

June 2011

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### Recommended Citation

Zhan, Ginny Qin and Gao, May Hongmei (2011) "International Faculty's Perceptions of Their Professional Experiences: Results from a Recent Survey," *Journal of Global Initiatives: Policy, Pedagogy, Perspective*: Vol. 6 : No. 1 , Article 1.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.kennesaw.edu/jgi/vol6/iss1/1>

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# International Faculty's Perceptions of Their Professional Experiences: Results from a Recent Survey

Ginny Qin Zhan and May Hongmei Gao<sup>1</sup>

The current study examined international faculty's perceptions of their professional experiences at a regional university in the Southeastern United States. A survey questionnaire was used to collect data. Overall, results present a very positive picture of how these foreign born faculty members are functioning at the university. Most are satisfied with a number of areas in their professional responsibilities; are confident about their English skills; enjoy positive interaction with their students and colleagues; and view their international experiences and global perspectives as valuable assets in their professional life.

## Introduction and literature Review

It has been reported that racial minority students and female students' enrollment in the American higher education has been rising (Hune, 1999). Similarly, universities and colleges are also witnessing an unprecedented increase in the number of foreign born faculty members (McCalman, 2007; Skachkova, 2007). Most of these international professionals went to universities in their native countries and came to the United States to attend graduate schools. Hired by American institutes of higher education, these foreign born faculty members contribute to globalization in education in the United States, enhancing internationalization efforts of many of the U.S. college classrooms (McCalman, 2007).

What are the noted strengths and challenges facing these international faculty members? Though somewhat limited, a review of the existing research shed some light on the process of acculturation for these faculty members. Cross-cultural psychologist Berry (1990) defines acculturation as the process during

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<sup>1</sup> The authors wish to acknowledge the generous support from the SALT program at Kennesaw State University, and thank Katelyn Brammer for her excellent effort in helping with analyzing data.

which individuals, when in contact with other cultures, maintain continuities as well as make changes in their attitudes, values, and behaviors. The result of this process may vary for different people, but two key elements are essential: individuals will keep some aspects of their native culture intact, and make changes in other aspects. What is maintained and what is changed may depend on a number of variables including educational level, SES, urbanization, language, social relations, and others (Berry, 1990).

A general pattern in immigrant faculty's acculturation process as they adjust and adapt to life in higher education in the United States is the initial experience of cultural shock (Bennett, 1998; Geleta, 2004). For most immigrant faculty, professional socialization in the academy will involve some form of cultural shock, the impact of which may result in some loss in their self-confidence as they are trying hard to fit in. As time goes on though, the immigrant faculty members may start to find their footing and rediscover their own identities. They will become more confident about their abilities and acculturate themselves successfully into teaching and learning (Geleta, 2004). Similarly, others (Lee, 2004; Shrake, 2006; Zong, 2006) have also described their acculturation journey in the academy as a process of rediscovery of their own identities and how they were able to integrate their new professional experiences into a new holistic identity. For example, Lee (2004) indicates in her article how her identities as a female Asian immigrant professional evolved as responses to the specific circumstances in the academy, and eventually made her a confident and competent professor. Zong (2006) also went through a transformative process of identity and status navigation, border crossing, and cultural boundary negotiation. She believes that these ongoing experiences are conducive to her primary professional role as a college professor.

Language competence is another dimension of significance discussed in the literature of immigrant faculty in higher education. For many non-native speakers of English, teaching their subjects in accented English is viewed as a challenge. Liang (2006) reports her interviews with foreign born instructors who indicated that they have all experienced difficulties in the classroom due to perceived language limitation. Some of their students challenged the instructor's credibility and authority due to their accented English, making the instructors feel that their professional competence was being diminished (Liang, 2006).

Other researchers have examined cultural aspects in assessing the strengths and challenges of international faculty. McLean (2007) uses the model of

Hofstede's (1980) cultural dimensions. The four discussed dimensions are: individualism-collectivism, uncertainty avoidance, power distance, and masculinity-femininity. These four dimensions have been used to form a framework for examining various cross-cultural topics including education. McLean (2007) points out that the individualism-collectivism orientation can be used to examine the faculty's leadership styles in the classroom; uncertainty avoidance to examine how teachers and students communicate; power distance to examine students' expectations of teachers' management competency; and masculinity-femininity to examine cultural expectations on academic achievement. The individualism-collectivism model provides a workable framework for researchers to view the acculturation process and professional socialization of international faculty members. For example, Shrake (2006) discusses cultural influences on Asian female personalities which are sometimes viewed as being apolitical, somewhat submissive, avoiding conflicts and confrontation, all of which may pose challenges to their success in the classroom and in the academy. As many foreign born faculty are from traditionally collectivistic cultures, this model provides relevant framework for comparing a number of behavioral patterns typical of individualistic and collectivistic cultures.

