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ADVANTAGES OR DISADVANTAGES? FOREIGN-BORN PROFESSORS TEACHING AT MARITIME INSTITUTIONS IN USA

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Abstract. As the world has become increasingly integrated, more and more foreign-born scholars receive faculty jobs at universities and colleges, including maritime institutions in the USA. These foreign-born professors have been through vigorous training in the USA including doctoral programs in their respective fields. This is in addition to recognition and acclamation for their international vision, work ethic and solid knowledge. However, as professors from abroad, they have invariably pronounced disadvantages that largely stem from cultural differences and the accents of those for whom English is a second language.

The paper presents an empirical analysis of the advantages and disadvantages facing foreign-born professors teaching at maritime institutes in the USA. Applying a case study methodology and drawing on school-wide questionnaires from students, peer faculties, and administrators, the paper examines the scope and scale of differences of foreign-born or domestic-born professors measured by teaching effectiveness and learning outcomes. The paper also looks into actions that would heighten the advantages and mitigate the disadvantages of foreign-born professors if such issues arise.

The findings indicate that it is generally agreed that there is not a notable difference between foreign-born or domestic-born professors per se, but rather it is personal teaching styles, academic approaches and genuine enthusiasm about subject matter that are the key elements affecting evaluations. Respondents believed that foreign-born professors brought with them international perspective which inspired cadets to think about questions in unprecedented and innovative ways. Some cadets suggested specific courses like Chinese Economy or Japanese Law Systems be given to professors who came from the countries of the origin, while assigning more general courses like Calculus to domestic-born professors. By doing so, they claimed, professors would be teaching to their strengths and offering a unique educational perspective.

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1 INTRODUCTION

As the world becomes increasingly interconnected, a growing number of foreign-born scholars receive faculty positions at universities and colleges in the United States, including American maritime institutions. These scholars earned 40 percent of U.S. doctoral degrees in science and engineering in 2003. In 2001, according to the Commission on Professionals in Science and Technology, 38.0% of engineering faculty members in U.S. institutions of higher education were foreign-born, as were 35% of medical scientists, and 29.2% of mathematical science faculty (Lowell, Babco, & Ellis, 2010). These foreign-born professors have been through intensive western training which include doctoral programs, as well as receiving recognition and acclamation for their international vision, work ethic and solid knowledge. However, as professors from abroad, they have invariably pronounced disadvantages that largely stem from cultural differences and the accents of those for whom English is a second language.

The paper presents an empirical analysis of the advantages and disadvantages facing foreign-born professors teaching at maritime institutes in the USA. Applying a case study methodology and drawing on school-wide questionnaires from students, peer faculties, and administrators, the paper examines the scope and scale of differences of foreign-born or domestic-born professors in regards to teaching effectiveness and learning outcomes. The paper also looks into methodology that would heighten the advantages and the mitigate disadvantages of foreign-born professors if issues were to arise.

The paper is structured as follows: Section II identifies advantages and disadvantages foreign-born professors might face. Section III presents possible resolutions to tackle the problems and ways to enhance the advantages. Section IV offers a conclusion.

2 ADVANTAGES AND DISADVANTAGES OF FOREIGN-BORN PROFESSORS

It has become a recent development that increasing numbers of foreign-born professors find work at American universities and colleges, including maritime institutions. At Massachusetts Maritime Academy (MMA), we have 13 foreign-born professors out of 82 full time faculty, which accounts for about 16% of the all faculty members at the school. A questionnaire was conducted the spring semester of 2015 at MMA and 33 cadets participated in the survey. The purpose of the survey was to investigate how often a typical cadet has a foreign professor each semester, the advantages and disadvantages of a foreign professors from the students' point of view, and any differences the impact of American professors versus foreign professors would impose on their education.

Table 1 shows clearly that for cadets at MMA, it ranges one out of five to one out of three classes being taught by foreign-born professors. Table 2 supports a similar ratio of foreign-born professors for all the semesters that the cadets have spent at MMA.

