

Investigating Supports, Barrier and Cultural Navigations During Transitions as International Faculty Members

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Abstract

The growth of international graduates in U.S. higher education institutions has prompted a growing presence of international faculty in U.S. higher education, especially in the fields of STEM, science, technology, engineering, and mathematics. International faculty members are expected to take on responsibilities on many aspects of teaching, research, service, mentoring, advising, and globalization in U.S. institutions. Despite their success in teaching, research, service expectations, and contribution toward globalization, many international faculty members struggle with mental health, imposter syndrome, isolation, invisibility to the system and yet being used as a token, then immigration challenges, and they are also torn between two worlds (their home countries and the US) compared to the U.S.-born faculty. They also lack structural, navigational, and mentorship support throughout their career. Our own experiences of navigating US higher academia without much support have been our primary motivation to explore this topic. Additionally, a lack of research in the area of international faculty development makes this topic worth exploring. This auto-ethnographic qualitative work grounded within the scope of transnationalism utilizes a cultural wealth framework and aims to identify the barriers and challenges faced by international faculty members and also recognizes productive ways to address those gaps in terms of designing resources for international Ph.D. students and faculty members as the needs for international faculty members look different than the home-grown ones. In this work, we tried to unpack the barriers and navigational challenges faced by us in general and during our critical transitional points in career. We finally shed some light on the ways international faculty members can be supported during different career stages of our lives (for example, their transition points from graduate student to advanced researcher and/ or junior faculty members and finally helping them to transition into mid-career faculty positions like an associate professor and helping them move onwards full professor or administrative positions) based on our own first-hand experiences. The goal of this autoethnography is to include the cultural and linguistic assets and unique world views that international faculty members bring and finding ways to leverage them while promoting professional development, mentorship supports, and preserving their mental health.

1. Introduction

International faculty members play a vital role in shaping the academic landscape of higher educational institutions in the United States. Their diverse perspectives, cultural backgrounds, and expertise enrich the learning environment and contribute to the global reputation of the American higher educational landscape. The landscape of U.S. higher education has experienced a notable transformation in recent years, marked by the increasing presence of international faculty, especially in the fields of science and engineering[1]. This growth is evident in data highlighting that the representation of foreign-born faculty easily surpasses that of domestic

underrepresented racial/ethnic groups. The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) data refers that out of 11,599 new tenure-track (assistant professor level) faculty at four-year degree-granting institutions in 2009, 11.5 percent (1,332) were foreign-born, higher than other minority groups in the US surpassing Asian American (10.5 percent), African American (0.5 percent), and Hispanic (0.4 percent) representations (author's own calculation with Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System [IPEDS], 2009) as noted by Kim et al. [2] This trend is not just a prediction of the global nature of academic landscape but also highlights the contributions of diverse cultural perspectives in enriching the educational environment in the US context. However, a very little has been documented in research on the experiences of the international faculty members and their integration into the US system. We know a very little about their pursuit on immigration issues, language barriers, culture shock, discrimination, xenophobia, and difficulties in navigating tenure and promotion processes.

Our work-in-progress paper, capturing the narratives and struggles of international faculty members across different institutions in the US, ventures into this evolving terrain, offering insights into the unique experiences of international faculty members. Central to our study is the collective experience of the co-authors, a diverse group of international faculty hailing from three different countries. Each author brings their unique perspective, shaped by their cultural and academic backgrounds, to the forefront of this investigation. Their journeys, encompassing both achievements and challenges, provide a multifaceted view of the life of international faculty members in U.S. academia. In this work, we unpacked the barriers and navigational challenges faced by us in general and during critical transitional points in career. And we finally shed some lights on the ways international faculty members can be supported during different career stages of our lives (for example their transition points from graduate student to advanced researcher and/ or junior faculty members and finally helping them to transition into mid-career faculty positions like associate professor and helping them move onwards full professor or administrative positions) based on our own first-hand experiences.

These experiences are crucial to understanding the myriad challenges they face, including mental health issues, imposter syndrome, isolation, and the complexities of navigating immigration processes, yet there is a gap in research capturing those experiences.