Despite challenges they may face, foreign born faculty members bring some well recognized unique strengths to the job. Due to their multicultural background and experiences, international faculty members in general have acquired, to various degrees, intercultural competence and a global perspective. Bennett (1986) discusses in great detail a developmental model of intercultural competency and sensitivity, which moves from ethnocentric to ethnorelative stages. Integration, he argues (1986), is a person's ability to evaluate people and events from within that particular culture's frame of reference, therefore rendering their judgment not ethnocentric but contextually relative. Many international faculty members are able to reach the stage of integration and bring this perspective to the classroom, enriching their teaching experiences as well as their students' learning process. Stier (2003) agrees that international faculty members are uniquely well positioned to incorporate intercultural competencies and global perspectives into their teaching by their multiple roles. First and foremost, they are teachers who impart knowledge; second, they are like "drill sergeants" who expect respect for diverse cultures and peoples; third, they also serve as mentors who provide guidance to students; and last, they are students' informal counselors who give advice in a variety of real life situations (Stier,

2003). In all these roles, international faculty members are able to educate and communicate with their students from a wider global perspective.

There are a number of strategies proposed by researchers that have been found to be related to successful teaching experiences by international faculty. McCalman (2007) suggests that international faculty members should take the responsibility of reducing the cultural gap between them and the students. Even though most international faculty and some American faculty may encourage students to familiarize themselves with diverse cultures and acquire a global perspective, most students still lack such cross-cultural knowledge and competence. Therefore it is important for the faculty member to exhibit cross-cultural competence in the classroom, serving as a good role model for the students. Specifically, McCalman (2007) recommends that the international faculty members use flexibility and adaptability among other skills and attitudes, to communicate a sense of intercultural awareness to the students. Other factors and strategies have also been identified. Sadao (2003) discusses in length variables associated with international faculty's professional success, including multicultural awareness, perceptions, and skills. She suggests that it is extremely important for international faculty to intentionally learn and acquire such awareness and skills to enhance their teaching and interaction with students, not simply relying on one's international background per se. Sarkisian (2006) provides a guide for international faculty with many specific strategies, among which is narrowing the cultural gap between the international faculty and the students, which is supported by McCalman's (2007) view. She also discusses useful strategies involved in how to deliver good lectures and presentations, and how to lead effective discussions. These strategies have been found to contribute to successful and rewarding teaching experiences for international faculty (Sarkisian, 2006).

To summarize, the literature, though not abundant yet, does indicate that international faculty members in the United States have some unique strengths and face certain challenges as well. Our purpose for the current study was simply to learn more about international faculty's professional experiences in higher education in the United States, and to hear firsthand about their perspectives and insights. The studies discussed earlier were helpful in our broad understanding of this population. We decided to take a more exploratory path given the fact that the literature in this area is far from systematic and the topic was not widely or well researched. For our broad purpose, we conducted an exploratory study in

the fall of 2007 and spring of 2008. A survey questionnaire was sent to all foreign born faculty at a comprehensive university in Southeastern United States, asking them to share their perceptions of their professional experiences. Specifically they were asked about their perceptions of language skills, interaction with students, effects of cultural background on teaching, their assessment of strengths and challenges, and their overall satisfaction with their experiences. These were the variables that we believed were relevant, based on our review of the literature, and were important factors influencing the overall experiences of foreign born faculty members.

In this paper, the results from the survey research are reported. It is hoped that these results will provide a valuable opportunity for individuals in the academy to learn how foreign born colleagues perceive their professional experiences and understand their strengths and challenges. Most important, this paper hopefully will shed light on the valuable contribution to internationalization of higher education in the United States made by foreign born faculty members.

## **Method**

### ***Participants***

A total of 67 international faculty members from a comprehensive regional university in Southeast United States participated in this study. Forty-five percent of the sample was male, and 54% female. On average, these faculty members have lived in the United States for 14 and half years, and have taught college (including independent teaching experience in graduate school) in this country for a little over 10 years. These and other demographic information is presented in Table 1.

