

Supporting International Faculty in U.S. Geography

Last month I focused on ways to improve support for early career faculty in geography. My interest in this topic made me aware of how much more can also be done to help and support foreign-born, international faculty—not just early career faculty, but faculty of all levels transitioning into U.S. higher education.

For me, the need for improving support for international faculty grew from my work on the Geography Faculty Development Alliance project. In focus-group interviews conducted with participants, Michael Solem found that international faculty often identified different needs and concerns than their native-born counterparts, even if some or all of their college and graduate education occurred in the U.S. Certainly, there are overlapping concerns—relating particularly to the stress of succeeding in an academic career—but other issues arose as well. As would be expected, many concerns related to visa and immigration issues, particularly policy changes made after 9/11 which have had tremendous impacts on personal and professional lives. Applying for visas, residency or citizenship is usually a long, costly process which can leave an assistant professor in legal limbo all during the pre-tenure years, unable to apply for some grants open only to citizens or to travel freely to and from research sites and conferences.

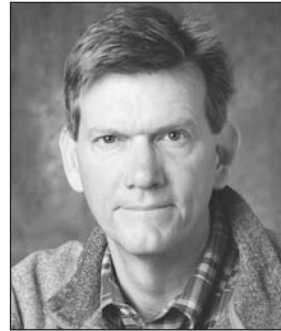
But a sense of “othering” also arose in many of the comments. These were feelings of exclusion, difference and isolation that parallel in some ways the “othering” which geographers have explored in other contexts with respect to gender, sexuality, color and disability. Sometimes these comments responded to formal policies, for instance how much administrative assistance or financial help is offered to obtain visas. But sometimes comments reflect on the difficulties of navigating informal cues in interactions with students, colleagues and administrators. In the classroom, for example, international faculty can sometimes face student hostility toward “foreigners” saying anything even remotely critical of the U.S. and of the students’ ways of life. On the other hand, some international fac-

ulty are able to use their international status as an asset in the classroom by offering contrasting perspectives, stirring discussion and questioning assumptions. At the same time, students may sometimes expect instructors to portray life in their home countries in ways that conform to stereotypes and prejudices—even though the instructor sees her or his home country in a very different light.

But issues outside the classroom may be equally challenging. Colleagues’ stereotypes can add just as much stress, particularly for faculty from underrepresented groups who feel they need to prove themselves as “model minorities.” Job searches and interviews can be far more stressful and difficult than for American candidates and, once hired, international faculty not always receive recognition for their non-English publications in merit and promotion reviews. Other situations arise from miscommunication based on the mistaken assumptions about how departments are organized and how decisions are made. Inadvertent remarks and modest slights may be amplified as they move across cultural boundaries. As a friend noted to me once, “what am I to think when my colleagues won’t even learn how to pronounce my name correctly.” These types of experience sometimes leave international faculty feeling unappreciated, unwanted, and isolated within their departments. They often feel that they have to deal with many difficult academic, cultural, and legal obstacles on their own, without adequate help and support from their colleagues and institutions. All the while, these faculty may be facing challenges helping their spouses, partners or family adapt to the local community or in maintaining long-distance connections with their families and home communities.

I think that addressing these issues is important for several reasons. First, the number of international faculty in U.S. geography is already substantial. Based on 2005 data, of AAG members holding appointments in postsecondary institu-

tions, approximately thirty-two percent were international and the number and this percentage seems to be increasing steadily. Second, this rapid new migration is more varied in nationality and demographic background than previous waves, such as the influx of British and Commonwealth geographers during the 1960s and 1970s, meaning that issues of support are more varied than they once may have been. Finally, international geographers are changing, improving and expanding the character of American geography by contributing new perspectives and methods across all subfields. Without



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effective support, I think some of these talented individuals will move to different careers or countries.

I don't have a ready set of bullet points about how to improve support, but more research and increased awareness are ways to begin. The experience of international faculty can vary dramatically depending on their personal and educational backgrounds, home country, gender, life stage, family situation, and where they choose to live and work in the U.S. Effective support seems to hinge on understanding how such factors crosscut individual professional lives and then offering help at the personal level. Yet, raising awareness is perhaps just as important. Among international faculty that report positive experiences, one point mentioned often is personal help offered by a chair or colleague. That is, one-on-one help seems to make a tremendous difference in navigating the norms of academic life. But the issues I've outlined are here not confined to the U.S. The globalization of higher education is increasing the movement of geographers and academics. Supporting international faculty as they transition into new academic settings is an issue which needs to be addressed more systematically not only in the U.S., but worldwide. ■

Ken Foote
k.foote@colorado.edu