2. Literature Review

The literature review provides an overview of research on international faculty members in the U.S., focusing on their contributions, challenges, support mechanisms, policy impacts, diversity considerations, and professional development opportunities [3]. A study highlighted the need for mentoring, networking, and training opportunities for foreign-born faculty members and providing more information and training for chairs, so that they are able to support and mentor their foreign-born colleagues better and captured a gap in existing literature.[4]

A significant concern highlighted in previous studies is the apparent lack of structured support systems within U.S. academic institutions for international faculty[5]–[7], which also remains a pertinent theme in our narratives. This gap manifests in several ways, from inadequate navigational guidance within the academic system to insufficient mentorship opportunities, often leaving these faculty members to face both professional and cultural barriers alone [6]. Despite these challenges,

the international faculty contributes immensely to their fields, bringing a rich tapestry of cultural and linguistic diversity, particularly beneficial in the realms of global engineering and humanitarian design [8]. A previous study highlighted that international faculty members were significantly more productive in research but less active in teaching and service than their domestic counterparts [9]. Their unique perspectives are not just academic assets but are also pivotal in fostering a more inclusive and globally conscious STEM and at large academic community. However, leveraging this diversity effectively requires a nuanced understanding of the various cultural backgrounds and experiences that these faculty members bring to the table.

Our paper, therefore, not only delves into the challenges faced by international faculty but also explores strategies for fostering an environment that is both inclusive and supportive of their professional development. By harnessing the cultural and linguistic diversity of these faculty members, we aim to enhance the academic community's capacity for innovation and global engagement. This exploration is more than a mere examination of the challenges at hand; it is an acknowledgment and celebration of the rich, diverse contributions that international faculty make to U.S. higher education. Through this comprehensive analysis, we seek to offer meaningful insights into professional development for international faculty, contributing to the evolution of global engineering and humanitarian design in a world that is increasingly interconnected.

3. Theoretical Framework

a. Community Of Cultural Wealth Framework: We framed different cultural backgrounds from the asset-based perspective, not from the deficit approach. We utilized Yosso's Cultural Wealth Model (2005), which puts forth six forms of cultural capital that people of color draw on to navigate marginalizing academic milieus. She defined cultural capital as "accumulated assets and resources in the histories and lives of Communities of Color" (p. 77). The six forms of cultural capital she defined are as follows:

- *Aspirational capital* is about the hopes, dreams, and aspirations that immigrant parents and communities pass on to the next generation. [10]
- *Linguistic capital* refers to multilingualism, ethnic identities, and other communication skills, including cultural traditions like storytelling, art, music, and poetry.
- *Familial capital* is the cultural knowledge practiced through kinship and extended family that carry a sense of community, history, memory, and cultural intuition.
- *Social capital* refers to social networks and the resources that can be accessed through them.
- *Navigational capital* includes the cultural knowledge that can be used to navigate oppressive and marginalizing systems.
- *Resistance capital* is the knowledge and skills learned by communities of color over generations of resistance to inequity and oppression.

Our work involves framing our ethnic, linguistic, and cultural background from an asset-based perspective. This step is crucial in understanding how these forms of capital have played a role in each co-author's journey and how they can be recognized and utilized within the broader academic context while supporting them.

b. This work is also situated within the transnationalism framework [11] because we collected narratives from scholars across different ethnicities who are employed at different institutions within the US. Transnational space generally indicates the impact of intersectional relationships in a geopolitical context. The idea of transnationalism challenges the rigid and binary idea of nationalism that defines the modern nation-state. The definition of transnationalism, in contradicted the idea of nationhood and posits a significant shift in the understanding of borderlands and national identities, moving towards more synergistic activities that are host country-specific. Also, at this time of globalization, when people make it home across different countries, the use of the transnational framework makes more sense. In this context, we have presented narratives of international faculty members across different disciplines and different institutions, and the goal is to represent their struggles, barriers, and navigational challenges in the pursuit of being successful scholars in academia while keeping their mental health intact. Transnationalism has been used in the field of education broadly to study collaborative work and understanding the experiences of the people who live across borders, in different countries that where they were raised. [12;13].