**Table 1: Demographic information of participants**

SEX	Male 45%	Female 54%		
AGE	31-40 39%	41-50 33%	51-60 24%	Under30/Above60 2%
AFFILIATION	Arts 9% CHSS** 45%	Business 11% CSM*** 22%	Education 6% UC**** 2%	CHHS* 6% Other 2%
RANK	Full 16%	Associate 33%	Assistant 38%	Lecturer/Instructor 7%
BIRTHPLACE	Asia 39%  South America 8%	Africa 11%  Cent. America 3%	Europe 32%	North America 8%
NATIVE LANGUAGE	English 16%	Non-English 84%		

\*College of Health and Human Services\*\*College of Humanities and Social Sciences  
\*\*\*College of Science and Mathematics\*\*\*\*University College

### ***Procedure***

The Human Resources Department at the university provided the researchers with a list of 135 faculty members who were born in a foreign country. The researchers sent an email message to all of them explaining the purpose of the project and asked for their voluntary participation. A link to the Survey Monkey system was provided. A cover letter was displayed before the actual questionnaire. If faculty members agreed to participate, they then proceeded to the survey. A total of 67 completed the questionnaire, rendering approximately a 50% return rate.

### ***Measures***

A survey questionnaire was developed by the researchers. Besides demographic information, the questionnaire measured several aspects of international faculty's professional experiences, as detailed in the following:

- *English language skills.* The language skills were measured by self-evaluation. The participants rated their English proficiency in listening, speaking, reading, and writing, the four essential areas of language mastery. The answers were presented on a Likert-type scale (1=poor ... 5=excellent). The participants were also asked to report whether they and students had communication problems due to the instructor's lack of English language proficiency, specifically, how often the students or the faculty have found it hard to understand each other's English. The responses were presented on a Likert-type scale (1=never ... 5=always).
- *Interactions with students.* To measure international faculty's general experience interacting with students, two items asked the participants to rate how easy or difficult it was for them to interact with students both in and outside the classroom. The responses were presented on a Likert-type scale (1=very difficult ... 5=very easy).
- *Perceptions of students.* To find out how international faculty viewed their students, the participants were asked to compare college students in their native countries with their students here on four behavioral characteristics: respect (two items), skills (six items), work ethic (four items), and traits (six items). The responses were presented on a Likert-type scale (1=much lower ... 5=much higher).
- *Effects of cultural background.* Two questions measured international faculty's perceptions of effects of their cultural background on teaching effectiveness and other areas of faculty experience (e.g., overall teaching quality, teaching methods, interaction with colleagues, etc.). Specifically, they were asked whether their cultural background "enhanced" or "posed challenges" in seven areas of teaching effectiveness and other aspects of faculty experience. The responses were presented on a Likert-type scale (1=not at all ... 5=a great deal).
- *Perception of strengths and challenges.* Two open-ended questions asked the participants to reflect on their faculty experience regarding their unique international background. They were encouraged to write what their greatest strengths and challenges were as international faculty at the university.
- *Overall satisfaction.* Faculty's overall satisfaction was measured with four questions on satisfaction with teaching, research, service, and overall



faculty experience. The first three areas constitute the basis of a faculty member's annual review, as well as tenure and promotion considerations. The response choices used a Likert-type scale (1=not satisfied at all ... 5=very satisfied).

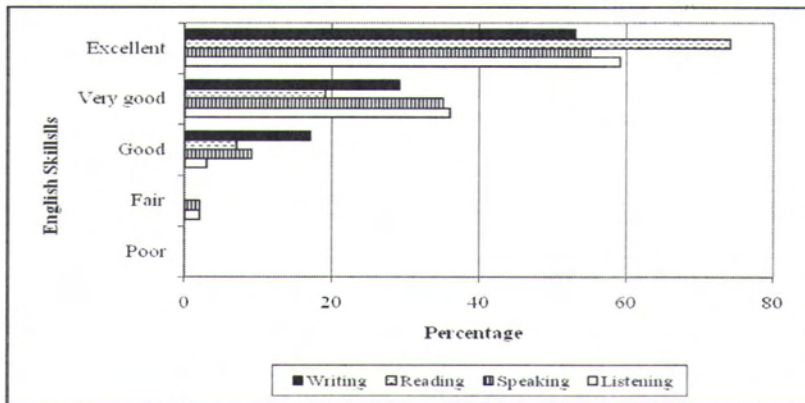
- *Additional comments.* The participants also had an opportunity to write any additional comments at the end of the survey.

