Original Paper

Retaining International Faculty: Meeting the Challenge

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Abstract

The benefits of the presence of international faculty on university campuses are widely acknowledged. Their integration into campus life creates a global atmosphere and provides rich resources to encourage globalization efforts on campus. We set out to explore the perceptions of the challenges faced by our international faculty, with the further goal of meeting these challenges and increasing their retention. To probe these perceptions and address the challenges they identified, we created and disseminated a survey and interviewed our international faculty. The results of the study will be used to increase the retention of international faculty at our institution. The actions we propose will be to create more opportunities to socialize, provide more legal support, recruit more international students, offer mentorship based on cultural affinity, and make English language support and speech modification services available to international faculty and encourage them to take advantage of these services.

Keywords

faculty development, international faculty, international faculty retention, internationalization of higher education, internationalizing the campus, campus globalization initiatives

1. Introduction

The benefits of the presence of international individuals on university campuses are acknowledged by everyone in higher education. Their presence and integration not only create a global atmosphere, but also provide rich resources to encourage globalization efforts on campus. How can universities increase the presence and retention of international faculty on our college campus? What steps can be taken to meet their social, cultural, academic, and linguistic needs? In this study, the authors have set out to explore the perceptions of the challenges faced by the international faculty at our university to be able to meet these identified needs thereby resulting in increased retention rates. We believe that if these

challenges are met, we will see an increase in the retention rates of international faculty at our university. The results and recommendations of this study can also be considered to increase retention rates of international faculty at other IHEs.

Attracting and retaining quality faculty is very important to educational institutions as low faculty retention rate can potentially create both monetary and academic consequences (Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, 2012, as cited in Soomro, 2013). International faculty have become an essential part of higher education institutions (Altbach, 2003; Mamiseishvili & Rosser, 2010; Manrique & Manrique, 1999). They are active in doing research, integrating global perspectives to teaching and learning, and overall enhancing students' global learning (De Wit, 2002; Mamiseishvili & Rosser, 2010). For most colleges, attracting and retaining a diversified faculty is a high priority in their strategic planning (Phillips, Dennison, & Davenport, 2016). However, criteria for retaining a highly qualified faculty in higher education in many cases are vague and unclear (Soomro, 2013). It is a wonder why so little research has looked at the issues facing international faculty, especially considering that in 1998, Finkelstein, Seal, and Shuster (as cited in Phillips, Dennison, & Davenport, 2016) reported that 26.6% of all new faculty in this country are foreign born, as are 17% of senior faculty. According to a 2006 report from the National Center for Education Statistics, between 1993 and 2003, there was a 96.6% increase in non-resident faculty and in fall 2015, the same organization reported that 19.4% of post-secondary faculty were non-resident aliens (National Center for Education Statistics, 2016). The Institute of International Education reported that the number of international scholars in the United States increased from 115,098 in the 2009-2010 academic year to 124,861 in the 2014-2015 academic year (Herget, 2016).

International individuals bring various benefits to their institutions, including promoting international exchange programs, enhancing domestic students' and scholars' global perspectives, contributing economically to the institutions and local communities, and boosting the national and global rankings of the institutions. It is vital for schools to remain competitive and attract more internationals to develop global learning on campus and promote universities nationally and globally (Restoring U.S. Competitiveness for International Students and Scholars, 2006).

Herget (2016) asserts that a big predictor of the success of international faculty is not where they are from but whether they are at an institution that provides adequate support and resources for these faculties. In order to identify these areas of needed support, previous research investigated the challenges faced by international faculty. International faculty at various institutions identified their most salient and often overlapping challenges as being logistical, social, cultural, academic, and linguistic. Logistical difficulties are often the result of visa restrictions and residency issues (Foote, Li, Monk, & Theobald, 2008). Kastberg (2014) examined the social challenges that face *all* working-class faculty, international and domestic. In interviews with faculty, Kastberg documented that some of the social challenges faced may be difficulty in finding housing, schools for children, and jobs for their partners. Members of other cultural and linguistic groups (regardless of their citizenship status) face