4. Methodology

This study employs an auto-ethnographic approach intertwined with the cultural wealth framework, which is situated with transnational framework, to explore the experiences of international faculty in U.S. higher education institutions, particularly in the fields of science and engineering. Auto-ethnography [14], [15], as a method, allows researchers to use their own experiences as primary data, offering a deep, introspective understanding of the cultural phenomena under investigation. This approach is particularly suited to our study as it enables each co-author to draw upon their personal narratives, reflecting their journey as international faculty in the U.S., thereby providing an authentic, first-person perspective on the challenges and opportunities they encounter. We did not use any prompts while telling our stories. However, navigating the transition points in our academic career was the essence of our narratives.

The cultural wealth framework underpinning this study is instrumental in recognizing and valuing the diverse cultural assets and resources international faculty bring to the academic environment. This framework, rooted in the idea that marginalized groups possess inherent cultural assets, helps in articulating the unique contributions and strengths of international faculty. It allows for a comprehensive understanding of how these cultural resources can be leveraged to enhance the academic and social fabric of U.S. higher education institutions.

To integrate the co-authors' personal experiences and insights into the research, we have structured the methodology as follows:

- a. *Narrative Collection*: Each co-author, representing a distinct national background, shares their personal narrative. These narratives encompass their experiences, challenges, and successes in navigating U.S. academia as an international faculty. This process includes documenting instances of cultural adjustment, professional development and encounters with institutional barriers [16]. We presented each narrative based on themes like transitional experiences, our experiences as graduate students, then transitioning into our

first professional roles (postdoc, junior faculty etc), and then finally moving towards post-tenure experiences.

- b. *Integration of Insights*: Finally, the insights gleaned from the narratives and the thematic analysis are integrated into the broader scope of the study. This integration is done in a manner that respects the individuality of each co-author's story while also contributing to a collective understanding of the role and experiences of international faculty in U.S. higher education.

Through this methodology, the study aims to offer a rich, detailed, and empathetic understanding of the lived experiences of international faculty members, grounded in both personal insights and theoretical frameworks. This approach not only enriches the research with diverse perspectives but also aligns with the goal of leveraging cultural diversity for global engineering and humanitarian design. To ensure quality and trustworthiness, authors met virtually a couple of times as a team and then exchanged emails and personal chat messages back and forth discussing different aspects of the paper. Also, each researcher answered the following prompts for the second round of review-

- a. What are the cultural norms and traits you wish your professors/ PI/ mentors knew about your culture so that intercultural communication would have been easier as a graduate student and as faculty both?
- b. What are some of the cultural values from your culture that you still practice in terms of your professional life and as a whole? (for example, it can be the timely presence or respecting elders etc., make sure to expand on them)

Patton [17] describes six criteria for judging the quality of autoethnography: reflexivity, substantive contribution, aesthetic merit, impact, expression of a reality, and relational ethics. We addressed reflexivity by inclusion of first-person narratives and positionalities. We addressed substantive contribution as our study rejects deficit approach while studying international faculty members working in the context of STEM education. Aesthetic merits have been addressed by capturing thick description of data. The impact of the work is mostly on faculty development. This work is a stepping stone to international faculty development employed at US based institutions. All our narratives are written in first person point of view and they capture our realities as faculty members. Finally, three of us live the similar experiences of being international faculty. We all have an insider's insight to all of our struggles. Hence, a sense of solidarity and mutual respect addresses the last component relational ethics in terms of this research [18].

5. Co-Authors' Narratives and Experiences

Given the diverse backgrounds of faculty, we have outlined different perspectives and experiences of each faculty including a personal narrative focusing on specific challenges and experiences in U.S. academia. Exploration of cultural and linguistic assets and their role in the U.S. educational context, followed by a discussion on transition challenges from different career stages in academia.

- A. *Dr. D M, Assistant Professor of Curriculum and Instruction from India:*

I arrived in the United States from India as an international student to pursue a PhD in literacy education at a Midwestern Traditionally White Institution (TWI), a high research (R2) university [19]. The transition to literacy education proved challenging due to cultural differences and distinct academic expectations between my home country and the shift from a psychology background to the field of education. Being the first international student in my department, the lack of familiarity with how to support me through the academic program became evident from the department's end. I did not feel heard, cared and valued as a PhD student. International women scholars, including myself, have unique needs for mentorship. Unfortunately, the mentorship I received was not tailored to my international experiences, and the academic guidance that I kept receiving did not align with my learning style. This lack of support during my PhD journey left me feeling helpless, invisible, and it took a toll on my mental health and overall well-being. Despite these challenges, my research has consistently focused on studying marginalized experiences and advocating for the support of underrepresented identities as I have been truly invested in my research. I always believe our own positionalities shape our life and professional identities, hence, my passion to work in the diversity, equity, and inclusion issues comes from my own firsthand experiences as an immigrant woman of color working in the US higher academia.