## Results

Descriptive results were reported on each of the measures discussed earlier. An overall examination between demographic variables (i.e., gender, age, affiliation, birthplace, native language and faculty rank) and participants' responses on these measures showed no significant relationship with one exception. International faculty whose native language was English reported higher means on speaking and listening proficiency than those whose native language was not English.

On English language skills, it was found that overall, an overwhelming majority of the participants rated their English skills as "very good" or "excellent" in listening (95%), speaking (90%), reading (93%), and writing (82%). Figure 1 presents detailed results.

Figure 1: Participants' self-report of English skills



We also examined the means on these items of international faculty whose native language is English versus those for whom English is not their native language. Results indicate that there were significant mean differences on

speaking ( $t=3.4$ ,  $p<.01$ ) and reading ( $t=4.1$ ,  $p<.01$ ), but not on listening and writing. Obviously, if an international faculty is a native speaker of English, he/she scored higher on these items than those who learned English as a second language. Thus, it appears that whether English language is their native language or not played a role in these faculty members' self assessment of their English speaking and reading skills. Overall though, these results do indicate that international faculty in the sample have very high confidence in their English language skills.

The results on the two items on English proficiency and communication with students show that a little over half of the sample reported that their students "never" complained that they found it hard to understand the professor's English (53%), and similarly, they "never" found it hard to understand their students' English either (53%). Many reported however, that "occasionally" their students complained that they found it hard to understand the professor's English (41%), and that they also "occasionally" found it hard to understand their students' English (46%). For those whose native language is not English, the percentages are slightly different, but not significantly so.

On interactions with students, it was found that a majority of the participants reported that it was "easy" or "very easy" to interact with students both in the classroom (77%) and outside the classroom (78%). About 23% reported that it was "sometimes difficult, sometimes easy" to interact with student in the classroom, whereas 19% reported so for outside classroom interaction. Native language did not affect these responses. Overall, we believe that these results indicate a fairly high comfort level for international faculty when dealing with students. Figure 2 presents detailed results.

**Figure 2: Participants' self-report on interaction with students**

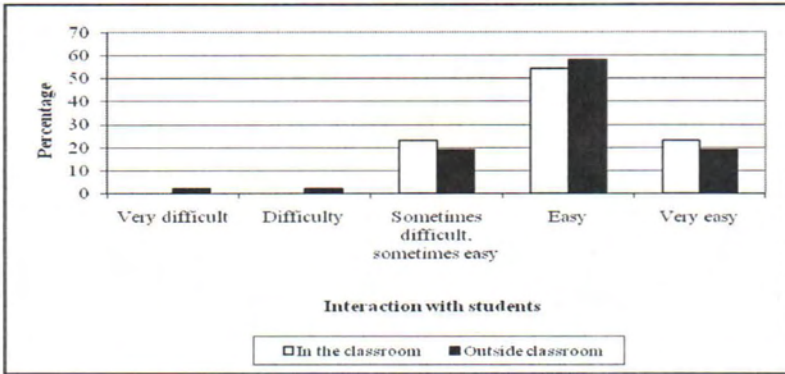


Table 2 presents international faculty's perceptions of their students, as compared to students in their native countries. As is clear from the table, international faculty's responses vary in different areas of assessment. Overall, half or more participants rated their students higher on four areas: technology savvy, oral articulation, presentation skills, and independence. Three out of the four are in the skill category, indicating participants' positive view of their students in technology related skills. Similarly, half or more participants also rated their students lower on four areas: respect for teachers, writing skill, hardworking, and motivation for learning. It is noteworthy that 70% of the participants perceived their students to be less respectful of teachers than students in their native countries, indicating a major difference in international faculty's view between their native culture and American culture regarding respect for teachers among college students. Percentages of 50 and above are highlighted in the table.