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social and cultural challenges, such as the absence of a social and professional network of friends and difficulty in socializing and interacting with colleagues (Redden, 2008). According to Thomas and Johnson (2004), international faculty reported the lack of collegiality in U.S. colleges leading to "a sense of isolation and loneliness" (Thomas & Johnson, 2004, as cited in Phillips, Dennison, & Davenport, 2016, p. 6). Academic and cultural challenges include not fully understanding the higher education system of the U.S., and specifically the culture of the school at which they are working (Gahungu, 2011; Redden, 2008). Some also report that majority students are culturally insensitive, disrespectful, and question their expertise (Phillips, Dennison, & Davenport, 2016). Linguistic challenges may include international faculty encountering prejudice when it comes to language capacity (Lee & Janda, 2006).

The goal of our project was twofold: 1) to identify the specific challenges reported by international faculty at our institution, a medium-sized state university in a rural community on the east coast, and 2) to make suggestions as to how our institution can address these challenges. We begin with a discussion of the methodology, move on to a discussion of the results, and finally offer recommendations based on the results.

2. Method

Wells (2007) defined international faculty as "all faculty members other than American born U.S. citizens" (p. 77), Sarkisian (2006) referred to "foreign nationals teaching in American college classrooms" (p. 113). Mamiseishvili and Rosser (2010) loosely defined it as "some who are drawn from outside the United States" (p. 51). Without a clear definition, it is difficult to apply the data, and its reliability is compromised (Yudevich, Altbach, & Rumble, 2017). For the purpose of this study, we decided to create an intentionally specific definition of international faculty: *international faculty are all members of other cultural and/or linguistic backgrounds who primarily identify with those backgrounds and have global perspectives, attitudes and values*. This group includes those on visas, visiting scholars, short-term and long-term faculty, U.S.-born citizens, naturalized U.S. citizens, and permanent residents. It may include American-born faculty members who have spent significant time abroad and who self-identify as international.

A survey was created in which international faculty at our university were asked to rate their perceived challenges in three areas: communication, university support and professional/academic support. This survey was distributed by email to the faculty with a request that anyone who considered themselves to be an international individual complete the survey. As stated above, since there is no set definition of *international* and we could not ascertain an exact number of international faculty on campus, we decided to leave it up to individuals to self-select.

As a follow-up, we decided to select two representatives from each school at our university to probe their perceptions more deeply. We asked two specific questions: 1) What is the biggest challenge you have encountered since you came to [our university] as an international faculty? and 2) Do you have

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any suggestions about how [our university] can better recruit or retain international faculty? We held interviews with the purpose of collecting personal reflections on this topic. Responses are summarized in the themes recorded below. The results of the both the survey and the interview were collected and analyzed. The challenges that became evident were then brought forth to the administration and suggestions as to how to address these challenges were made. We also sought to identify those practices that are appreciated by the international faculty and affirm these positive practices already employed by the university.

3. Results

Our results shed light on the varied perceptions of our international faculty. Our survey yielded the following results: we received 82 responses between September 27, 2016 and March 23, 2017 (approximately six months).