Regrettably, I received minimal support during the job search process at the end of my doctoral journey. Following my PhD, I undertook my first doctoral fellowship, navigating it independently again without much support. This journey was uncommon, transitioning from literacy education to a fellowship in STEM education with a focus on equity. Finally, the transition into my second postdoctoral fellowship became the most impactful and rewarding experience of my professional life. I found supportive mentors, predominantly women and women of color in STEM, who were eager to help me succeed, possibly drawing from their own experiences with microaggressions and hostility. The second postdoctoral experience paved the way for a successful transition into a faculty position in teacher education. Engaging in grant writing and large collaborations across multiple institutions, experiences are rare for a literacy education major. Those experiences left me feeling well-prepared to teach, research, and serve in my new role as a tenure-track faculty. As a junior faculty member, however, I find myself frequently invited to service roles based on my identity, experiencing tokenism in various contexts. I often find myself working twice as hard as my other counterparts due to my international identity. Navigating challenges with my work visa and its restrictions on international travel, coupled with a daily battle with imposter syndrome, further complicated my journey. Also, I often find myself doing a lot of shadow mentoring for international students and students of color around the clock as I really want to be there for them. I met many of them at different professional venues and connected with them.

Having spent over 11 years in the country, I still grapple with cultural homelessness. Currently, my research focuses on the experiences of immigrant/international experiences, especially focused on women of color faculty members. My goal is to utilize my own journey through higher academia as a valuable resource for international and immigrant students aspiring to become future faculty. I want to work towards making this space equally accessible for all groups of students, scholars, and faculty members.

B. Dr. H S: Associate Professor of Mechanical Engineering from Iran:

My journey in academia, originating from Iran and transitioning to the U.S., encapsulates both the unique challenges and growth opportunities faced by international faculty in American higher education. Born and raised in Iran, where I completed my undergraduate and master's degrees in engineering, my initial academic experience was firmly rooted in the Iranian education system. This background set the stage for a significant cultural and educational shift when I arrived in the U.S. for my PhD at the University of Wyoming. The complexity of my transition was compounded by having a South Korean advisor, who was himself an international scholar. This situation limited my exposure to U.S. academic culture, as both of us navigated the nuances of being international in a foreign academic environment. Serving as a teaching assistant, where I led a lab twice a week, became a pivotal experience. It allowed me to engage directly with U.S. students, offering insights into their values and mindset, and gradually integrating me into the academic culture. However, my effort to blend into this new environment was often marred by self-censorship and a reluctance to express disagreement, a behavior influenced by cultural norms from both my Iranian background and my advisor's South Korean culture. This dynamic highlighted the complexities of cross-cultural academic relationships and their impact on personal and professional development. Amidst these challenges, I often grappled with feelings of loneliness compounded by anxiety over whether I could meet the expectations set before me. These internal struggles were a silent battle, reflecting the broader challenge of maintaining mental health in a high-pressure academic environment. A turning point in my PhD journey came when I switched advisors to an American faculty member. This change brought forth a more conducive environment for open dialogue and growth, leading to noticeable personal development that even my peers recognized. Teaching an undergraduate course as the principal instructor further solidified my skills and confidence, laying a strong foundation for my eventual faculty position. Upon joining Penn State as a lecturer, I was able to leverage my diverse teaching experiences from my PhD to excel in my new role. While I thrived in teaching and research, my service contributions were initially minimal, reflecting a common challenge faced by many international faculty members. Additionally, being part of a predominantly white student population at Penn State Behrend presented its own set of challenges, not in the form of overt discrimination, but rather through the subtle dynamics of being a minority faculty member.