**Table 2: International faculty's perceptions of students, as compared with students in their native countries, in percentages**

	Lower	Same	Higher	Total
<b>Respect</b>				
Teachers	<b>70**</b>	23	7	100
Classmates	42	48	8	98
<b>Skills</b>				
Technology	7	28	<b>57</b>	92
Oral articulation	27	16	<b>57</b>	100
Presentation	16	28	<b>50</b>	94
Writing	<b>56</b>	27	14	97
Research	40	22	31	93
Team work	24	34	34	92
<b>Work ethic</b>				
Punctuality	37	27	32	96
Independence	20	19	<b>59</b>	98
Hardworking	<b>55</b>	28	16	99
Responsibility	27	48	22	97
Motivation for learning	<b>63</b>	23	10	96
<b>Traits</b>				
Maturity	41	42	17	100
Honesty	10	50	30	90
Open-mindedness	37	20	37	94
Politeness	44	32	23	99
Humor	12	45	40	97

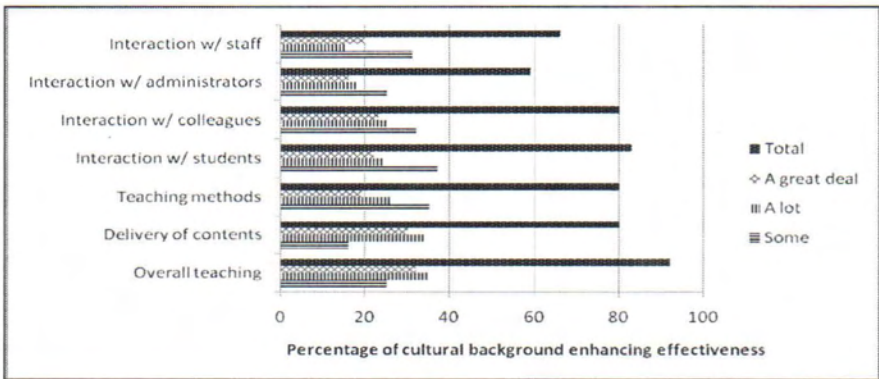
\*Some totals are not 100% due to the “I don't know” response category.

\*\*Numbers above 50% are bolded.

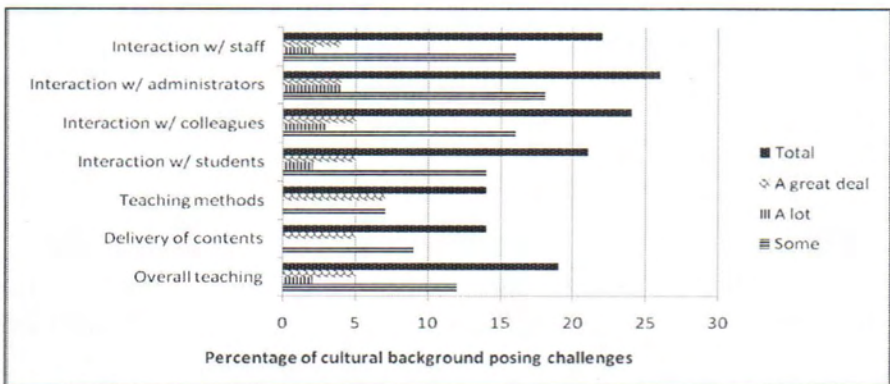
The responses to whether the participants believed that their cultural background “enhanced effectiveness” or “posed challenges” in seven specific areas of their faculty experience were analyzed. In general, the majority of the participants thought that their cultural background enhanced their effectiveness in these areas. The agreement responses for enhanced effectiveness (ranging from “some” to “a great deal”) to the seven areas are 92% for overall teaching, 82% for

delivering course content, 83% for teaching methods, 85% for interaction with students, 81% for interaction with colleagues, 66% for interaction with administrators, and 71% for interaction with staff. Similarly, a majority of the participants did not believe that their cultural background posed any challenges in these seven areas. The agreement responses for posed challenges (ranging from “some” to “a great deal”) are 19% for overall teaching, 14% for delivering course content, 14% for teaching methods, 21% for interaction with students, 24% for interaction with colleagues, 26% for interaction with administrators, and 22% for interaction with staff. These results are presented in Figure 3 and Figure 4.