2.1 Advantages of foreign-born professors

It is generally agreed that their work ethic, international vision and productivity are common attributes of foreign-born professors. According to a study published in the Journal of Higher Education in November of 2011, foreign-born faculty members in the USA are more productive than their American born peers; they produced one peer-reviewed paper a year, compared to their American-born colleagues that produced an average of 0.60 articles annually. Two hypotheses stand as follows: firstly, foreign-born professors must be exceptional students in order to be accepted by American schools for graduate studies. Following graduate school, the most promising are invited to stay as

Table 1 Answers to the questions: how many classes are taught by foreign professors the Spring Semester of 2015 at MMA

Number of cadets	5	11	1	2	5	2	4	2	1
Classes taught by foreign-born professors Spring term of 2015	1out of 6	1out of 5	1out of 4	2out of 7	1out of 3	2out of 5	1out of 3	3out of 6	2out of 3
Percentage of surveyed cadets	15%	33%	3%	6%	15%	6%	12%	6%	3%

Table 2 Answers to the questions: What is the average number of classes being taught by foreign professors for all the semesters at MMA

Number of cadets	1	1	7	12	1	2	4	2	1	1	1
Classes taught by foreign-born professors for all semesters	1out of 12	2out of 15	1out of 6	1out of 5	1out of 4	2out of 7	1out of 3	2out of 5	1out of 3	2out of 7	3out of 5
Percentage of surveyed cadets	3%	3%	21%	36%	3%	6%	12%	6%	3%	3%	3%

Table 3 Answers to the question: Advantages of foreign-born Professors (May 2015)

Categories of answers	Answers
Qualification	knowledgeable, strong educational background, very qualified,
Different perspectives	good for students to expand their minds, increase knowledge on different things,
Teaching approaches	Take students more seriously, move slower over topics, more passionate about the subject matter. make class more interesting, Expect students to study more
Global vision	Different perspective on global issues
Bring different culture to class	to experience cultural diversity,

faculty afterwards. Secondly, foreign-born professors adopt the resolute mindset of immigrants in a new country. They are more motivated and more enthusiastic to face challenges and prove their capability. As a result, they tend to work harder and longer than their American-born counterparts.

The advantages of foreign-born professors, as reported by a survey taken of cadets at MMA, are listed in the following categories shown in Table 3.

The students are highly aware of the qualifications and training foreign-born professors possess, and all agree that the biggest advantage of foreign-born professors are the unique angles they bring to the issue at hand. One student wrote, "some foreign-born professors bring a different set of skills and knowledge that we are not used to seeing. If they match the class, they are good". Another student said that "foreign born professors can help give another look at what is being taught." One student even wrote that "they are very qualified and set higher standard". The President of MMA, Admiral Gurnon, said that foreign-born professors are "valuable assets of our faculty body. They are very well trained, very knowledgeable, extremely dedicated, and helping tremendously our cadets expand their international visions and global perspectives."

2.2 Disadvantages of foreign-born professors

Disadvantages of foreign-born professors could also be identified. They include the obvious such as thick accents and cultural barriers, and the less openly admitted issues of racial tension and ethnic discomfort. According to the paper by Lee in 2004, foreign born professors are more productive and yet they reported lower levels of job satisfaction. Table 4 sums up the disadvantages MMA surveyed cadets would see.

The students still focus very much on the "foreign" aspects of the professors and the inconveniences, even misunderstandings as a result of this fact.

Table 5 gives the answers to the question, "Do you prefer American professors to foreign professors?" About three quarters of the students reported not having any preferences between American and foreign-born professors. As one student put it, "it boils down to the quality of the teachers, not where they are from. There are good teachers from US, and there are good teachers from other countries." Another student said that they prefer to have American professors, as they might understand material better for "more career based courses like engineering classes, which will be preparation for Coast Guard License Examination." One

Table 4 Answers to the question: disadvantages of Foreign -born Professors (May 2015)

Categories of answers	Answers
Command of English	Sometimes difficult to understand, speak with strong accents, hard to follow
Cultural barrier	Have trouble relating to students culturally, not being acquainted with the society that much
Teaching Method	Not understand the way they explain concepts, have trouble sometimes to engage in discussion and communication

Table 5 Do you prefer American professors to foreign-born professors

Answers	Prefer American Prof.	Prefer Foreign Prof.	No Preferences
Number of cadets out of 33	6	3	24
Percentage	18%	9%	73%

Table 6 Does your study outcome impact if you have American vs foreign professors

Answers	No negative impact	Negative impact	No difference
Number of cadets out of 33	5	3	25
Percentage	15%	9%	76%

student wrote that they “prefer foreign-born professors as they can always relate better to low-income students vs American professors, and they take students more seriously than American professors. More thought-concentration is required for language barriers and higher expectations”.