C. Dr. J G, Assistant Professor of Mechanical Engineering from China:

As an international faculty member from China, my journey to the United States has blended academic challenges and cultural adaptations. I started on this path by moving to North Dakota State University for my Ph.D. in mechanical engineering, a significant shift from my polymer materials and engineering background. This life transition, though daunting, was made smoother with the support of the Chinese Association of Students and Scholars, which helped me connect with peers and navigate the new environment. Despite the support I received, I encountered significant language barriers that impacted both my everyday life and academic progress. Adapting to the American educational system, where research assistants are expected to function as independent researchers, contrasted my prior experiences. It was a gradual realization for me that pursuing a Ph.D. meant evolving into an independent researcher rather than remaining a student,

although lifelong learning is important for professional growth. To manage high requirements and uncertainties, I decided to first pursue a Master's degree before progressing to a Ph.D., which provides me with the needed flexibility. Fortunately, my advisor was always supportive and was open to offering job recommendations or even considering a change of schools if necessary. Thanks to her support, I did much of my experimental work at South Dakota State University. Looking back, I realize my transition to U.S. educational settings was somewhat complicated by the fact that my advisor, herself only a few years into her transition from India, was still acclimating to the American system. However, her extensive experience at Hong Kong University and her familiarity with Chinese work culture played a crucial role in bridging many of these gaps. However, during a working dinner with collaborators, I made a comment that upset her. I said that the master's degree I gained had little value and only added more coursework and publication load. She believed that every graduate degree needed to be solidified with three published articles and a 100-page thesis. My comments were perceived as a challenge to her supervision style and authority in front of colleagues. From that moment on, and after observing other international graduate students, I realized that the adviser-advisee relationship is very different in Asian culture compared to the United States. At Penn State Behrend, as a junior faculty member, I faced challenges, particularly in balancing research and teaching responsibilities at an undergraduate-focused institution. My strategies for success here included simple experimental setups engaging undergraduates, theoretical work backed by collaborations for publications, and integrating daily work with educational research. These approaches were not merely survival tactics; they represented my adaptability and resilience in the face of new academic cultures and environments. My journey reflects the struggles of a Chinese faculty member adapting to and thriving in U.S. educational settings.

6. Implications to Strategies for Support and Faculty Development

Our stories offer some worthwhile suggestions about how academia can become a more inclusive space for international faculty members. As previous studies have described [2] that international faculty are less satisfied than their U.S.-born colleagues while being more productive than their US counterparts. We tried to unpack further through our own experiences. All the narratives have highlighted either a lack of mentorship or a mismatch in terms of mentor support and expectations. Therefore, there is a clear need for the institutions to build a robust mentorship plan and pathways for international faculty members. Also, we noticed that all three participants for this study vocalized for effective mentorship from the doctoral program itself. Also, the narratives highlighted that working with other international faculty members often limited their professional experiences due to cultural differences. For example, the first author mentioned her lack of mentorship until her second postdoctoral experiences. Third author mentioned about an incident of mismatch of expectations with his PhD adviser which did make his mentor upset. Therefore, we argue that international faculty members have a different mentorship needs and just pairing with other international faculty members will not suffice. All the faculty members should receive training on cultural sensitivity and intercultural communication centered with in an asset-based perspective, so, that they can address the conflicts in a productive way.

All three narratives represent experiences of being alienated due to the cultural differences. However, each story also represented each one's resilience, their high ambition to be successful in a different country, and their connection with identity based-ethnic and cultural clubs. Three of us made life-long friends through those organizations, hence, our suggestion for the institutions would be to extend explicit support to those organizations to grow. Their purpose is not just limited to host cultural events, we argue from our own experiences that they served a familial space for us and many of us got navigational and academic help from them. We bring wealth of culture and our own repertoire while we make the decision to move and work in the United States, they should be leveraged while deciding policy and practice for retaining international faculty members.