**Figure 3: Effects of cultural background: Enhancing effectiveness**

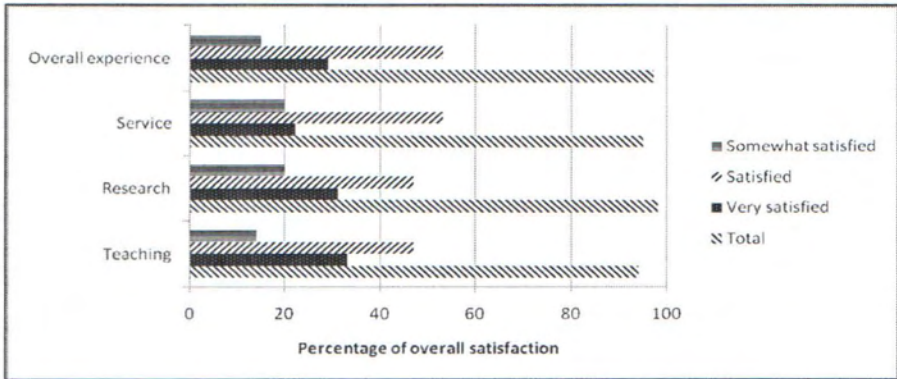


**Figure 4: Effects of cultural background: Posing challenges**



The participants' responses on their satisfaction in the four areas of teaching, research, service, and overall experience were analyzed. Results are presented in Figure 5. An overwhelming majority of the participants in the sample were satisfied with their faculty experiences in all the four areas: 94% in teaching, 98% in research, 95% in service, and 97% in overall experience (ranging from "somewhat satisfied" to "very satisfied").

**Figure 5: International faculty's self-report on overall satisfaction**



The responses on the two open-ended items on perceptions of strengths and challenges were content analyzed. Three clear themes of strengths emerged. The major theme of strengths is international experience as a positive asset. Almost every participant except for one listed their cultural background, knowledge of the global world, and an international perspective as their greatest strength. Specifically, many believed that these strengths contributed positively to their teaching in both contents and methods, and how they related to their students. A second theme is work ethic. Many participants mentioned hard work as another major strength. A third one includes several comments on various topics. All these three themes and their responses are presented in Appendix A. There are no significant differences in these results due to gender or other demographics.

The responses on challenges as an international faculty were more diverse and less concentrated on a few specific themes. They covered a wide variety of issues from teaching and research related topics, acculturation and identity topics, to difficulty in interaction with colleagues and students due to cultural and language differences.

## Discussion

Overall, the current survey responses present a very positive picture of how international faculty members perceive their functioning at the university. Most of them are satisfied with their professional experiences in teaching, research, and service areas. They are confident about their English language skills, enjoy positive interaction with students both in and outside the classroom, and most believe that their international cultural background contributes to their successful teaching and effective interaction with colleagues.

It is interesting to examine their comparison of their students here with students back in their home countries, with the understanding that some of them may not have been college faculty in their home countries. In general, the responses indicated that international faculty participants praised the students' technical skills such as use of technology and presentation skills. They also viewed their students as more independent than those in their home countries. However, there are a few areas where the students received lower ratings. Many participants believed that their students showed less respect for teachers (70%), had lower motivation for learning (63%), had poorer writing skills (56%), and were less hardworking (55%) than students in other countries. Respect for teachers is a very common cultural value in many countries, particularly in collectivistic countries where a higher power distance is expected (Hofstede, 1980). United States is recognized as largely an individualistic culture where the gap between a teacher and a student is not perceived as large as in a collectivistic culture (McLean, 2007). In some cases, the instructor and students enjoy the kind of relationship more typical of that among colleagues. For some foreign-born faculty, this may seem like a case of blurred boundaries and the hierarchical structure is not clearly exhibited as they would like to see. On the other hand, many participants were also somewhat critical about their students' lack of motivation, low work ethic, and poor writing skills. It could be that these faculty members have high expectations of students in their academic performance, and are disappointed when not all students are successful. A situational factor here could be that most students at this largely commuter university work outside school, and many non-traditional age students also have family obligations, and as a result, the demands from these different directions put a large strain on the amount of time and energy that students can devote to their studies. Another factor could be less than adequate college preparedness, among other possible variables. Nevertheless, it can be frustrating for a professor to see students not

reaching their full potential and thus may attribute their low performance to lack of motivation or poor work ethic. It is interesting to note that no item in the traits section was rated significantly different between students in other countries and here.

It appears that the participants in this survey research view their different cultural backgrounds as a huge strength in their professional endeavors. Almost all of them state that their teaching and interaction with students are enhanced by their international experience and global perspectives. This view is consistent with early findings by other researchers (McCalman, 2007; Sadao, 2003; Stier, 2003). Contributions made by foreign born faculty to the internationalization of higher institutes of learning are significant, a fact unanimously acknowledged by international faculty in this survey. As the United States becomes more diverse in its population, students are exposed to a more diverse student population on campus, and it seems very essential for them also to be exposed to more diverse and international faculty members. This additional exposure in college may contribute to their better preparation for the workforce after they graduate.