3.1 Survey Results

As shown in Figure 1, 47% of the participants are not U.S. citizens. As for participants' education history, 64% received the K-12 education outside of the U.S., 51% received undergraduate education outside the U.S., and 15% received graduate education outside of the U.S.
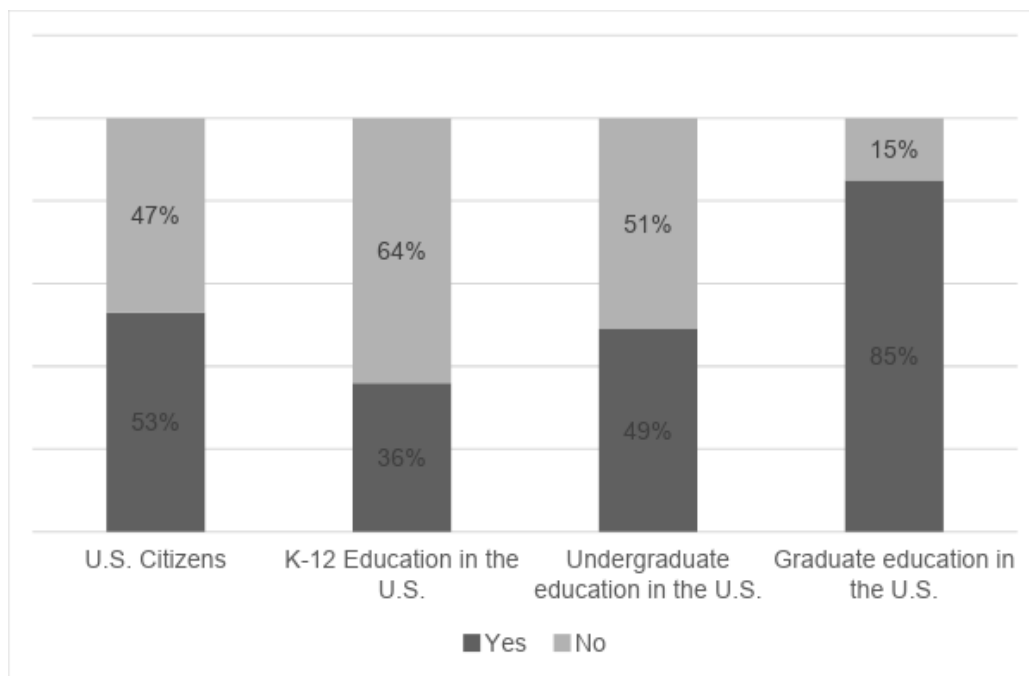
Figure 1. Citizenship and Education History of the Participants

Figure 2 reveals that participants reported that 67% had lived in the U.S. more than 15 years, 23% had lived in the U.S. between seven and 15 years, and 11% had stayed in the U.S. less than seven years. As for teaching or working at a U.S. institution, 41% of the participants reported that they had more than 15 years of experience, 36% reported between seven and 15 years of experience, and 23% had less than

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seven years of experience. As for this specific institution, 20% of the participants reported that they had taught or worked here for more than 15 years, 26% had seven to 15 years of experience, and 54% has less than seven years here.
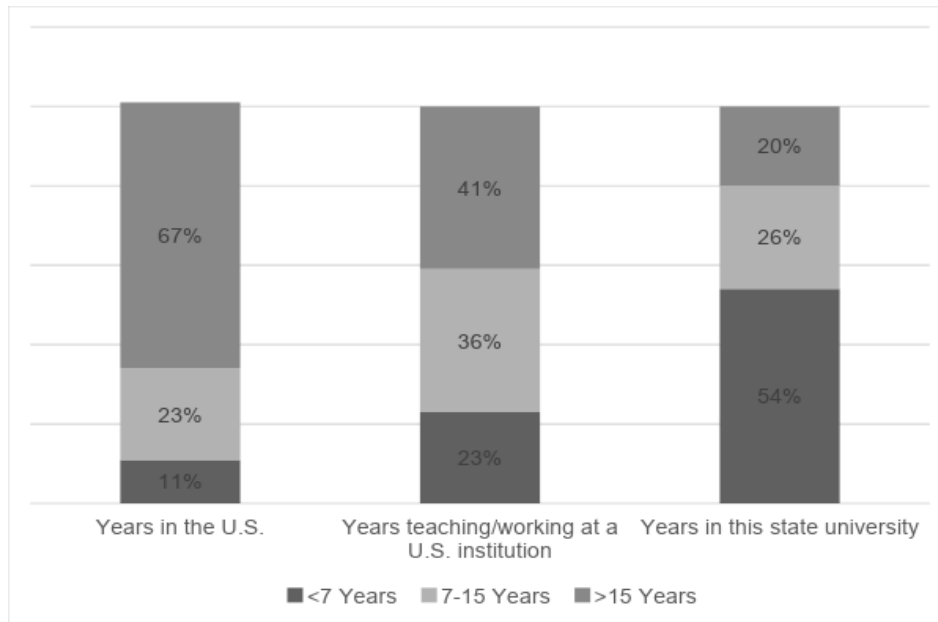
Figure 2. Amount of Time in the U.S., Years Working in a U.S. Institution and Years at Current Institution