All the narratives highlighted a lack of support system or lack of community. All three narratives mentioned their battle with loneliness and struggle with cultural differences. The stories described the lack of a critical mass of mentors with shared identities who can guide them in their leadership and academic pursuits. Hence, building a strong support system where international scholars and faculty members can connect with scholars with similar background and ethnicity will be helpful. Often informal mentorship and peer mentorship play a critical role in terms of navigating graduate school, job search, mental health support, and on the job navigational help. Most universities have international student organizations, however, in our experiences those clubs do not provide any professional and personal support. We recommend institutions to structure their international student and scholar offices in such a way so that they can connect with peers based on their educational level and professional need. We also recommend international student and scholar offices to provide training on cultural and academic transition into United States to make the transitional experiences easier for the scholars. We recognize from the narratives that faculty members have continued need for help during other transitional points like getting into the tenure track and post-tenure and promotion. Junior faculty members will need different kinds of navigational help from those who are in mid-career. Gender and other intersectionalities also play a critical role in those processes. Future studies should investigate those needs based on their identities and points in their career.

Also, in each story, all of us mentioned how we preserved our cultural values. For example, the second author emphasized

Punctuality and reliability are two key personality trait I have been carrying form my Iranian upbringing. The Iranian emphasis on respect for elders and authority influences my interactions with my senior colleagues. More importantly, adaptability and resilience that has been instilled in me through navigating various socio-political changes in Iran, has enabled me to tackle challenges and transitions effectively. Such cultural values continue to shape my professional personality and interactions in the American academic system.

First author emphasized on integrity, creating an impact, building relationship and respecting the elders as part of her Indian values which are reflected on her daily work style. Third author highlighted that during his graduate program he worked tirelessly with his PhD adviser without questioning the working hours. He also stated that even as a faculty member "I would readily accept requests from the chair to cover new classes or perform services, assuming that the Chair had made the right decision". The first author often finds herself in similar situation because she

was taught never to question her seniors and mentors. She also readily accepts service and teaching assignment requests from senior faculty members.

The third author also mentioned that “in a culture that values doers rather than talkers, I find myself disengaging from conversations both in academia and in life” which resonated with the first author strongly. Therefore, understanding those cultural values will enable the administrators and senior faculty members to mentor the international faculty members more effectively.

Additionally, there is a lack of data available on the mental health, well-being and overall productivity. Our narratives shed light on the significant mental health struggles experienced by international faculty members in a foreign country. These struggles are compounded by the absence of support from family and immediate friends, as well as the high pressures of competitive academic environment. We recommend to support international scholars further by providing therapists with the understanding of the global contexts and being accepting to another culture as all of us dealt with loneliness. Often euro-centric counseling frameworks do not fit with our need due to our collectivist background. To support the international faculty members institution must build more resources that are culturally competent and those resources must frame culture as an asset.

International faculty members and students are an important growing group, and their presence is likely to only increase in next decades. However, they are often overlooked and frequently underrepresented from various data sources. When conducting on-campus studies of faculty narratives, inclusion of international faculty members is pertinent. Also, we remind the institutions to be sensitive of using terms like *non-resident alien* while referring to their international faculty members. There should be more studies dedicated to understand the need of international faculty members. Different marginalized groups have different mentorship need just like all other domestic minoritized groups as documented in research extensively. Hence, it is critical to consider cultural values as assets while mentoring faculty members and students who grew up in different countries. We do not expect that the faculty members will be handheld during the mentorship, however, it is important to frame the cultural values as assets to retain them.

Finally, given the little research available on international faculty and scholars, it is important for institutions to collect more detailed data on their mobility [2]; we argue it becomes more critical to understand their mobility decisions due to the immigration uncertainties and cultural incongruence that they face.

6. Conclusion

The results and analysis of this study provide us with a stepping stone for future research about the experiences of the international faculty members and strategies towards retaining and supporting them. This paper will hopefully create dialogues around building resources for international faculty members to support them during their transitional points in career framing culture as an asset. Recommendations from the international faculty members are the first step to re-evaluate their need at the departmental and institutional level.

A thematic representation of the stories will be within our future scope of work. Also, we would like to do a thematic analysis of each narrative based on the concept of community assets. We recommend future researchers consider building on this work by studying the subject using a quantitative approach, through survey to capture more generic experiences of the international faculty members. We understand that this particular work included narratives from a small subset group. Furthermore, future work should explore the discipline and institution-specific experiences. A comparative study like how faculty members in different research institutions and regional institutions experience their journey might be worthwhile.

7. References

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