Consistent with previous research (Geleta, 2004; Lee, 2004; Shrake, 2006; Zong, 2006), some faculty members in the survey report that they are facing the challenge of acculturation and professional socialization. They are in the process of establishing an integrated identity that incorporates their native cultural values and American value system.

This study was a first step in a systematic exploration of foreign born faculty's perceptions of their professional experiences. The researchers plan to conduct in-depth interviews with some of these international faculty members as the second phase of this study begins. It is hoped that participants will provide more detailed information during the interviews. For example, they may share what type of challenges they are facing and what they think the university can do to help them overcome difficulties. With more detailed information, it may be possible to draw useful conclusions that will have policy implications for the university.

### **Limitations**

There are several limitations to the current study. First, only international faculty's perceptions were examined. It would be interesting to examine students' view of international faculty, as well as American colleagues and administrators'



views. It would provide more data on the impact of international faculty on the students, teaching, and other areas of higher education. Second, since American campuses have many international students enrolled, it will be extremely interesting to examine international faculty's relationship and effectiveness with international students. Third, a survey is limited in the scope of questions asked. It would be very useful to follow up by conducting in-depth interviews with some of the faculty to gain a more thorough understanding of their experiences. In face to face interviews, the participants will be able to provide examples to illustrate a point and provide us with richer data. The researchers plan to continue this line of inquiry and further examine the positive impact of international faculty in higher education.

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## Appendix A

### Participants' responses on what is "your greatest strengths as an international faculty"\*

#### Theme One: Cultural Background and Global Views

Culture background

Wider view

International oriented knowledge

Value of different culture

Understand cultural differences

Bring the international perspectives to the curriculum

The different world view and perspective I bring to the materials I teach and discussions on global issues and events

That very fact that I am international gives our student[s] a global perspective.

That I have experience elsewhere and am able to bring this into the classroom to heighten my students' awareness about other cultures

Present another approach, another view

Open mindedness

Understand educational differences between U.S. and other countries

My multi-lingual international background enables me to better relate to students from various ethnic backgrounds.

Experience on global markets in the international business environment

International perspective, broader worldview, different viewpoints on issues, and more acceptance of diversity

International experience helps me bring a comparative approach in the classroom.

Foreign language skills give me access to more research beyond the English-speaking academic world.

I am different and maybe special, which brings an element of excitement in the classroom. International experience and knowledge in many areas of the world, which is an important component of my discipline

I can use my educational background to enhance my effectiveness as a teacher.

I'm an enthusiastic believer of international education and exchange - since I'm a product of the concept, I model what I preach to the students.

Global perspective, rich cultural experience, open-mindedness  
Global awareness  
Experience with and understanding of different cultural perspectives and styles  
Easier to understand and accept differences  
Diversity, ability to see a situation differently, ability to work through all odds  
Diversity of experiences having worked in three countries  
Diversity is important.  
Different world view  
Cultural diversity knowledge  
Bring international perspectives to the discipline and program  
Bring a variety of perspectives, not only my own, but of a variety of countries other than my own and other than the United States, where I have lived and worked  
Bring to the academic community a different perspective, another view.  
Bring a different perspective.  
Being global, having another perspective of different issues  
Ability to understand multiple points of view and presenting subject matter in broader global contexts  
Ability to adapt to diverse environments  
A perspective that extends beyond the U.S. experience  
Traveling and living on different continents provides me with a unique view of the differences and similarities across cultures that I can bring to the classroom.  
Language proficiency is rather important when you teach a foreign language.  
Cultural and intercultural knowledge  
The ability to broaden students' horizon

## **Theme Two: Work Ethics**

Work ethics  
Hard work  
Dedicated working  
Responsible to the tasks and job  
More self-motivation  
High motivation  
Hard work and diligence

### **Theme Three: Miscellaneous**

Collaboration with colleagues

Respect to others

See students more as learners than consumers.

Teaching

Strong previous research and teaching experiences

Scientific background

Ability to work through all odds

Critical thinking

Logical mind

\* Included here are comments from those participants who gave us permission to anonymously present their responses.