The citizenship of the participants is shown in Figure 3. Survey participants reported being citizens of 21 countries, including China (15 citizens), Canada (four citizens), Malaysia (four citizens), Turkey (four citizens), Germany (three citizens), India (three citizens), Russia (three citizens). There were two citizens of each of the following five countries: Denmark, Puerto Rico, Romania, Spain, St. Kitts and Nevis, and one citizen for the following nine countries: Austria, Brazil, Bulgaria, Honduras, Iran, Israel, Jamaica, South Korea, and U.K.

Figure 3. Citizenship of the Participants

As for participants' self-identified cultural affiliations, Figure 4 notes that participants reported feeling affiliated with 20 cultures, with eight participants with U.S. culture, four with Italian culture, three with Puerto Rican culture, two with Jewish culture. There was one participant with each of the following 16 cultures: Caribbean, Dominican Republican, Eastern European, English, Euro-American, French, India, Israel, Jamaican, Japan, Polish, Romania, Russian, South African, Spanish, and Ukrainian.

Figure 4. Self-Identified Cultural Affiliation of the Participants

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In Figure 5, 11 languages are reported as dominant, including English (34 participants), Chinese (nine participants), Spanish (four participants), Korean (two participants), Russian (two participants), Turkish (two participants), and one participant for each of the following five languages: Bulgarian, Farsi, German, Malayalam, and Portuguese.


Figure 5. Dominant Languages of the Participants

Figure 6 notes that participants reported having communication difficulties with the following target groups: administration, colleagues, students, students' parents, and community members. Participants reported having the most communication difficulties (e.g., being misunderstood) with students (*Mean*=1.97), and the fewest difficulties with students' parents (*Mean*=1.46). They reported the need to repeat themselves the most with students (*Mean*=1.91) and the least with students' parents (Mean=1.25). Participants reported wanting to limit interactions as much as possible the most with administration (*Mean*=1.51) and the least with students (*Mean*=1.11). They reported being ignored while giving input or being asked a question the most with administration (*Mean*=1.68) and the least with students (*Mean*=1.17). They further reported more culturally inappropriate gestures from community members (*Mean*=1.47) and fewer from students' parents (*Mean*=1.22). Participants did not further specify these gestures in the survey.
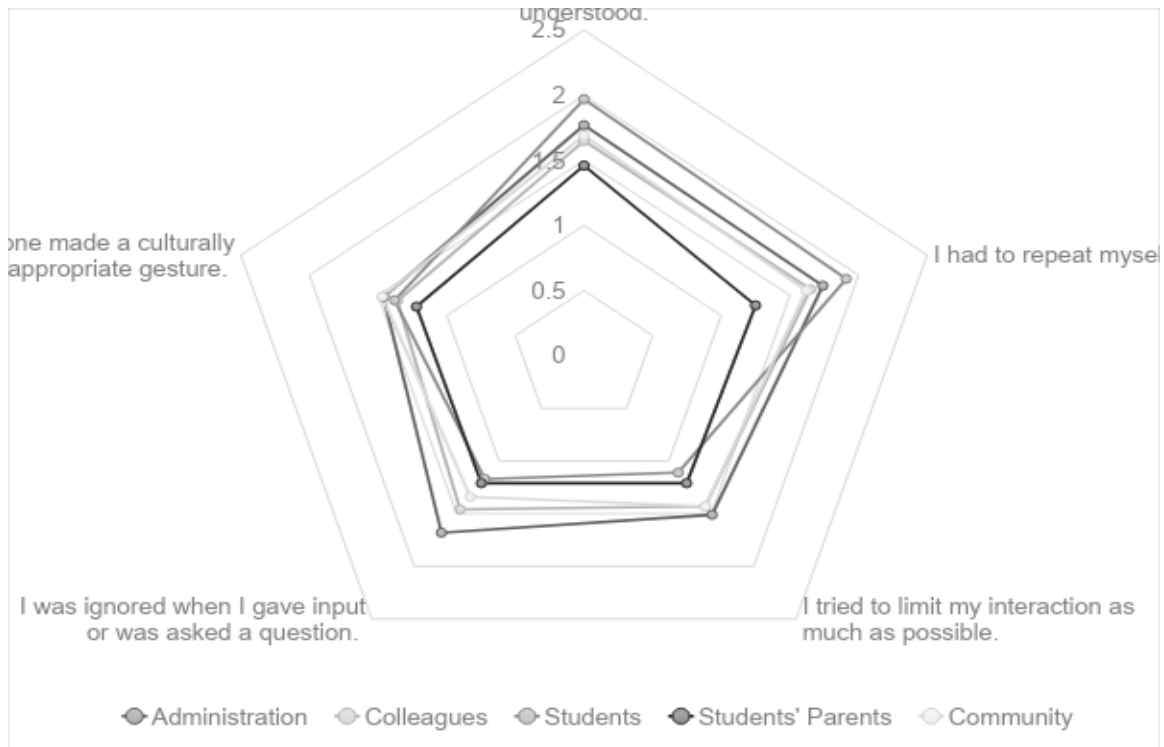
Figure 6. Means of Communication Difficulties of the Participants

