-born faculty member if she/he can be helped with anything in her/his transition.
- Inform new foreign-born faculty of any international club at the university and provide a contact name.
- Encourage new foreign-born faculty to attend workshops and sessions at conferences which focus on foreign-born faculty.
- As a chair, attend workshops or chair's sessions at conferences which may help you mentor this group of people.

Sometimes faculty may prefer not to share their problems with people who will later be in a position to evaluate them for tenure and promotion, being hesitant to reveal a potential weakness. In smaller universities in particular, there may not be a significant component of the faculty who are foreign-born with whom to share feelings and problems. For these

reasons, it is also important to provide a non-local forum. The GFDA workshops offer opportunities for early-career faculty to share experiences and exchange information. It would be valuable for foreign-born faculty members if funding agencies were to offer resources to support workshops and seminars that would provide foreign-born faculty with the theoretical and practical knowledge needed to excel in their careers in US university systems, tailoring the programmes to varying backgrounds. They might be designed not only for faculty members already in the US but also for foreign scholars, including doctoral candidates, who are interested in seeking employment in US universities. These would offer another potential venue to provide initial mentoring and networking followed by post-meeting communications addressed to specific issues ranging from legal questions to pedagogical and personal ones.

Conclusions

Travel writer Eric Newby has written, “[w]ould I have set off at all if I had known what the journey would be like or what I was going to find at my destination are questions I have often asked myself, reminded of the wartime poster which read ‘Don’t waste food! Why did you take it if you weren’t going to eat it?’ . To which some wit added a codicil: ‘I didn’t know it was going to taste like this!’” (Newby, 1999, p. xi). Many new foreign-born faculty members have had these feelings in relation to their early experiences at US universities. In this paper I have aimed to raise awareness of the issues that new foreign-born faculty members face at US universities and to stimulate thinking about ways that will support them so that their experiences will meet their expectations through a less complicated process of adjustment, acculturation and assimilation.

The survey responses from students who have had a foreign-born faculty member suggest that they generally value this experience given that they list many more positive aspects than negative ones. Higher education thus is benefiting from these appointments, but it is clear from concerns expressed by the faculty and their large number of negative responses about their departmental chair, the international office and the administration that institutions are not offering the support desired. Mentoring and facilitating networking for foreign-born faculty members should be seen as activities involving faculty members (both junior and senior), departments (especially the chair), the university, professional associations to which faculty members belong (such as the AAG), and funding agencies that are concerned with improving higher education.

Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank Janice Monk for encouraging her ideas and Kenneth Foote, Janice Monk, Rebecca Theobald and Heike Alberts for providing advice and suggestions on the improvement of this paper to its final draft. She would like to thank Plymouth State University for giving her her first opportunity to work in the United States which gave her that essential ‘foot in the door’. Finally she acknowledges the US Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) for making the process of work visa and Green Card application so easy!

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