Table 6 shows the answers to the question of if foreign-born professors might impact the learning outcome of the students. 76% of the participating students believe that there is no difference in their study outcome if the class is taught by an American professor or a foreign professor. 15% of students prefer American professors to foreign ones, as they would “understand better”. 9% prefer foreign-born professors to American ones. That is because, as one student put it, they “would study more and work harder as foreign-born professors set higher standards and expect you to accomplish more for the class”. Another student wrote, “It makes my study outcome a bit better from hearing how they do things. It is good to learn the different approaches.”

3 MEASURES TO ENHANCE ADVANTAGES AND MITIGATE DISADVANTAGES

As foreign-born professors have certain advantages and disadvantages in fulfilling their teaching responsibilities, it is important to search for measures which could help increase the advantage and overcome the

difficulties. Several approaches are proposed and examined in this section to utilize the advantages and make up the disadvantages of foreign-born professors.

3.1 More Specific Courses at undergraduate level

Most of the surveyed students believe that foreign-born professors are particularly skilled if they teach the classes related to their countries and cultural background. One student said that they found the foreign teachers are interesting to learn from when the classes can relate to their original country. Another student agreed that foreign-born professors are “better for specific courses relating to their background/ethnicity, because they add experience and flavor from their personal experience”.

In regards to teaching a country specific class by a foreign-born professor, a case study is offered here. I was assigned to teach Chinese Economy for the spring term of 2014. On the first day of the class, one questionnaire was conducted just to see how much the students, mostly seniors and a few juniors, knew about the country. On the last day of class, another questionnaire was done to see how much they learned and how they felt having a foreign-born professor teach the course in which their personal experiences were utilized. The following two tables sum up the answers from 20 participating cadets.

The answers to the question “Please list five things you know about China” can be put into five categories,

Table 7 Answers to the question: list five things you know about China (March 2014)

Categories of answers	Answers
Politics	communist government, internet control
Economy	fast economic growth, high ranking in merchant fleet, big trading partner of US, big shipping industry
Society	long history, rich culture, lots of ethnic minorities, good food, most populated country, 2008 Olympics, small families
Geography	capital is Beijing, the Great Wall
People	Confucius, Mao Ze Dong

Table 8 Answers to the questionnaires (June 2014)

Questions:	Positive	Negative	Neutral
Has the class met your initial expectation?	100%	0%	0%
Prefer to have a China-born professor for the class?	70%	10%	20%

politics, economy, society, geography and people as shown in Table 7. It tells that MMA cadets had some general information about China, such as political structure, rapid economic growth, maritime industry in China, culturally rich society and good food, not much in of details.

All of the students agreed that the class had met their expectations—to learn more about China and its economic growth. The great majority of the students are welcome to the idea of having a China-born professor teach the course, as she could “add her personal experience and insights”. Another student said that they could get “much more in depth with specific courses from foreign teachers, often times, they (foreign-born professors) are better than domestic professors”. Some other students disagreed with the idea; they were of the opinion that American professors might have interesting point of view looking objectively at the Chinese economy from outside.

3.2 More things to learn by living across culture

Foreign-born professors can gain English proficiency and cultural adaption simply by living immersed in American culture and holding faculty jobs. Gary Ferraro explained that it is crucial to understand the cultural differences, value norms and language styles, even some non-verbal communications skills like body posture, hand gestures and facial expression between negotiating parties, because “when entering international negotiation, there are no longer shared values, interests, morals, behaviors and linguistic styles, all of which can greatly affect the process and outcome of the negotiation”. The proposal of cultural submersion is applicable to American higher education where foreign-born professors will face American-born students. In order to be effective, it is important for foreign-born professors to pay particular attention to the new environment, cultural norms, history, and traditions of their adopted land.

In addition to learning outside the classroom, foreign-born professors could also try educational diversity to enhance teaching effectiveness. Tools including handouts, chapter summaries, etc. offer a visual medium so that students can receive the pertinent information in another form.

4 CONCLUSION

Looking at data, it is clear that foreign-born professors contribute greatly to American higher education.

Hard-working and productive, they bring unique international perspectives to their classrooms and American students. However, foreign-born professors also have some inherent disadvantages which may negatively impact the effective learning of their students, such as speaking accented English, cultural barriers, and possible deviation in thoughts and behaviors from American norms. As long as the foreign-born professors focus on and enhance their numerous advantages and work to overcome the cultural and language barriers, they are highly appreciated and make unmeasurably tremendous contributions to American higher education.

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