Participants' satisfaction with university support as reported in Figure 7, showed that they were most satisfied with the community service (*Mean*=3.77) and least satisfied with language support (*Mean*=2.58).
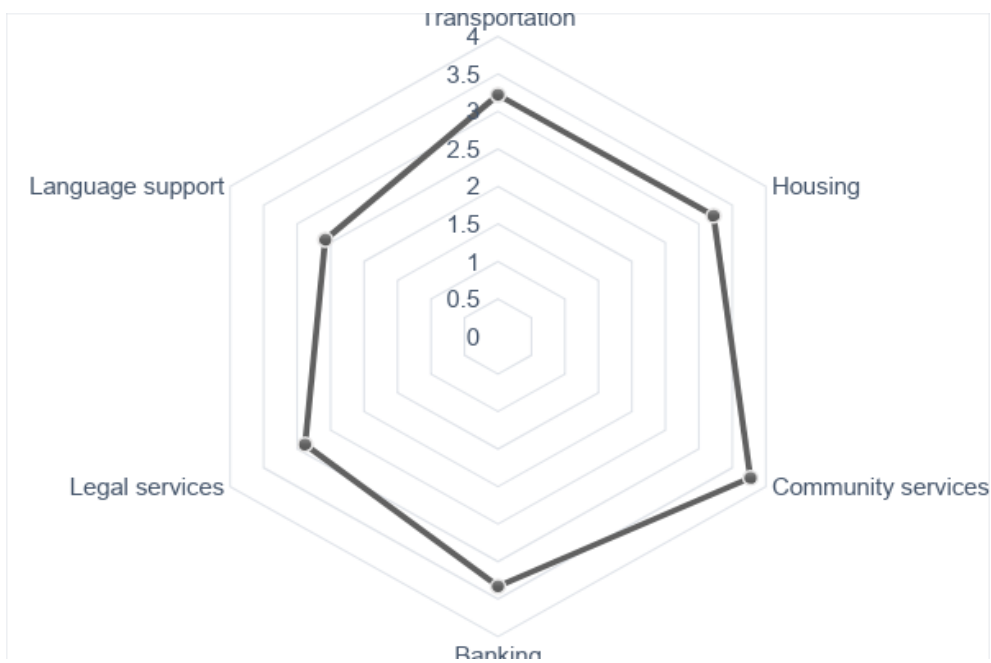
Figure 7. Means of Participants' Satisfaction with University Support

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As for the participants' satisfaction of professional/academic support Figure 8, participants showed they were most satisfied with library services (*Mean*=4.09) and least satisfied with travel funds (*Mean*=3.28).

Figure 8. Means of Participants' Satisfaction with Professional/Academic Support

3.2 Interview Responses

A sample of the verbatim responses from our interview questions regarding suggestions on alleviating the challenges faced by international faculty were categorized into the following themes:

Theme 1: Lack of social support.

"Maybe consider creating some clubs or groups for International faculty, so that they can have the opportunity to meet/know each other".

Theme 2: Lack of legal support.

"If Stockton wants to better retain international faculty, Stockton may consider paying the application fees for Permanent Residency application as it does for H1-b working visa. Many universities pay for the faculty members' permanent residency applications. If Stockton does the same, I think it will help Stockton to retain the international faculty".

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"As someone who lived under this uncertainty until just a few months ago, I certainly appreciate calling attention to this important issue and offering resources. But I also think in addition to such individual efforts, Stockton as an institution needs to make a more consistent effort to support all employees through the visa/green card and other immigration paper work/processes. These have always been complex and involve a great deal of financial and other stress; navigating it requires a supportive employer. I can only imagine that the process has become even more fraught now. But in my experience, there is no uniform or consistent support for this at Stockton, it is often left to the individual going through the process to negotiate with the Deans or supervisors adding yet another layer of stress".

Theme 3: Too few international Students.

"What the university can do is to recruit more international students, which would truly make the campus global. The presence of more international students would in turn facilitate the integration of the international faculty into the larger community".

Theme 4: Need for mentors.

"Assigning a [additional] mentor from the same [similar] culture who can help the person be familiar with local communities".

Theme 5: Language barrier.

"Cultural differences make me feel sometimes it is difficult to join conversations. Maybe a little language barrier as well".

4. Discussion

Our survey and interview data indicated that international faculty had experienced various communication difficulties on campus. Their biggest challenges were with students and administrators. The two main problems that were identified were *the need to repeat themselves* and *being misunderstood*, which both result in poor satisfaction ratings with the language services on campus. International faculty also felt ignored; this leads to low satisfaction ratings with the professional and academic support for sabbatical and travel funds.

Suggestions were also made to improve the experience of international faculty and the following suggestions were gleaned from the data collected from the personal interviews:

Suggestion 1: Increase social support.

Creating social clubs/groups would support the social needs of international faculty.

Suggestion 2: Offer additional legal support.

Offering more legal support in the form of immigration legal specialists and financial assistance to cover the cost of permanent residency applications would be helpful.

Suggestion 3: Recruit international Students.

Recruiting more international students to create a more internationalized campus and community would help with the integration of international faculty.

Suggestion 4: Provide mentors.

Initiating a mentorship program that pairs international faculty with members from the similar cultural/linguistic background would provide professional development.

Suggestion 5: Offer language support.

Making ESL and speech modification services available to international faculty and encouraging them to take advantage of these services would increase their confidence and engagement with the campus community.

4.1 Limitations of Study

Unfortunately, we could not get an exact number of international faculty at our institution from our human resources office because international status is not identified or collected by our university. So, while we acknowledge the limitations of this study, namely that we have an admittedly limited sample (N=82), we decided to pursue this study because of the useful information it can provide our institution to grow and retain international faculty on our campus. Undoubtedly, there are other campuses with a number of international faculty with the same goals that are experiencing similar challenges. We believe the results of our study will also be of use to other institutions who are working towards comprehensive internationalization. While acknowledging these limitations, we understand that all college communities must start somewhere and we are optimistic that we are poised to grow and to facilitate that growth; therefore, we need to explore the challenges that face us so we can address them.

5. Conclusion

Our study has shown that the majority of our international faculties have positive perceptions of the practices of our university. The international faculty who participated in the survey and interviews made specific suggestions, and we plan to integrate these ideas into future steps to be proposed to the institution. The actions we propose will be to create more opportunities to socialize, provide more legal support, recruit more international students, offer mentorship based on cultural affinity, and make English language support and speech modification services available to international faculty and encourage them to take advantage of these services.

We hope that this study will inform our university about the perceptions of international faculty, encourage other institutions to carry out studies to improve the experience of international faculty, and add to the growing body of literature that seeks to increase the retention of international faculty on our campuses.

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